Developing Peer Supports for College Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

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Abstract

Many postsecondary education programs for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) provide support to these students by matching them with peer mentors. Though this practice is widely used, the scholarly literature offers little information about successful peer support models in higher education settings. To address this need, we describe the model developed to support and include students with IDD in the Next Steps Program at Vanderbilt University. We first describe the roles and responsibilities taken on by peer mentors, as well as the Circles of Support model used by Next Steps at Vanderbilt University. We then detail how this model is implemented–including recruitment strategies, the application process, formation of Circles of Support, training of peer mentors, and ongoing support by staff. We conclude by discussing challenges encountered by the staff in facilitating this model, as well as implications for practice and research.

Keywords: Intellectual and developmental disabilities, inclusive education

In the last twenty years, the United States has seen exponential growth in opportunities for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) to participate in inclusive postsecondary education (PSE) programs (Grigal, Hart, & Weir, 2013). Though these programs all look different, they share the common goal of affording students with IDD the opportunity to pursue higher education. With the passage of the Higher Education Opportunity Act and accompanying financial support, inclusive higher education for students with IDD is "an idea whose time has come" (p. 50). Indeed, beyond programs developed independent of federal funding, federal grants supported 27 programs in 2010, and 25 in 2015 (ThinkCollege, n.d.).

To support and include students with IDD in college life, many PSE programs match students with peer mentors who serve as a support system (Grigal et al., 2013). The effectiveness of peer support models has been well documented in the special education literature (Carter, Sisco, Chung, & Stanton-Chapman, 2010). Though most studies on peer supports have been conducted in elementary schools, research at the middle and secondary levels suggest the promise of these practices with older learners. Some of the benefits to students with IDD include enhanced academic engagement and social interaction (Carter, Cushing, Clark & Kennedy, 2005; Carter & Kennedy, 2006). Developing peer mentor relationships to support college students with IDD is a natural extension of promising practices from the K-12 research base.

Limited Literature on Peer Supports in Higher Education

With so many new PSE programs being developed, there is a great need for detailed descriptions of promising practices related to peer mentoring. Unfortunately, the current literature base offers little guidance about implementing peer support models within higher education settings (e.g., Blumberg & Daley, 2009; Jones & Goble, 2012). This lack of information leaves program staff to work largely by trial-and-error, rather than benefiting from previous successes and lessons learned at other institutions (Hart, Mele-McCarthy,

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Pasternack, Zimbrich, & Parker, 2004). To address this need, we provide a detailed description of the peer mentoring model implemented at an inclusive PSE program, Next Steps at Vanderbilt University. Documentation of this model will allow staff members in existing and new programs to replicate components that meet their needs.

A Model for Developing Peer Supports for College Students with IDD

Setting and Participants

Next Steps at Vanderbilt University is a four-year certificate program for students with IDD (e.g., autism spectrum disorder, Down syndrome). Students include individuals with IDD aged 18-26. In the 2014-15 academic year, 10 students were enrolled. Students participate in an undergraduate course each semester, activities designed for students in the Next Steps program (e.g., employment internships), student clubs, and other social opportunities. To provide support to students and promote their social inclusion, Next Steps recruits volunteer undergraduate and graduate students to be peer mentors. Several peer mentors are matched with each student in the Next Steps program. This group of peer mentors composes that individual student's "Circle of Support." For demographic characteristics of peer mentors for academic year 2014-15, see Table 1.

Peer Mentors and the Circles of Support Model

Responsibilities of Peer Mentors

Peer mentors are asked to volunteer for at least two hours a week over the course of a semester. Some peer mentors exceed this expectation, and most continue to volunteer with the program after their initial semester. On average, students in the Next Steps program spend 10 hours per week in scheduled sessions with peer mentors.

There are four roles that a peer mentor might play: academic tutor, daily planner, exercise partner, and lunch partner. Academic tutors engage in a variety of activities with students–reviewing notes from class, preparing assignments, and studying for assessments. Daily planners help students to organize their time on campus and to plan for various responsibilities, whether those are related to classes, internships, or social activities. Exercise partners meet with students in the Next Steps program and join them in some form of exercise—from pick-up basketball to attending a yoga class. Others simply meet with students with IDD for lunch on- or off-campus.

Peer mentors are assigned to meet with one or more students in the Next Steps program for a specific time period each week. They are expected to attend these sessions as scheduled, and to reschedule with the student when necessary. Each student has an online sign-in sheet that documents the attendance of their peer mentors, as well as what was accomplished during their time together. This procedure ensures accountability of peer mentors and facilitates communication between peer mentors and Next Steps staff members.

Circles of Support

The group of peer mentors that supports an individual student is called a Circle of Support; most are composed of 8-12 peer mentors. Each Circle has a Lead Peer Mentor who serves as a liaison between Next Steps staff and the members of the Circle. The Circles of Support model is flexible in its approach to providing support. Each student in the Next Steps program is different and therefore requires individualized supports. Accordingly, the Next Steps staff forms each Circle of Support and develops student schedules based on the needs and preferences of each individual student. Some students may thrive with a smaller circle (e.g., fewer peer mentors), while others prefer more peer mentors in their Circles.

Beyond recognizing that supports should be individualized to each student, this model recognizes that support needs often evolve over time. As the students progress through Next Steps, their support needs often change. Upon starting in the program, a student may need extensive support such that all of their activities are scheduled and their time on campus is structured with the help of staff and peer mentors. However, as they progress through the program, students often need fewer supports to be facilitated by Next Steps. Often, they have become more independent in managing their time and responsibilities, and have more natural supports in place, such that the need for support provided by peer mentors is not as great. The goal for each student is to increase independence and gradually fade formal supports.

Recruitment of Peer Mentors and Eligibility

The Next Steps program takes several steps to recruit new peer mentors each year. Though the retention rate of peer mentors is high, there are various reasons that more volunteers are needed each semester (e.g., former peer mentors study abroad for a semester or graduate). A primary outlet for recruitment is the campus-wide Student Organization Fair that is held each fall. This event showcases all of the organizations on campus, providing students with information about

opportunities to get involved in volunteer and other opportunities. Next Steps participates in this event by setting up a booth that is staffed by both peer mentors and students with IDD who share information with attendees.

Another strong recruitment tool is advertisement through the *Special Education Newsletter.* Although Next Steps draws peer mentors from diverse backgrounds with a variety of majors (see Table 1), those in the field of Special Education often have a high interest in supporting students in the program. Given this interest, recruiting from students in Vanderbilt University's Special Education department has been successful. Many of these students view volunteering as a peer mentor to be both an opportunity to provide support to students with disabilities, as well as a way to extend their own learning (Griffin, Mello, Glover, Carter, & Hodapp, 2016).

In addition, the Next Steps program specifically recruits peer mentors from several campus organizations that encourage volunteerism, for example Vanderbilt's many fraternities and sororities. Dissemination of information about volunteering as a peer mentor varies by organization. Some fraternities and sororities send information about the opportunity to members via e-mail, while others invite a current peer mentor to present at a chapter meeting. In addition to these more formal recruitment strategies, many people become interested in volunteering as a peer mentor simply through word-of-mouth or interactions with students in the Next Steps program.

In terms of eligibility, peer mentors must be undergraduate or graduate students at Vanderbilt University. All peer mentors must pass a background check in order to participate. Applications are available prior to the start of each academic semester, and include questions regarding applicants' demographics, schedule, skills and dispositions, career goals, and prior experience (see Table 2). In addition, prospective peer mentors must provide two references.

Formation of Circles

As Next Steps staff learns about the needs, interests, and goals of a student, they can more effectively match students with peer mentors. With a diverse pool of volunteers, Next Steps is able to match students with peer mentors who can offer the supports needed to help the student thrive on campus. Students in the Next Steps program have a range of abilities and support needs. Those who have a need for academic or behavioral supports are matched with volunteers who have more experience with individuals with disabilities, as they may feel more confident using strategies to help students meet educational and behavioral goals.

Personality and mutual interests also play a role in matching students in Next Steps with their peer mentors. On the peer mentor application, volunteers describe their interests and extracurricular activities. This helps staff match students with peer mentors with whom they may have some interests in common. This effort to match individuals based on mutual interests can help the pairs build rapport quickly, laying the foundation for authentic friendships to develop.

Finally, availability also impacts the creation of a student's Circle of Support. Peer mentors submit times when they are available each week. Their schedules are then matched with the schedules and needs of the students in the Next Steps program. Thus, the staff creates Circles based on the needs of students in Next Steps, common interests, and compatible schedules.

The process of forming each student's Circle is revisited every semester. This allows for the Circle to evolve in order to meet each student's individual needs, and also provides the flexibility to make adjustments related to changing availability of peer mentors over time. Next Steps staff members ask both students with IDD and peer mentors if they have preferences about individuals they would or would not like to be matched with in the future.

Training

All peer mentors are required to attend an initial three-hour training facilitated by program staff; returning peer mentors are required to attend a one-hour review training each semester that provides an update of the initial training they received. These trainings provide an overview of the Next Steps program's policies, including issues related to confidentiality; disability etiquette; peer mentor roles and responsibilities; and the Circles of Support model. Peer mentors also receive information about the students with whom they are matched in regard to their interests, preferences, goals, strengths and challenges.

Additionally, during the training, peer mentors are introduced to strategies that have proven effective for supporting students in Next Steps in the past. Although the supports provided to each student will vary, such strategies include using visual supports, modeling skills, and providing reinforcement. During the training, peer mentors are presented a scenario and are asked to brainstorm ways to address the situation in small groups. The larger group then discusses possible approaches to resolve the situation in a positive manner.

Initial Facilitation and Ongoing Supports

Once peer mentors are assigned and trained, Next Steps staff members host a Kick-Off Party where the

students and peer mentors meet one another for the first time. To provide additional support, Next Steps staff organizes meetings with each Circle in the first few weeks of the semester. This provides an opportunity for the staff to check in with the peer mentors, provide further instructions about students' support needs, and problem-solve any concerns. These Circle Meetings are an important way that the group communicates with each other and program staff.

Although Circle Meetings provide a forum for peer mentors to discuss questions and concerns, they are encouraged to contact staff members directly if they experience difficulties in supporting the students with whom they are matched. This communication with staff results in a more immediate response and individualized support. In response to peer mentors' questions, staff can suggest strategies that have been successful with similar situations in the past, trouble-shoot a concern the peer mentors might have, and guide them to handle concerns appropriately.

Observed Outcomes

Anecdotally, we have observed this model to be critical to the success of students in the Next Steps program. Students routinely identify their friendships with peer mentors as their favorite part of the college experience. By developing friendships with students with IDD, peer mentors facilitate their authentic inclusion on campus. Further, from a logistical perspective, peer mentors are essential to providing individualized support to students with IDD as they participate in college life. Most PSE programs have limited capacity in terms of staff and funding; thus, volunteer peer mentors play an essential role in supporting students with IDD.

Additionally, a preliminary study of peer mentors identified several outcomes of this volunteer experience (Griffin et al., 2016). The 17 peer mentors who participated in this study unanimously reported the importance of their friendships with students with IDD. Participants also reported that they experienced personal growth and learned much from their interaction with individuals with IDD. Finally, as reported by peer mentors, this experience also has a bearing on their future career aspirations. Some reported wanting to seek employment in an inclusive PSE program similar to Next Steps. Others indicated that they now think about their career in a way that considers the needs of people with disabilities (e.g., an aspiring medical student might decide to specialize in Developmental-Behavioral Pediatrics versus another specialty). Likewise, some peer mentors reported changing their major to Special Education or a related field.

Implications for Practice and Research

In coordinating the Circles of Support model, the Next Steps staff has encountered certain challenges. For example, few males volunteer to be peer mentors (see Table 1), posing a challenge to the Next Steps staff in terms of pairing students with peer mentors. Matching a student with a peer mentor of the same sex can be beneficial for certain activities–for example, if the pair is exercising at the Student Recreation Center and the student needs support in the locker room. The Next Steps staff addresses this issue by ensuring that male students in the program have at least one member of their Circle who is male. Also, the staff actively recruits male peer mentors; for example, if a student expresses interest in joining a fraternity, the staff might recruit specifically within that organization in order to develop natural supports.

Another challenge involves peer mentors who do not fulfill their commitments, for example, by missing a meeting with a student in the Next Steps program. Though relatively rare, this situation has significant repercussions for both students and staff. Because peer mentors are not compensated (e.g., by stipends or course credit), there are few natural consequences for such irresponsible behavior. To address their concerns, staff members speak directly with the peer mentor. If the problem persists, they may not invite the peer mentor to return. However, this situation is rare; frequently, peer mentors respond positively to feedback from the staff.

Despite these challenges, the Circles of Support model is an effective way to support the diverse needs of college students with IDD. By capitalizing on the interests and efforts of volunteers, this model reduces the amount of formal support needed from PSE program staff or campus disability service providers who already have extensive workloads. Additionally, this model facilitates the authentic inclusion of students with IDD in college life. They are studying, eating, and "hanging out" with a group of their peers, just as other college students do.

Given the promise of this model, future research should focus on its immediate and longitudinal effects. Researchers should document the friendships that develop from peer mentoring relationships, and investigate whether these friendships sustain over time. Also, researchers should investigate the finding that volunteering as a peer mentor has a bearing on career aspirations (Griffin et al., 2016). Longitudinal research on the career paths of former peer mentors would shed light on the impact this experience has on the lives of future professionals.

Inclusive PSE programs are a new frontier in higher education. The Circles of Support model represents one approach for supporting the social and academic development of college students with IDD. As we have described, this model accommodates varying needs for support among students with IDD, while also promoting their inclusion in the campus community, and minimizing the formal supports provided by program staff and disability services. By presenting a detailed description of the Circles of Support model, it is our hope that other current and future programs for students with IDD might benefit from the structure presented and lessons learned.

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Table 1

Demographics of Peer Mentors for Academic Year 2014-15 (N = 66)

Demographic Variables	*n* (%)
Gender	
Female	53 (80%)
Male	13 (20%)
Ethnicity	
Caucasian	53 (80%)
Asian	11 (17%)
Hispanic	1 (1.5%)
Multiple	1 (1.5%)
Primary Majors	
Special Education	19 (29%)
Other	18 (27%)
Psychology	7 (11%)
Liberal Arts & Sciences	6 (9%)
Biology	
Economics	4 (6%)
General Education	4 (6%)
Medicine & Related Fields (e.g., pre-nursing)	4 (6%)

Note. Other includes the following: Art History, Chemistry, Child Development, Communication Studies, Engineering, Film Studies, Health Administration, History, Human and Organizational Development, Law, Neuroscience, Philosophy, Political Science, Public Policy, Social Work, and Undecided

Table 2

Sample Questions from Peer Mentor Application

Topic	Question
Motivation for applying	What interests you most about this volunteer opportunity?
Prior experience with disability	Describe your experiences, if any, with persons who have disabilities.
Interests/hobbies	Please list your personal interests and hobbies or activities you like to do in your spare time.
Availability	What amount of time do you anticipate that you will have to commit to as a mentor?
Personal Characteristics	Please circle 3-5 words that best describe you: Outgoing, Quiet, Athletic, Patient, Talkative, Artistic Friendly, Assertive, Careful, Funny, Creative, Studious Active, Flexible, Daring, Energetic, Shy, Responsible