

# Faculty Mentorship Program for Students with Disabilities: Academic Success Outcomes (Practice Brief)

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## Abstract

Classroom success and academic integration are essential indicators of academic success (Tinto, 2012). Since students with disabilities, compared to students without disabilities, often face additional transitional academic issues when entering college, Ball State University developed a Faculty Mentorship Program (FMP) for students with disabilities to facilitate their academic integration. This practice brief presents a study of a nine-year longitudinal analysis of 32,409 students in three groups: students with disabilities participating in a FMP, students with disabilities not participating in the FMP, and students without disabilities. Three academic success outcomes were tracked; one-year retention, and four- and six-year graduation rates. The article also provides a thorough discussion of the portability of the program with suggestions for implementation on other campuses.

*Keywords: Students with disabilities, mentorship, faculty, transition*

Successful transition into the collegiate setting is needed so that students can thrive in college. University engagement and involvement are crucial for academic integration (Astin, 1985). Furthermore, when students are able to form meaningful relationships with their peers and faculty members, they are more likely to engage with their academics and succeed in their coursework (Chambliss & Takacs, 2014). These transitional events are even more crucial for students with disabilities and their success on campus. This article will examine the benefits of mentor programs for students with disabilities and provide additional information other than what was previously discussed (Harris, Ho, Markle, & Wessel, 2011; Patrick & Wessel, 2013) about the Faculty Mentorship Program for students with disabilities at Ball State University.

## Faculty Mentorship Program

The Faculty Mentorship Program (FMP) for students with disabilities at Ball State University was created in 2006 by faculty and staff in the Office of Disability Services (Patrick & Wessel, 2013) and has been offered to new students with disabilities each

subsequent year. Matriculating students with disabilities volunteered to be paired with a faculty mentor during their transitional year. An introductory email was sent to the mentor and student pairs to begin the relationship (Harris et al., 2011). The nature of the mentor relationship was determined by the two of them, including the frequency and manner in which pairs met. For example, some met every other week, monthly, or on an as needed basis. Additionally, some pairs decided to keep in touch electronically throughout the academic year. Finding a system that was beneficial for both the student and faculty member was essential. Faculty members provided advice on how students could be successful with their academic coursework, and also helped integrate students to campus by introducing them to resources and other faculty members.

In order to best serve students with disabilities, faculty mentors were informed of their responsibilities prior to participating in the mentorship program. Periodic luncheons, sponsored by the Office of Disability Services, for all faculty mentors allowed them to be updated on helpful information related to students with disabilities, discuss their experiences with

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student mentees, and identify best practices for the mentors. Not only did students benefit from the mentorship, faculty members also benefited by expanding their understanding of how best to help students with disabilities succeed. Ball State University received a three-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Postsecondary Education to help the university enhance the effectiveness of the FMP by providing additional professional development opportunities for faculty and staff to ensure best practices when working with students with disabilities.

After a review the related literature, the authors describe the method for the study, the academic outcomes for students with disabilities participating in the program, and provide suggestions for other institutions interested in starting a similar program.

### Literature Review

Tinto's (1993) theory of individual departure serves as the theoretical framework for this study. Students must transition from their high schools to collegiate settings and separate from their previous experiences in order to successfully integrate into college. Academic and social settings exist in colleges and university; integration into these settings is essential for students. If students do not integrate into the academic and/or social settings, they may develop feelings of isolation and be at risk for eventual departure from the institution.

The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 reported that only 34% of students with disabilities enrolled at four-year institutions completed their degrees (Newman et al., 2011). This statistic demonstrates the need for additional support for students with disabilities to be successful in academic and social settings. Students must be aware of their strengths and weaknesses in order to effectively seek accommodations and make decisions regarding how to be successful in college (Hamblet, 2014). Understanding the transitional challenges students with disabilities face when entering college can enable campus educators to create impactful programs to help them succeed.

The transition from high school to college may be intimidating for many students. However, students with disabilities face additional challenges (Barnard-Brak, Davis, Tate, & Sulak, 2009; Rothman, Maldonado, & Rothman, 2008) as interaction with teachers lessens, classwork become more rigorous, and individual support systems change (Enright, Co-

nyers, & Szymanski, 1996). Not only are they facing similar transitional experiences as students without disabilities, but they also have to navigate academic accommodations in the classroom, something that may have been done for them prior to college. Universities and high schools approach academic accommodations differently (Madaus, 2005). Students must learn to advocate for themselves while in college and understand the resources available in order to succeed. However, students with disabilities may feel uncomfortable approaching faculty members to request an accommodation (Fichten, 1990). Navigating this new environment can be challenging until students understand expectations and seek to form relationships with faculty members.

Students' ability to succeed in the classroom and integrate academically is essential for student persistence (Tinto, 1997). A supportive community for students is created within academic classrooms; students learn from their instructors and peers. Academic and social integration are both important to enable persistence to graduation. Furthermore, academic rigor must be balanced with high expectations (Tinto, 2012), challenge, and support (Sanford, 1967). The relationships that are formed between faculty members and students are essential for students to achieve success within a rigorous academic discipline (Tinto, 2012). Beyond the rigor of the coursework, there must be support to effectively foster the development of the student. Without these two harmonious components, students may not persist to graduation. Faculty members and rigorous classroom cultures are an essential component for college student success. Mentoring programs can provide students with support that enables them to develop confidence and navigate challenging academic environments (Campbell-Whatley, 2001). These relationships can also help develop key academic and social skills for students with disabilities. Mentors can reinforce academic success skills, such as time management, and they can serve as an informed campus friend for students with disabilities to come to with questions or concerns. This relationship can foster growth and development for students with disabilities.

Students with disabilities who have faculty mentors have higher GPA and improved academic success outcomes compared to students with disabilities who do not have mentors (Harris et al., 2011). Not only do these students perform better academically, but they are also aware of campus resources that can be used

to seek assistance. The individual attention students receive in the program enables students to transition successfully to the collegiate setting by utilizing the resources available and feeling a sense of belonging on campus. This is the value of having a faculty mentor that is able to guide and direct students to success. Furthermore, having a faculty mentor in the academic field of their mentee may facilitate the needed career information to help students transition after college (Patrick & Wessel, 2013). "Mentors can engage mentees in discussions to explore ideas they have not considered related to the student's goals, provide encouragement, act as a support system, and provide students with specific knowledge related to their field of interest" (p. 106). This relationship provides students with support in order to meet the challenges of completing college.

Students experience a challenging transition when they enter college. Students with disabilities face additional challenges related to integration. Providing additional support and guidance from faculty members can not only help students develop self-confidence but can also help them navigate important resources for success.

### Method

This practice brief provides quantitative data to complement the qualitative phenomenological examination previously reported in the *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability* on the Faculty Mentorship Program (FMP) for students with disabilities at Ball State University (Patrick & Wessel, 2013). The study aimed to compare academic success outcomes (i.e., year two retention rate, and four- and six-year graduation rates) for students with disabilities participating in the FMP, compared to students with disabilities not participating in the FMP, and students without disabilities at Ball State University. The research question was, are academic success outcomes (i.e., year two retention rate, and four- and six-year graduation rates) significantly different between FMP participants, other students with disabilities not participating in the FMP, and students without disabilities? As the data already existed in the university's student information system, it was considered archival data (Elder, Pavalko, & Clipp, 1993). There were 32,409 full-time matriculating students in the population during the period 2006-2014. The sample equaled the population. Students with disabilities were identified

as having registered with the Office of Disability Services by the start of the matriculating year. Faculty Mentorship Program participants were involved with the program during the fall semester of the matriculating year, and some students continued into the spring semester. Retention was defined as being enrolled as a full-time student by the year two fall semester official statistic date. Four-year graduation was defined as having graduated by the end of the summer during year four. Six-year graduation was defined as having graduated by the end of summer during year six. Chi-square contingency analyses were computed to examine for significant differences.

### Academic Success Outcomes

Table one presents data of three academic success outcomes (i.e., year two retention, four- and six-year graduation rates) for fall semester full-time matriculating students during 2006-2014. There were 32,409 participants in this nine-year longitudinal analysis; 300 students with disabilities participating in the FMP, 311 students with disabilities who did not participate in the FMP, and 31,798 students without disabilities. The cumulative two-year retention rate was 82.00% for participants in the FMP, compared to 78.88% for students with disabilities who did not participate in the FMP, and 79.18% for students without disabilities.

The four-year cumulative graduation rate for FMP participants was 40.40%, compared with 31.68% for students with disabilities not in the FMP, and 39.76% for students without disabilities. The cumulative six-year graduation rate for FMP participants was 67.81%, exceeding students without disabilities by over 8%. There was a statistically significant difference when comparing the graduation rate of FMP participants (67.81%) and students with disabilities not participating in the FMP (60.29%).

### Portability and Implications

The outcomes data for students with disabilities participating in the FMP suggests that a FMP may play a critical role in providing students with the academic and social support needed to be successful (Tinto, 1993, 1997). Despite the many transitional challenges students with disabilities encounter as they enter college (Bernard-Brak et al., 2009; Enright et al., 1996; Fichten, 1990; Rothman et al., 2008), students with disabilities participating in the FMP out-

performed their peers with disabilities and students without disabilities in all three areas in this study (year two retention rate, four- and six-year graduation rates).

Given the research that indicates a lower graduation rate for students with disabilities (Newman et al., 2011), the higher four- and six-year graduation rates for students in the FMP are noteworthy. Not only were the four- and six-year graduation rates higher for FMP students than other students with disabilities, they also outpaced students without disabilities. This higher level of persistence to graduation for FMP students speaks to the important role that faculty members can play for students with disabilities (Patrick & Wessel, 2013).

The connections that FMP students make with faculty members during the first year of college helped them attain a higher year two retention rate than other students with and without disabilities. These relationships with faculty members help students achieve academic success (Tinto, 2012) and develop the skills and confidence they need to progress through college (Campbell-Whately, 2001). The regular contact that mentors have with their students assists the students with staying engaged academically and socially on campus, thus increasing the likelihood that the student will successfully persist towards graduation.

### **Faculty Mentorship Program Implementation Suggestions**

A program similar to the FMP may be implemented on other campuses. Helping faculty members to see the importance of the role they can play in the academic success of students with disabilities is the critical first step in starting a faculty mentoring program. Faculty members are busy and asked to serve their colleges and universities in many ways. Making sure that the benefits of being a faculty mentor are clearly articulated, and that the responsibilities of joining a mentoring program will not take too much of their time, will help them understand that this is not just another meeting to fit into their crowded schedules.

In addition to the academic success outcomes described previously for students with disabilities, faculty members in the FMP have also received benefits from their participation. In program evaluations conducted with faculty participants, faculty members have reported that mentoring students with disabilities and attending program training sessions have made them more aware of the concerns their students experience and the resources available to them. Many

faculty mentors have indicated that participation in the FMP has helped make them better teachers for all of their students. Additionally, some faculty are able to count their participation in the FMP as a service requirement in the promotion and tenure process (Harris et al., 2011).

Based on the success of the FMP at Ball State, the following suggestions are offered as considerations in implementing a similar program at other colleges and universities:

- Host a luncheon or a brown bag lunch meeting with some of the faculty members who have expressed interest in students with disabilities and those who have been good partners in providing accommodations. If there is a faculty advisory committee for the disability services office on your campus, those faculty members may be a good starting point to gauge interest in a mentoring program.
- Talk to faculty members about some of the reasons college may be difficult for students with disabilities, including the difficult transition due to the manner in which disability services is administered in postsecondary as compared to secondary schools. Faculty members may be surprised when they hear of the over-accommodation that often happens in high school. Understanding more about transitional challenges that students with disabilities encounter may help them see the need for a faculty mentoring program.
- If there is sufficient interest to start a mentoring program, select faculty members from a variety of academic departments to participate. If certain academic majors are more popular for students with disabilities, it may be necessary to invite multiple faculty members from those departments to participate to ensure that one faculty member isn't assigned multiple students. Emphasizing that the FMP does not require a great deal of long-term commitment from faculty mentors has helped Ball State recruit faculty from a broad range of academic departments. There are currently almost 50 faculty members from 35 academic departments in the FMP.
- Start the program small and keep it informal. The Ball State FMP began with only about 20 faculty members, and its organizers have de-

liberately tried to keep it as a low-level commitment. Ball State faculty mentors have consistently reported that they enjoy the informal nature of the FMP and the fact that it is unlike other commitments they have on campus. They are simply asked to become a mentor to a new student with a disability and to personalize the Ball State experience for the student.

- Offer new students with disabilities and their families many opportunities to learn about the mentoring program. Provide information about the program to students with disabilities coming to campus for pre-admission visits, first-year orientation, and other new student programs. Parents have been especially receptive to the possibility of their student receiving mentoring in the student's academic discipline. Ball State has created a brochure detailing the FMP that is sent to all matriculating students who disclose their disability to the Office of Disability Services.
- Connect the student and faculty mentor together early in the student's first semester. The Director of Disability Services at Ball State emails the student and faculty member at the beginning of the fall semester to introduce the two. Disability Services then offers an informal lunch meeting during the second or third week of the fall semester to which new students and faculty mentors are invited. Faculty and students often meet for the first time at this lunch and set a plan for the manner and frequency of future meetings.
- Though faculty members are not paid for their service in the FMP, small incentives and "thank yous" have been well-received. Disability Services offers free luncheons for the faculty two to three times per semester in which disability resources and issues are discussed. A topic pertinent to disability and higher education is selected as the theme for the training session, and a faculty or staff member with a level of expertise on the topic is asked to lead a discussion. These luncheons are interactive, with faculty members asked to share their experiences about the topic. They often learn best practices in teaching students with disabilities from one another. Faculty members have also been given shirts and vests with the FMP logo, and letters of appreciation

have been written by the Director of Disability Services, to Deans and Department Chairs, recognizing the faculty members service in the FMP.

### Conclusion

Although this was a single-site study designed to provide in-depth data on a faculty mentorship program at one institution, it is clear that connecting new students with disabilities with faculty mentors has contributed to successful academic outcomes for students with disabilities. The data reflect that students with disabilities obviously have benefited from having a faculty mentor. Faculty mentors have also reported various ways in which their involvement in the FMP has been valuable to them. However, the biggest winner in the FMP may be the Office of Disability Services. There are currently almost 50 faculty members who volunteer as mentors, representing 35 academic departments. These mentors receive specialized training from Disability Services, and then share their experiences and knowledge with colleagues in their academic departments – essentially serving as ambassadors for the Office of Disability Services. The relationships developed with faculty through their participation in the FMP have given the Disability Services staff opportunities to engage with faculty which would not have been possible without the FMP.

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Table 1

*Academic Success Outcomes: Retention and Graduation Rates for Faculty Mentorship Participants (FMP), Other Students with Disabilities (SWD), and Students without Disabilities (SWOD) at Ball State University, 2006-2015*

Cohort	Group	Matrics <i>n</i>	Retention to year two		Graduated after four years		Graduated after six years	
			<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
2006	FMP <sup>1</sup>	31	26	83.87	11	35.48	21	67.74
	SWD <sup>2</sup>	40	32	80.00	11	27.50	26	65.00
	SWOD <sup>3</sup>	3,486	2,690	77.17	1,133	32.50	1,972	56.57
2007	FMP	31	26	83.87	18	58.06	22	70.97
	SWD	33	25	75.76	7	21.21	17	51.52
	SWOD	3,423	2,689	78.56	1,210	35.35	2,047	59.80
2008	FMP	37	31	83.78	21	44.68	33	62.16
	SWD	31	23	74.19	9	28.13	20	61.29
	SWOD	3,685	2,887	78.34	1,513	40.51	2,221	60.27
2009	FMP	47	40	85.11	21	44.68	33	70.21
	SWD	32	29	90.63	9	28.13	20	62.50
	SWOD	3,735	2,964	79.36	1,513	40.51	2,274	60.88
<b>2006-2009 cohorts subtotal</b>								
	FMP	146					99	<b>67.81*</b>
	SWD	136					82	<b>60.29</b>
	SWOD	3,735					8,514	<b>59.42</b>
								<b>Six-year graduation rates →</b>
2010	FMP	28	22	78.57	14	50.00		
	SWD	21	16	76.19	8	38.10		
	SWOD	3,493	2,771	79.33	1,566	44.83		
2011	FMP	24	17	70.83	8	33.33		
	SWD	45	35	77.78	19	42.22		
	SWOD	3,714	2,890	77.81	1,775	47.79		
<b>2006-2011 cohorts subtotal</b>								
	FMP	198			80	<b>40.40</b>		
	SWD	202			64	<b>31.68</b>		
	SWOD	21,536			8,563	<b>39.76</b>		
								<b>← Four-year graduation rates</b>
2012	FMP	28	20	71.43				
	SWD	41	33	80.49				
	SWOD	3,356	2,648	78.90				
2013	FMP	35	32	91.43				
	SWD	32	23	71.88				
	SWOD	3,459	2,825	81.67				
2014	FMP	39	32	82.05				
	SWD	36	29	80.56				
	SWOD	3,447	2,815	81.67				

(continued)

Cohort	Group	Matrics	Retention to year two		Graduated after four years		Graduated after six years	
		<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
<b>2006-2014 cohorts subtotal</b>								
	FMP	300	246	<b>82.00</b>				
	SWD	311	245	<b>78.78</b>				
	SWOD	31,798	25,179	<b>79.18</b>	←Year two retention rates			
	Total	32,409						

*Notes.*

<sup>1</sup> FMP is students with disabilities participating in the Faculty Mentorship Program.

<sup>2</sup> SWD is students with disabilities not participating in the FMP.

<sup>3</sup> SWOD is students without disabilities.

\* $p < .05$ .