
Practice Report

Reflections on Developing an Employment Mentoring Program for College Students Who Are Blind

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In a competitive employment climate, college graduates with visual impairments (that is, those who are blind or have low vision) face challenges securing work. Employment barriers among visually impaired individuals include: limited early work experience, negative employer attitudes, transportation issues, lack of exposure to successful role models, underdeveloped blindness skills, and low confidence in the ability to perform work-related tasks (Coffey, Coufopoulos, & Kinghom, 2014; Crudden & McBroom, 1999; McDonnall & O'Mally, 2012; McDonnall, Zhou, & Crudden, 2013). Students with visual impairments may also have unrealistic expectations for finding employment. We surveyed a nationally representative group of service providers and directors of state agencies ($N = 87$), and more than one-third of respondents (34%) believed that college students with vision loss are too optimistic about finding jobs after graduating (O'Mally, 2014).

Mentoring relationships can provide multiple benefits for these students as they prepare to enter the workforce. Mentorships provide opportunities for students to job-shadow, receive expert advice, develop job-seeking skills, understand career-specific accommo-

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dations, expand social networks, access resources, and build confidence. Mentors serve as successful role models and may offer students a more realistic view of the effect visual impairments can have on job-seeking and navigating their field of interest.

Existing mentoring programs that serve students with visual impairments and other disabilities include CareerConnect (American Foundation for the Blind, 2016), the Do-It program at the University of Washington (2016), and various interventions implemented by blindness consumer groups. These programs vary widely in structure and implementation. We designed, implemented, and evaluated a mentoring program specifically for college students who are legally blind and are seeking employment after graduation.

A national longitudinal study was conducted to evaluate the impact of mentoring on employment outcomes using standardized procedures (O'Mally & Antonelli, 2016). Students were randomly assigned to either work with a mentor for one year or to receive traditional career resources. To standardize the study, we used specific eligibility criteria and a limited time frame, and provided suggestions for activities and discussion topics.

The purpose of this article is not to report the study outcomes, however, but rather to present reflections and resources used in designing a mentoring program for college students with visual impairments. In developing this program, we learned information that may be valuable to program administrators, service providers, students, and mentors. This article presents the demographics of participants; suggestions for recruitment and staffing; challenges in matching students with mentors, resources, and orientation materials; and practical applications.

CONSIDERING THE NEEDS OF THE POPULATION

Because this was an empirical study designed to compare two groups, participants ($N = 77$, 26 mentees, 26 mentors,

and 25 comparison students) had to meet specific eligibility criteria, including legal blindness (O'Mally & Antonelli, 2016). Our nationally diverse sample, with representation from 30 U.S. states, consisted of more women than men among students (62.75%) and mentors (65.38%). We limited our sample of students to those under age 35 years to examine the effect of mentoring on college students of traditional ages who likely had little work experience. Although this criterion was important to increase internal validity in our study, we learned that many students over 35 years of age were interested in participating. Older students were discouraged by the age restriction and expressed strong interest in working with a mentor, explaining that their vision loss required them to reeducate in order to change careers. They described challenges in using technology, in transferring existing skills to new careers, and in discussing their disability and accommodation needs with potential employers. We informally provided them with resources, and noted that future programs could be tailored to address the specific needs of adults with visual impairments returning to school.

Our study design required a narrow time frame for data collection. To examine employment outcomes following graduation, we limited eligibility to students who were graduating within one year of the study. Many students were excluded because they were graduating too early or too late, or because they were not planning to seek employment immediately after graduation. Students were often inaccurate in estimating their graduation dates, with some graduating more than a year later than expected. It is crit-

ical for students to be able to provide potential employers with realistic estimates of when they will obtain their degree. Pairing students with mentors earlier in college could provide opportunities for career exploration, job shadowing, and skill development needed to meet important milestones.

SUGGESTIONS FOR RECRUITMENT AND STAFFING

As researchers, we have limited direct contact with consumers, making recruitment challenging. Our limited eligibility criteria made it difficult to obtain a large sample of students. Over 40 students who did not meet eligibility criteria contacted us to participate in the study. This number may be grossly underestimated, given that we had no way to gauge the number of students who did not contact us who knew that they did not meet criteria. In a brief survey of service providers ($N = 59$), 42% said they referred students to participate, and 47% reported they had never heard of the project (O'Mally, 2014). Despite exhaustive recruitment efforts, heavy caseloads may make it difficult for service providers to prioritize the promotion of external projects. More students would benefit from evidence-based programs with broader eligibility criteria implemented directly by service providers or consumer organizations.

Over 100 mentors volunteered, with only 26 selected for participation based on availability of a mentee match. Most mentors expressed a strong desire to mentor, noting that they would have appreciated the same opportunity when they were preparing for employment. Some indicated that they volunteered for other mentoring programs but were rarely, if

ever, contacted. Mentors may be an untapped resource, and we recommend a structured design in which administrators match mentees with mentors, provide support, and develop guidelines for frequency of contact. Our intervention provided this type of structure, and participants rated the program very highly.

Soliciting student participation was more difficult even though they reap the greatest benefits. Potential explanations for low student participation include: narrow eligibility criteria, over-commitment to school and other activities, or undervaluing the opportunity to work with a mentor. We asked mentors and our advisory council board what might explain the lack of student response. Some suggested that students may be overconfident about their own job-seeking skills and underestimate the challenges they could face in finding work after college. We recommend that service providers and parents strongly emphasize the value of partnering with a mentor with vision loss who is working in the student's field to encourage students to participate in mentoring programs.

We found many successful strategies for obtaining a nationally representative sample. First, we developed a nationwide registry for individuals interested in participating in visual impairment research. This registry currently has over 400 individuals who are visually impaired, and we actively share information with registrants about opportunities on behalf of other organizations. Second, we recruited through social media including Facebook, websites, electronic discussion groups, radio, and newsletters. Third, we recruited heavily through organizations that have direct contact with individuals with

vision loss. We contacted vocational rehabilitation counselors, presented at conferences, and contacted disability offices at universities and the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD). We promoted diversity by recruiting through groups such as National Association of Multicultural Rehabilitation Concerns (NAMRC), Consortia of Administrators for Native American Rehabilitation (CANAR), National Organization for Albinism and Hypopigmentation (NOAH), and student support services at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

Recruitment, matching, and retention were the most time-consuming aspects of this program. Financial considerations will likely determine resources that can be allocated for administering a mentoring program. Throughout this intervention, we had one full-time staff member, and two part-time employees provided assistance as needed. Our staff members had minimal involvement after the orientation and distribution of materials. Although participants were satisfied with the level of staff involvement, some suggested that structured activities, group meetings, or ongoing training led by staff might be beneficial.

CHALLENGES IN MATCHING PAIRS

We intended to pair students with mentors who are legally blind, currently employed in the student's field of interest, and living within one hour of the student to allow for monthly face-to-face contact. Although we had a tremendous response from potential mentors, it was difficult to match them with students in all three criteria. Students living in rural areas or pursuing unique careers were particularly

Table 1

Percentages of respondents ranking most important factor for mentor matching.

Most important factor	Mentees	Mentors	Service providers
Legal blindness	47.8	56.5	42.0
Same profession student is pursuing	30.4	39.1	41.0
Close geographic location	26.1	4.3	17.0

difficult to match with local mentors. When a local mentor could not be found, students were paired with a distance mentor. We sought to match students with mentors who were currently employed. When it was not possible to connect students with employed mentors, we paired them with recently retired ones. Decisions for including retirees were made on a case-by-case basis, and it was preferable that the retiree was connected to their field and able to provide the student with access to the place of employment and networking opportunities.

After the study began, we asked students, mentors, and service providers to rank the importance of three factors in choosing a mentor. Highest ranked among all groups were the factors that mentors be legally blind and in a similar profession; geographic location had the lowest ranking (See Table 1). With greater accessibility of technology, the perception of the need for face-to-face contact may be lower than in the past. However, local contact offers important opportunities including job shadowing, networking, and practicing social skills. The sample in this study was not large enough for a statistical comparison between distance (15 pairs) and local (9 pairs) mentoring, an issue that warrants further research.

Although students, mentors, and service providers seem to agree that visual

impairment is a critical characteristic in mentors, it may be beneficial for students with visual impairments to work with mentors who are sighted as well. A mentorship arrangement may expand students' networks, reduce negative stereotypes that employers may have about blindness, and allow students to practice self-advocacy and interacting with a predominantly sighted workforce. In addition, it may be advantageous for students to work with a variety of mentors during college (for instance, a sighted mentor working in a similar field who is located near to the mentee and a visually impaired mentor working in the student's field who can share experiences and provide disability-specific information despite living far away from the mentee).

PROVIDING RESOURCES AND ORIENTATION

We developed a 20-page mentoring manual to serve as a guide for mentors and mentees. The manual includes an overview of the project; responsibilities and expectations; guidance for developing successful mentoring relationships; and activities and topics for discussion, including accommodation planning, disclosure, blindness skills, and social skills. Resources and activities focus on job shadowing, job-seeking skills, networking, and finding transportation. In a brief survey, service providers rated the areas in which job-seeking students with

visual impairments needed most help, and the majority indicated visual impairment and independence skills (40%), social skills (33%), and job-search skills (25%) (O'Mally, 2014). The manual addresses each of these areas, and it is publicly available in electronic format from the website: <http://blind.msstate.edu/our-products/employment-resources>. It includes links to resources that may be useful for students, parents, mentors, service providers, employers, and organizations developing mentoring programs.

Prior to beginning the mentorship, mentors and mentees participated in separate interactive, group orientation sessions with other mentors or mentees. After finding that the use of webinar software that was designed to be accessible involved a steep learning curve for participants, making it inefficient for a one-time session with all the participants in the mentor or mentee group, several orientations were conducted with small groups of participants by conference call. The structured, one-hour orientation used the mentoring manual as a guide, included a PowerPoint presentation, and encouraged discussion. Mentors (100%) and mentees (95.8%) indicated that the orientation helped them understand the program requirements. Participants (83.4% mentors and 86.3% mentees) also found the mentoring manual to be informative.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

This intervention demonstrates the desire among students with visual impairments and professionals to work with others in pursuing employment. The number of interested mentors doubled the number of eligible students, possibly indicating that mentors understand the value of mentor-

ing better than do students or that students may have unrealistic expectations about gaining entry into the workforce. The willingness of mentors to work with students on a long-term, volunteer basis is particularly noteworthy when considering the feasibility of future programs. Students also value the mentoring relationship, as evidenced by an exceptionally high retention rate. All but two mentoring pairs completed the full study, and those who dropped out reported that they were incompatible with their matches. Participants completed an evaluation survey in which they provided quantitative and qualitative feedback about the program. Both mentees and mentors found the program valuable and expressed a willingness to remain in contact after the study concluded. To increase student participation, we suggest broadening eligibility to include college students of nontraditional ages and those who are in the earlier stages of post-secondary education. We also recommend that service providers actively encourage students to consider the value of mentoring and assist in developing realistic views of securing employment.

Mentoring programs can be implemented with limited resources. Administrative supervision was minimal in this program, and the retention rate was still impressively high. Administrators matched pairs, provided orientation materials, and addressed issues that arose within mentoring pairs. Participants expressed high program satisfaction, and some suggested increased involvement of staff members to provide ongoing feedback. Several participants also suggested incorporating interactive communities (for example, Facebook groups, Twitter, and electronic

discussion groups) to allow participants to share resources, ideas, and strategies to improve mentoring relationships and employment outcomes. Some participants suggested including a few opportunities for mentors and mentees to meet locally in groups. Depending on resources and program design, mentees and mentors could plan to meet in groups at the city or state level or at regional conferences.

Developing effective mentoring programs for college students with visual impairments is an ongoing process. The mentees in this program showed increases in self-efficacy, career adaptability, and job-hunting assertiveness (O'Mally & Antonelli, 2016). Encouraging dialogue, examining existing programs, and sharing successful strategies are critical in developing evidence-based mentoring interventions to improve employment outcomes for visually impaired students.

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