

## **Perspectives of Peer Mentors Supporting College Students with Intellectual Disability: Findings and Recommendations from a Systematic Review**

*By Mindy Lingo, L. Danielle Roberts-Dahm, Clare Papay, Belkis Choiseul-Praslin, & Chelsea VanHorn Stinnett*

### **Introduction**

Peer mentors provide crucial social, academic, and campus community inclusion supports to students with intellectual disability enrolled in higher education. Research on the perspectives of peer mentors provides valuable insight into the impact that supporting students with intellectual disability has on both the students and the mentors. Research that includes peer mentor reflections on their positive and negative motivations and experiences can help identify effective and ineffective practices within higher education programs for students with intellectual disability.

This Insight Brief reviews findings and recommendations from the following literature review: Carter, E. W. & McCabe, L. E. (2021). Peer perspectives within the inclusive postsecondary education movement: A systematic review. *Behavior Modification*, 45(2), 215-250. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0145445520979789>

As part of its charge to disseminate research and best practices related to improving higher education for students with intellectual disability, the Think College Inclusive Higher Education Network compiled a list of published research on higher education for students with intellectual disability. A systematic review of research on the perspectives of peer mentors by Carter and McCabe (2021) stood out as having important implications and recommendations for higher education programs for students with intellectual disability. In this Insight Brief, we summarize the findings of Carter and McCabe (2021) and provide recommendations for current or developing higher education programs for students with intellectual disability in implementing best practices for students and peer mentors.

### **Summary of Research**

Carter and McCabe (2021) conducted a systematic review of 37 articles on the perspectives of peer mentors in higher education and their personal involvement in the operations of programs for students with intellectual disability.

#### ***Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria***

Studies included in the review reported data from peers who were undergraduate or graduate students, focusing on their perspectives of higher education programs or their experiences with students with intellectual disability in either formal or informal roles. Peer perspective data needed to be part of a formal study or program evaluation for the study to be included in the review. Exclusion criteria ruled out studies where peers interacted only with individuals with intellectual disability outside of a higher education program as well as studies involving students with disabilities other than intellectual disability. Additionally, studies lacking first-hand peer experience or containing only anecdotal evidence were excluded.

**Research on the perspectives of peer mentors provides valuable insight into the impact that supporting students with intellectual disability has on both the students and the mentors.**

## ***Coding Procedures***

The authors coded information on the demographics and roles of peers, the colleges they attended, and the methodology used to solicit perspectives. As part of the coding, the authors used a constant comparative method to develop the categories reflected in the peers' perspectives. They found eight areas of emphasis, which they used to develop their research questions: (1) the factors that motivated peers to become involved, (2) how peers evaluate their own effectiveness in providing support, (3) the nature of their relationships with students with intellectual disability, (4) the challenges peers report experiencing, (5) the ways peers were personally affected, (6) their descriptions of the impact of the higher education program on their campus, (7) the attitudes they held toward inclusion and disability, and (8) their recommendations related to inclusive postsecondary education programming.

**There are multiple factors that motivate people to become peer mentors including prior experience with people with intellectual disability, personal values, gaining new friends and fun experiences, and professional or academic motivation.**

## ***Research Questions and Major Findings***

### **1. What motivated peer mentors to become involved in supporting college students with intellectual disability?**

Five studies identified multiple factors that motivated peer mentors, such as:

- prior experience and relationships with individuals with intellectual disability, or having a disability themselves
- their personal values or interest in serving others
- gaining new friendships and exposure to a fun experience
- professional and/or academic motivation

### **2. How did peer mentors evaluate their own effectiveness in providing support?**

Peers reported their effectiveness in seven of the studies. They stated they were:

- successful and impactful in their role, especially when they were taught specific instructional techniques and support strategies from program personnel
- effective in supporting the growth of their mentee in reaching goals, increasing study habits, and expanding social networks and community involvement
- able to help with in-class assistance through collaboration, communication, and support in expanding social networks and community involvement

### **3. How did peer mentors describe their relationship with students with intellectual disability?**

Twenty of the studies included peer descriptions of their relationships with their mentee. Mainly, they described them as follows:

- Peers often referred to their relationship with the students as a friendship.
- Some felt it was a very typical friendship that developed over time, while others felt there were differences between their relationship with their peers participating in the higher education program and their peers who were not part of the program. Some felt the relationships were different because of the type of support that was required, their role as an advocate, or their role as a model of appropriate behaviors.

#### 4. What challenges did peer mentors report encountering in their roles?

Six studies identified challenges peer mentors share about their experience. Peer mentors encountered challenges with social relationships, behavioral challenges, personal challenges, differential expectations, and structural issues. The challenges in the following list were usually specific to one student, time, or place. Higher education program staff should consider ways to circumvent these challenges when planning for the integration of peer mentor support in the program.

- **Social relationships:** Peer mentors reported difficulty in establishing authentic friendships, forming social relationships outside of the program, and being socially excluded in campus settings (e.g., cafeteria, classes). Peer mentors felt that romantic interests were the most prominent challenge. They also shared concerns about students with intellectual disability being taken advantage of by others.
- **Behavioral challenges:** Peer mentors stated that it can be awkward to address inappropriate behaviors when needed and difficult to redirect students who were unwilling, unmotivated, or distracted.
- **Personal challenges:** Peer mentors shared that they did not know enough about the students, their disabilities, or the academic content they were asked to support. They also faced challenges with balancing responsibilities as a peer mentor, having difficult conversations, and/or understanding how to navigate issues of independence while still considering dignity of risk.
- **Differential expectations:** Peer mentors reported a lack of student expectation on the part of faculty, and their own lack of understanding about how to provide effective accommodations in the classroom. They also described the confusion of students with intellectual disability in the college classroom and the difficulty of managing students with disruptive behaviors.
- **Structural issues:** Peer mentors reported the “special student” status kept students from being able to participate in campus activities, on-campus living, and/or commencement. They also noted that students in the program do not experience a “typical” college student schedule; instead, students experience heavily scheduled interactions. Additionally, there was a lack of space for meetings and work sessions that program staff could use regularly.

#### 5. How were peer mentors affected personally by their experiences with higher education programs for students with intellectual disability?

Twenty-four studies addressed how peer mentors were impacted by the experience, which included the following ways:

- **Professionally:** Peer mentors pursuing careers in education found the experience beneficial for exposure to inclusive practices, hands-on experience, and counteracting preconceived notions. Others reported it made them rethink their future career choices in ways that either included a career change to working with or a desire to work with/hire people with disabilities in their future roles.
- **Disability attitudes:** Working for the program positively influenced the way peer mentors viewed the capabilities of people with disabilities. The experience also increased peer mentors’ disability awareness and made them more attuned to disability equity on campus.
- **Personal and social growth:** Peer mentors described the friendships they developed with students with intellectual disability and other peer

**Based on feedback from peer mentors, program staff should consider the following when recruiting and training peer mentors: provide an orientation and training for new mentors, hold regular meetings for peer mentors and staff for support and to provide feedback; and make efforts to be intentional with pairings.**

mentors. They also reported an increase in communication abilities, leadership, collaboration, organizational skills, confidence, and spiritual growth.

- **Academic impact:** The experience of working with the program provided motivation and enhanced peer mentors' own learning. They also felt that this inclusion of students with intellectual disability provided a more enriching class environment.
- **Remuneration:** While some students did receive course credit or payment for participation in peer mentoring, this was not explicitly stated as a benefit.

## 6. How did the peer mentors describe the impact of programs for students with intellectual disability on their campus community?

There were 9 studies that included descriptions of how peers felt their campus community was affected by the higher education program. Mainly, higher education programs

- for students with intellectual disability have a positive impact on the campus beyond just those directly involved. They impact the whole community and increase disability awareness and diversity within the campus.

## 7. What attitudes did peer mentors hold toward inclusion and disability?

Fourteen studies addressed the peer mentors' comfort levels, views on inclusion, and perceptions of the abilities regarding students with intellectual disability, these

- **Comfort level:** Peers generally feel comfortable interacting with individuals with intellectual disability, especially those with formal mentoring experience. However, some peers note initial anxiety or discomfort in specific contexts, like supporting older students or addressing behavioral differences.
- **Views of inclusion:** Peer mentors support including students with intellectual disability in college. Surveys consistently highlight benefits such as increased acceptance of diversity, with qualitative findings echoing this support through positive experiences of peers in inclusive roles.
- **Views of disability:** Peers mentors generally hold positive attitudes about the capacities of students with intellectually disability, particularly when they have direct experience, with those involved in inclusive settings expressing higher expectations and appreciation for diversity.

## 8. What recommendations did peers have related to higher education for students with intellectual disability?

There were 10 studies that included peer mentors' recommendations for higher education programs, mainly focused on training and student support information. The primary recommendations included the following:

**Academics:** Peer mentors need additional training on providing academic support and appropriate accommodations.

**Social inclusion:** Staff need to provide more specific information about students' interests and strategies to get them involved and forming friendships. Staff could also help facilitate campus socialization.

**Program design:** Programs need to provide more training to peer mentors on the students' abilities and disabilities of interest.

**Provide guidance and training to peer mentors about their roles, responsibilities, and disability awareness so they can be successful in providing support.**

TABLE 1. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PEER MENTORING PRACTICES

	<b>Carter and McCabe's Recommendations for Practice:</b>	<b>Think College Suggestions for Practice:</b>
<b>Peer Mentoring Roles</b>	<p>Use peer mentors in formal and informal roles to support the full inclusion of students in college life.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal: academic tutors, in-class support, social and health partners</li> <li>• Informal: pair with students to access campus events, clubs, and meals</li> </ul>	<p>Be creative in using peer mentors to support inclusive campus/community environments to provide the most authentic college experience for program participants.</p> <p>Some suggestions include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• in-class academic or tutoring support, health partners (e.g., working out, physical activity engagement, planning healthy meals) club/organization facilitators, eating companions, campus escorts, welcome committee to campus, advice groups, and socialization support.</li> </ul>
<b>Peer Mentoring Recruitment</b>	<p>Be intentional about involving peer partners from a broad array of majors and experiences. Reach out to organizations beyond the colleges of education, social work, and health related fields.</p> <p>Do not assume they must have experience working with individuals with disabilities.</p> <p>Make a concerted effort to get peer mentors from diverse backgrounds and increase participation of men.</p>	<p>Intentionally recruit peer mentors with disabilities to support campus involvement.</p> <p>Use returning program participants to support incoming first-years or in overall recruitment efforts.</p> <p>Consider engaging the campus Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion or Disability Services Office in recruitment efforts.</p> <p>Reach out to a variety of majors, focuses, or social organizations for mentors, including ones with high rates of participation of men— fraternities, male service organizations, and athletic teams.</p> <p>Recruit for peer mentors at campus organization fairs, new student orientations, or welcome back week events.</p>
<b>Benefits of Peer Mentors</b>	<p>Focus beyond just the benefits for the students with intellectual disability. Include the overall benefits for peers and the college community, especially in the initial phases of planning the program.</p> <p>Use the perspectives of peer mentors alongside those of the program participants to guide program evaluation and improvement.</p>	<p>Include a peer mentor representative on your advisory board, in program planning, and in staff meetings.</p> <p>Establish an official service and/or social organization for peers and students with intellectual disability to join for equal representation and participation opportunities.</p> <p>Allow peer mentors the opportunity to provide feedback through a confidential survey or suggestion box to encourage their honest input on programming.</p>
<b>What Peer Mentors Need</b>	<p>Provide guidance and training to peer mentors about their roles, responsibilities, disability awareness, available social opportunities, and instructional practices so they can be successful in providing support.</p> <p>Establish program protocols to encourage reciprocal relationships and avoid unfair power dynamics.</p> <p>Provide guidance to students with intellectual disability in navigating relationships with their peer mentors, including how to address romantic interests in others.</p>	<p>Provide an orientation for new mentors.</p> <p>Give several opportunities for training geared toward specific topics related to disability awareness, program protocols, communication strategies, positive feedback, and other topics.</p> <p>Hold scheduled/recurring meetings for peer mentors and staff for support and to provide feedback from program participants.</p> <p>Provide a sharing platform for the peer mentors, which can contain a campus activity calendar, background information on student preferences, and a way for them to ask staff questions when needed.</p> <p>Make efforts to be intentional with pairings (e.g., common interests, similar cultural backgrounds).</p> <p>Attempt to keep successful pairings together to help establish long-term relationships.</p>

## Implications

### For Research

Carter and McCabe (2021) suggest future research on peer perspectives in higher education programs for students with intellectual disability can be strengthened. They call for a deeper exploration of the formal and informal experiences peers have as well as cross-campus studies to account for programmatic differences. Longitudinal studies are also needed to assess the long-term impact of these experiences on peers' career trajectories and attitudes. Lastly, more rigorous methodologies and experimental studies should be employed to better understand the effects of peer involvement on social, academic, and advocacy outcomes.

### For Practice

Carter and McCabe (2021) and original article authors also share key areas of implications for practice regarding peer mentors—the type of role they have, recruitment efforts, the benefits of being a mentor, and what they need. To increase research-to-practice efforts, we have included the suggestions for these areas with additional practice suggestions for programs from our experienced Think College staff in Table 1.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

MINDY LINGO is a Training Developer for the Think College Inclusive Higher Education Network at the Institute for Community Inclusion, UMass Boston.

L. DANIELLE ROBERTS-DAHM is a Project Coordinator for the Think College Inclusive Higher Education Network at the Institute for Community Inclusion, UMass Boston.

CLARE PAPAY is a Senior Research Associate at the Institute for Community Inclusion, UMass Boston.

BELKIS CHOISEUL-PRASLIN is a Research Associate at the Institute for Community Inclusion, UMass Boston.

CHELSEA VANHORN STINNETT is the Training and Technical Assistance Coordinator for the Think College Inclusive Higher Education Network at the Institute for Community Inclusion, UMass Boston.

### INSIGHT, Issue No. 65, 2024

This is a publication of the Think College Inclusive Higher Education Network at the Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston, funded by the Office of Postsecondary Education (Grant No. P407C210001). The opinions contained in this document are those of the grantee and do not necessarily reflect those of the funders.

**Recommended citation:** Lingo, M., Roberts-Dahm, L.D., Papay, C., Choiseul-Praslin, B., & Vanhorn Stinnett, C.V. (2024). Perspectives of Peer Mentors Supporting College Students with Intellectual Disability: Findings and Recommendations from a Systematic Review. Think College Insight Brief, Issue No. 65. Boston, MA: Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston.



**ThinkCollege**  
**INCLUSIVE HIGHER EDUCATION NETWORK**  
 INSTITUTE FOR COMMUNITY INCLUSION, UMASS BOSTON