

Training Peer Mentors to Support Students With Intellectual Disability in Higher Education

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PURPOSE: Inclusive post-secondary education (IPSE) provides students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) the opportunity to receive higher education to prepare them for independent living and future employment. As IPSE programs grow for students with IDD across the U.S., it is important to consider what successful outcomes mean and the quality of supports provided to these students. Peer mentors provide students with IDD academic and social support, and are key stakeholders in IPSE program success. Peer mentors come from a variety of academic backgrounds and, while this diversifies their perspectives and inputs, they may not have adequate knowledge or experience to support students with IDD. Untrained mentors are ill-equipped to adapt assignments to match a student's abilities, provide appropriate cues/prompts, or manage challenging behaviors (Carter & McCabe, 2020). This project measured outcomes from a peer mentor training program aimed at preparing them to effectively support students with IDD in accessing higher education and social opportunities at college. The training program used an occupation-based, holistic approach and provided training to mentors on how to foster self-determination, manage challenging behaviors, and effectively cue and prompt students with IDD.

DESIGN: This single group pre-test/post-test study was designed to measure the effects of an IPSE peer mentor training program on mentors' confidence in supporting students with IDD at college. A series of three training workshops were held with undergraduate college students hired as peer mentors at IPSE programs across the state of Pennsylvania.

METHOD: Data was collected from undergraduate peer mentors prior to and following the peer mentor training program using a modified version of the Student Confidence Questionnaire (SCQ) (Derdall et al., 2002). Paired samples *t*-tests and Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were used to assess change in peer mentors' confidence in communication, adaptability, innovation, supervision, and professional competence (Derdall et al., 2002).

RESULTS: Peer mentors ($n = 13$) from three universities, Duquesne University (46.2%), Temple University (38.5%), and Gwynedd Mercy University (15.4%), participated in the training program. Only 23.1% of the mentors had received prior training. 46.2% of mentors worked as a peer mentor for 1-2 semesters and 30.8% had no prior experience as a mentor. The training program significantly improved peer mentors' overall confidence [Pre-test Mean SCQ Score = 104.0; Post-test Mean SCQ Score = 117.0; $t(12) = 5.719$, $p = .01$]. The training program specifically impacted mentors' confidence in their communication ($p = .004$), adaptability ($p = .013$), and supervision skills ($p = .334$). While mentors' innovation and professional competence skills increased, these changes were not statistically significant. There was a statistically significant improvement in total SCQ scores for new mentors as compared to more experienced mentors ($p = .01$).

CONCLUSION: IPSE is a role-emerging practice setting for occupational therapy practitioners, and they can play a vital role in ensuring students with IDD are successful in building campus life skills, social capital and self-determination. This data indicates that formal training for peer mentors can improve their skills and confidence in providing necessary supports to students with IDD at the college level. An occupational therapy-driven training program for student peer mentors can help establish best practices in support of students with IDD attending IPSE programs.

References

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