
Research Report

Community Mentors: The Perspectives of Working Adults with Visual Impairments

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Although most teachers of students with visual impairments spend time in internships prior to teaching, they often begin teaching without firsthand contact with capable adults who have visual impairments (that is, those who are blind or have low vision). As a result, they may be unfamiliar with the daily planning and adaptation undertaken by those adults. To provide future teachers with an understanding of adult experiences, The University of Arizona's program to prepare teachers of students with visual impairments requires each graduate student to spend time with a community mentor who is visually impaired. This Research Report describes the first phase of outcome analysis for the project, based on interviews with 17 community mentors.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Most university programs preparing professionals in the field of visual impairment plan a variety of experiences to enhance candidates' understanding of how visual impairment affects daily life. Planned experiences may include listening to speakers, reading autobiographies, viewing videos, and attending conferences of consumer organizations. However, these experiences provide only brief snapshots of the lives of these people.

Simulation of visual impairment is incorporated into the curricula of most university programs, but it does not provide ongoing contact with visually impaired people. Although the effectiveness of simulation varies, some studies of disability simulation have demonstrated improved attitudes following

simulation experiences (Colwell, 2003; Goddard & Jordan, 1998). The strongest effects of simulation occur when the experience also includes interaction with people who have disabilities (Flower, Burns, & Bottsford-Miller, 2007). Positive effects of mentoring by visually impaired people on less experienced visually impaired students have also been reported, especially when students are making the transition from secondary school (O'Mally & Antonelli, 2016; Powers, Sowers, Stevens, & McCracken, 1995; Whelley, Radtke, Burgstahler, & Christ, 2003).

No studies could be found in which mentors with visual impairments were paired with mentees preparing to work with visually impaired people. Because literature supports the positive effects of personal contact with a competent individual with disabilities, faculty at the University of Arizona hypothesized that assigning graduate students to mentors with visual impairments would ultimately affect their expectations of children and the quality of their teaching. This report describes the perspectives of 17 mentors who participated in the project. The information was gathered through recorded interviews after three years of program implementation.

METHODS

Beginning in fall 2012, all 33 students who entered the master's or post-baccalaureate certification program in visual impairment at The University of Arizona were assigned to a *community mentor*, defined as an employed individual with blindness or low vision who lives and works in the student's community. This requirement was included as a professional development activity in a federal grant funded in 2012. Thirty participating students were sighted, and three had visual impairments. Five students worked with more than one mentor, due mainly to scheduling needs; the other 28 students completed assigned activities with one mentor. Nine of the 23

mentors worked with more than one student over the three-year time period.

Mentors were located through written announcements to consumer organizations and rehabilitation agencies, as well as to individuals known to the faculty. Mentors were originally to be employed in jobs not directly related to visual impairment. However, three mentors who were rehabilitation professionals in visual impairment were included because of the difficulty in finding local mentors. Thirteen others were employed in roles unrelated to disability, and eight had disability-related roles not in visual impairment. The number totals 24 because one individual had two jobs during the mentoring period. Mentors were employed as attorneys (2), skilled workers at government agencies (3), workers in university disability services not specific to visual impairment (3), rehabilitation professionals in visual impairment (3), university instructors in disability areas not specific to visual impairment (2), business technology specialists (2), resident assistant in a dormitory (1), counselor (1), vending stand operator (1), university teaching assistant (1), special education teacher (1), staff member on a health education project (1), food services worker and teaching assistant (1), and an administrator at an arts organization for people with disabilities (1). Mentors received a \$100 honorarium on completion of mentoring.

During the first two semesters of their programs, students arranged meeting times with their mentors and completed five related papers. Activities included an interview and four different activities selected by the mentor and mentee from a list of options. Students submitted five papers of two-to-four pages in length describing a transportation diary, job shadowing, family interview, recreational activity, advocacy experience, low vision evaluation, social activity, or a student-proposed activity.

During the third and fourth years of the project, we contacted the 23 mentors to re-

quest interviews. Five mentors did not respond, and contact information was unavailable for one other. Seventeen mentors signed consent forms and participated in interviews, for which each received \$50. The study was approved by the Human Subjects Protection Program at The University of Arizona. Table 1 provides information about the 17 mentors who were interviewed.

Telephone interviews were conducted by the two authors. The calls were recorded using the TapeACall smartphone application to audiotape the conversations, which were then transcribed into print. Themes were generally identified within each question, since the purpose of the interview was to evaluate specific effects of the program. No measures of reliability or validity were conducted. If a mentor mentioned a topic unrelated to the prompt question, the information was included with responses to a more relevant question. Given the specific focus of each question and the need for conciseness, numbers of responses in main categories are presented here, with representative examples. The following section summarizes the mentors' perceptions.

RESULTS

The interview included eight questions intended to gather information about program effectiveness. Predominant themes are summarized below.

Expectations for student learning

Mentors described what they hoped their mentee would learn and whether the students actually learned what the mentor expected. Eight mentors wanted their students to recognize that people with visual impairments have the potential for independence, often with adaptations. "I just hoped that she would learn how I live life independently and what kinds of things I have to do just to help me."

Five mentors wanted their students to understand that people with visual impairments vary in personal characteristics and are not

Table 1
Work roles and personal information about mentors.

Identifying number	Employment	Gender	Blind (B) Low vision (L)	Congenital (C)/ Adventitious (A)
1	University disability resources staff member	M	B	C
2	Staff for State Forest Service	F	L	A
3	Residential dormitory staff	F	L	A
4	Attorney	M	B	C
5	Rehabilitation teacher in VI	F	L	A
6	Rehabilitation teacher in VI	F	B	Unknown
7	Psychological counselor and part-time yoga instructor	F	B	A
8	University disability resources administrator	F	B	C
9	Government services in transportation planning	M	L	C
10	Staff at rehabilitation agency for VI	M	L	A
11	University instructor/disability services	M	L	A
12	Attorney	F	L	A
13	Food services worker at air force base; changed to classroom assistant at school for students with visual impairments	M	B	C
14	University instructor/disability services	F	B	A
15	Government employee in voter services	M	B	C
16	Special education classroom teacher	F	B	C
17	Administrator of exceptional arts organization	M	B	C

Note: VI = visual impairment.

defined by their visual impairment. One respondent commented, “The . . . range of personality has nothing to do with being visually impaired or blind but . . . with the different kinds of people in a society.” Three others especially wanted the mentee to learn about their work roles and day-to-day experiences.

When asked whether they felt their students learned what the mentor had hoped, 15 said they did and 2 were not sure. Those who perceived benefits cited examples of student learning, as described by a mentor who was a resident assistant in a university dormitory: “I think she learned that people with visual impairments range on a large spectrum. . . . She saw there are colleagues with different abilities, different vision levels than I had.”

Only one mentor was ambivalent about whether his mentee had learned things that might be useful in the future. “I tried to impart as much as I could, but it’s so challenging to know if that’s going to come in handy

later. . . .” Others noted that the mentees needed to know how adults live and work. “Although the mentees will work mainly with children, they need a conception of their students’ futures.”

Memorable experiences

Mentors described a variety of experiences with their mentee. An employee of a government agency, a special education teacher, a university instructor, and an attorney said their most memorable experience was having the student accompany them on their jobs. One man, who worked for a government agency, stated that the student was able to “see what a good education is eventually going to lead to.” An attorney noted that the student was especially interested in her courtroom interactions.

Another mentor felt that the student’s opportunity to interview the mentor’s mother was memorable. From listening to that interview, the

mentor also learned more about her own mother's experiences. Another mentor attended a meeting of the National Federation of the Blind with her mentee. Although this mentor was not a member of the organization, she wanted to encourage her mentee to hear different points of view of people with visual impairments.

Other activities included watching a baseball game, attending a low vision evaluation, going to the gym while the mentor exercised, watching the mentor perform in community theater, hiking with the mentor and her dog guide, participating in a yoga class taught by the mentor, observing the mentor manage a display table at a job fair, and having lunch at a restaurant.

Three mentors shopped with their mentees. One said, "... she had a difficult time not helping me. She was so ready to get to the door and to tell me where the cashier was. It was surprising to me, and she was able to talk about that." Memorable experiences were mainly related to jobs and daily routines such as shopping, exercising, and recreational activities.

Perceptions of visual impairment

When asked how the students' perceptions of visual impairment differed from their own, mentors cited several main themes. Some felt that mentees initially regarded their abilities as "amazing." Several felt that this impression was because their mentees mainly had contact with children, often those with multiple disabilities. One mentor noted that her mentees thought she would have more difficulty with access than she did. Others mentioned that the students had not had enough experience to regard visual impairment as a "normal" experience.

One mentor thought her mentee was unduly worried about the mentor's safety. In another situation, a mentor with low vision described how the mentee waited quietly by her office door for several minutes, assuming that the mentor knew she was there. Even in those

cases, mentors understood that the students' responses were due to lack of experience with people with visual impairments as well as not enough knowledge of that individual's abilities.

Student potential for teaching

Most mentors said they did not have the opportunity to observe skills related to teaching. Several had offered to help their mentees improve braille skills. Others mentioned skills and attitudes that would be helpful in teaching children with visual impairments. Although mentors did not cite general teaching skills, they recognized the attitudes essential for teaching: "There is that level of dedication, of commitment, of caring. . . ."

Student skills related to visual impairment

When asked about their mentees' skills for interacting with people with visual impairments, all mentors except one answered affirmatively. The one who was not positive about her mentee's skills commented briefly that the student was "in the beginning stages" but did not mention examples of any difficulty with skills. Some commented on specific communication skills, especially students asking if assistance was needed rather than assuming that the mentor wanted guidance: "'Would you like me to be a sighted guide?' . . . She asked what I needed instead of just assuming, which was great."

The mentors reported that mentees thoughtfully considered ways to make interactions natural: "She seemed very conscious of not overstepping any boundaries . . . not shouting in my ear or any of those kinds of things that happen with people sometimes."

Project effectiveness

Mentors were asked how the experience could be more effective for the mentors and the students. Varied responses addressed the duration of the experiences, assignments, group meetings, and additional ways of com-

municating. Most mentors commented that assignments were appropriate, and they appreciated the opportunity to choose options: "It was cool how they could choose or we could talk together and see what best fit with my schedule."

Three mentors wished for more unstructured time beyond the formal assignments. One stated, "I wished that she and I had more time . . . talk time, not just 'she needs to observe me in this environment and she needs to observe me doing this,' or 'she needs to go with me to a social activity.'"

Several mentors suggested a final session in which mentors and mentees could share thoughts and ideas about the assignments. One suggested ". . . a little reception or something where you bring all the mentees together, and they get to talk with other mentors and . . . hear [about] their experience[s]." Mentor responses reflected general satisfaction with the intent of the program, with varied suggestions for improvement.

DISCUSSION

Seventeen individuals with visual impairments were interviewed about their experiences as mentors with students who were preparing to teach children with visual impairments. They hoped to convey the range of competencies and careers that are possible for adults who have visual impairments, as well as an understanding of adaptations. Most were certain their mentees benefited from the experience. They described a variety of experiences with students, often with humor and evidence of enjoyment. Many noted that the students seemed surprised by the mentors' capabilities but were open to new learning.

Some mentors recommended an initial or final orientation meeting among mentors, mentees, and university faculty. Most were pleased with the variety of activities, but three suggested that there be a longer period of informal interaction time. An important out-

come was that at least three of the mentors and mentees have continued to be in contact after the experience ended.

The mentoring program was an innovative feature of a federal grant. Based on the mentor interviews and faculty discussion with students, the project appears to have been effective in helping students understand the day-to-day experiences of working adults with visual impairments. The program will continue as an element of the training program after the current grant cycle, with minor changes based on mentor and student feedback.

One project limitation was the distance required for meetings for students who lived in rural areas. Because rural students had to plan less frequent visits that often lasted longer, it was difficult for them to observe prescheduled activities (for example, a specific meeting, performance, or class lecture). Another limitation was the difficulty in completing five assignments in one semester due to schedules. Instructors assigned incomplete grades and converted them to a regular grade when the assignments were complete.

In spite of these limitations, mentors perceived that the program enhanced student understanding of the experience of working adults with visual impairments. The positive and constructive feedback from mentors suggests that the project was not only valuable for students, but also rewarding for mentors, who enjoyed the opportunity to share their experiences and shape the thinking of future teachers.

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