

Mentoring and Employment Preparation for College Students

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Key Points

1. Legally blind college students were randomly assigned to either work with a mentor who is blind in their career field or to use traditional career resources to improve chances for employment after graduation.
2. Recruiting students for the project was challenging, possibly due to narrow eligibility criteria. The final sample was 76 (26 students using traditional resources and 25 students paired with 25 mentors).
3. Preliminary findings show that students found jobs after graduating and felt that the jobs matched their skills and interests.
4. Students reported positive experiences in participating and planned to keep in touch with their mentors after the study.
5. Data collection will conclude in January 2015 and more results are forthcoming.

Research Summary

Given a competitive employment environment, it is important to consider ways in which students who are blind can gain experience to prepare them to be successful in finding jobs after graduating. Although there are existing mentoring programs for students who are blind, this study uses a randomly-controlled trial design to investigate the effectiveness of mentoring on employment. The purpose of this study is to investigate best practices in mentoring to improve competitive employment outcomes for college students who are legally blind.

Clicker Question: How realistic do you think college students with B/VI are in their expectations about their ability to find jobs after graduating?

Very realistic (10%)

Somewhat realistic (48%)

Not realistic, they're too optimistic (34%)

Not realistic, they're too pessimistic (7%)

Students with blindness have been shown to have limited work experience. Working with mentors allows students to gain valuable information about the job search, expand their professional network, increase their confidence in finding employment, and provides opportunities for job shadowing and practicing interview skills. Students and professionals were recruited nationwide to participate in this longitudinal study. To be eligible, all participants needed to be legally blind and living in the United States. Professionals included individuals who met that criteria, and were also currently employed or recently retired. Student participants had to be legally blind, living in the U.S., under age 35, in their last year of college or graduate school, and planning to work immediately following graduation. All individuals interested in participating completed an online eligibility form.

Once determined eligible, students were randomly assigned to either an intervention group or a comparison group. Those in the intervention group were paired with a mentor (who was legally blind and working in a similar profession) for the course of one year. Mentees and mentors completed an online orientation to the program and were provided with a mentoring manual that detailed the program and offered resources for job preparation. Mentees completed monthly and quarterly reports online detailing their progress with mentors and their job search. Mentors completed quarterly reports online to provide information about their progress with their mentees. Every effort was made to match each student with a mentor who lived no more than an hour away, to allow for face to face interactions and job shadowing opportunities. When this was not possible, students were matched with distance mentors who were encouraged to set up meetings to talk or Skype on a regular monthly basis over the course of the year. Mentees received a \$20 gift card on a monthly basis throughout the project to offset transportation costs incurred as a result of meeting with their mentors.

Clicker question: I believe that it is most important for students to be matched with mentors who:

Have a similar disability (42%)

Work in the same profession (41%)

Live close enough for face to face interaction (17%)

The comparison group of students did not work with mentors, and instead received traditional career preparation materials in the form of a resource sheet that was also provided to those in the intervention group. The comparison group also completed quarterly reports to document their job search activities. They received a \$20 gift card as an incentive for each report completed. All students in the project completed pre-test, 6-month, and post-test measures online to assess a variety of differences (e.g. self-efficacy in job-seeking, assertiveness, career optimism, and employment outcomes).

Clicker question: Did you refer students to participate in this project, or encourage staff to share the information?

Yes, I shared project information with eligible students/agency staff (42%)

No, I didn't know anyone who would be eligible (5%)

No, I never heard of the project before today (47%)

I don't remember (5%)

Student participants (N = 51, 25 intervention, 26 comparison), participated in the study in one of four cohorts designated by graduation date. Mentees were paired with 25 mentors. Data collection for Cohort 1 & 2 were completed, however data for Cohort 3 & 4 were still in progress at the time of the presentation. All data collection will be complete by January 2015. The majority of mentees and mentors were White (77% and 80% respectively), and over 60% were women. Most of the students participating were undergraduates (72.5%). The majority (80%) of mentors were currently employed, with only 20% recently retired. There were a wide variety of majors represented among the students with the largest categories being: Social

Sciences (21%); Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (17%); and Law/Gov't/Public Administration (16%). More than half (52%) of the mentors selected had a graduate degree, and 24% had a doctoral degree.

Clicker question: In order to secure competitive employment, in my opinion, students with B/VI need the most help improving their:

Social skills (33%)

Blindness/independence skills (40%)

Job search skills (25%)

Academic performance (1%)

Preliminary results included pre-test self-efficacy data for all students, and data on employment outcomes and experiences in the program were only available for those in completed cohorts 1 & 2 (N = 19). Participant retention was very high, with only 2 pairs withdrawing prematurely due to personal circumstances. The majority of mentors and mentees strongly agreed that the program would be beneficial to others, and most mentors and mentees reported that they planned to stay in touch after the program. On average, students submitted 15 job applications each, with a median of around 5 applications. In a pre-test measure of job-seeking self-efficacy, the majority of scores indicated high confidence, particularly in independent tasks and contributions once employed (e.g. requesting a job application form, working on your own, completing an application). Areas with lower self-efficacy scores appear to revolve around interacting with employers during the interview process (e.g. disclosure of visual impairment, general interview skills, self-presentation during an interview).

Of 19 students with complete data, 10 were employed (1 of those part time) and 9 were not employed at the completion of the project. Salaries ranged from \$13,000 to \$52,000. All who were working full time received insurance and benefits. The majority of the participants reported high satisfaction with their jobs, and indicated that it matches their education level and interests.

Future research will include analyses on all 4 cohorts, comparisons between groups (intervention and comparison group), and the analyses of other measures including assertiveness and career optimism. Products anticipated to come out of this project include a mentoring manual, a career preparation resource sheet, an employment preparation listserv, and informational video clips about mentoring and job preparation for college students.

Panel Discussion

Panelists:

Donna Smith, Easter Seals, Project ACTION

Sean Whalen, National Association of Blind Students

Joey Richey, Alabama DRS

Joe Strechey, AFB

When we originally designed this study, we intended to match mentors and students based on location, profession, and disability. Meeting all three criteria was not always possible. We asked our participants in this audience which they feel is most critical. Now we will ask you, from your experience, which of these is most critical to match, and why?

My belief is location, obviously, and disability, but I would say that the commonality and really what they're learning from it is typically about that type of career. All these things have a role, and it also depends on the individuals involved.

I think I'm right in line with the results from the audience, and agree with the previous comment. If you have to sacrifice one, I think location is the clear one to go. When weighing whether it's disability or field of employment is important, I guess I'd look at what the student needs most from this mentoring relationship, which I admit can be hard to determine sometimes, but if it's questions about, 'Look, I want to be a chemist, how am I going to do this particular job?' Or, 'I want to be an economist, how is this going to work for me?' That obviously needs someone who's in the same field. If it's somebody who just maybe needs more confidence and just to see that there are blind people out there who are professionally and successfully employed, really just having somebody who can share those skills and help instill that confidence can be really helpful. If I had to pick one, I would default to disability, but I think field of employment is a close second.

I totally agree on these ideas. I would default to vocation being the most important, and disability being second. One of the potential benefits of using mentors who are not people who are blind or visually impaired might be to help build some connections within those fields. If you are a chemist, or about to graduate and want to be a chemist, and you're talking to a professional in that field already, then that may help you get some connections within that field, and help people who are not blind or visually impaired also to understand that this is a really sharp person coming out of university eager, ready to do the work, can do the work, and that may be some job connections that would be useful.

We speculated that some of our difficulty with recruiting students may have been due to narrow eligibility of criteria required by the project. Can you suggest other reasons that we have lower responses from students than we expected, and how, via our counselors, encourage students to become engaged in mentorship programs like this?

I would also say it's hard to get youth to engage in a lot of things. You put out scholarships, and it's hard to get youth to apply for scholarships. Corporations put out large scholarships, and they still have a hard time engaging youth and getting them to buy in and go through the process.

I would definitely agree with that and also to say, one thing maybe is baseline of confidence coming in. If you don't think that you're employable and won't really benefit from this relationship, you might not be inclined to get engaged with the program.

I was aware of the project, but I was one of those people that did not refer, but it wasn't because I didn't want to, I didn't have anyone eligible. I have quite a few students, but none of them were at that level to transition from school to employment.

I think that youth coming out of college now, people who are blind or have low vision, for the most part, went to public schools. They were in inclusive environments, they went to university in inclusive environments, there are expectations that they are going to leave university and work in inclusive environments. I think that one possibility is that you could get a little more interest if it was not so specific to disability.