Building Inclusive Communities Through Peer Mentoring:
A Tool for Change

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This research study illustrated the personal and professional growth experienced by peer mentors who volunteer to support students with an intellectual disability in an inclusive postsecondary program. Three hundred forty-four written reflections provided by 85 peer mentors over a ten-year period were analyzed using Grounded Theory. Results focus on four categories, including a) Professional Learning, b) Intrapersonal Learning, c) Broadening Friendship Networks, and d) Challenging [Dis]ability. The fourth category, Challenging [Dis]ability, demonstrated an impact of the peer mentoring experience which extended beyond personal and professional benefits gained by peer mentors, with implications for altering societal views of individuals with disabilities, with a shift toward recognizing abilities over disabilities.

Keywords: inclusion, postsecondary education, intellectual disability, peer mentoring

As inclusive postsecondary programs for young adults with an intellectual disability (ID) across the United States are cultivated, our understanding of these programs and their impact on campus communities has grown. With 285 programs nationwide listed in the Think College Search directory (Think College, n.d.), research about these programs, including the people and communities they serve, provides insight into the benefits and barriers for postsecondary inclusion (Grigal & Papay, 2018). We now have a stronger understanding of how a college or university experience impacts students with an ID (Paiewonsky et al., 2010), as well as how faculty are impacted by the presence of students with an ID in their classrooms (Jones et al., 2016; Mock & Love, 2012). We have a stronger grasp of what makes an institution inclusive (Gilson et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2015), as well as how having an intellectually diverse campus impacts the campus culture and those involved in it. May (2012) found traditional college students enrolled in courses alongside

peers with an ID demonstrated "positive changes in attitudes about diversity" (p. 245). Similar results were found by Carroll et al. (2009), who suggested that purposeful and well-structured encounters between students with and without disabilities "can have an enormous impact" (p. 362) on one's attitudes toward those with a disability. In a recent study, Harrison et al. (2019) compared the impact of interactions with individuals with an ID between peer mentors and the general student population. Although several significant differences in attitude and perception between the two groups emerged from the study, the overall findings indicate a positive shift in feelings toward those with an ID, evolving from pity toward empathy and understanding.

Peer mentoring has received a nod in the postsecondary literature as investigations targeting the role of the peer mentor in supporting college students with an ID have blossomed across the academic landscape of this field. Through this research we have a greater understanding of how effective peer mentoring partnerships among college students with and without disability are developed (Jones & Goble, 2012), as well as the motivation and dispositions of peer mentors who volunteer to support their peers with an ID (Griffin et al., 2016). Recent research suggests interactions with individuals with an ID can contribute to personal and professional skill acquisition, motivation to promote inclusive practices, and attitude changes about disability and ID, for both peer mentors and instructional coaches (Farley et al., 2014; Izzo & Shuman, 2013). Those who use college peer mentors to support students with an ID in higher education settings recognize the powerful influence peer mentors can have on their partners' success. Further exploration would provide more in-depth information on how peer mentors are specifically impacted by the mentoring experience.

Research Question

The purpose of this research was to unearth and illustrate the personal and professional growth experienced by undergraduate peer mentors who volunteer to support students with an ID on campus. The specific research question was: What are the perceived personal and professional outcomes associated with peer mentoring in an inclusive postsecondary program for students with an Intellectual Disability? What we excavated through this research has potent implications for generating inclusive communities.

Method

Context

The research was conducted at a southern regional university with over 15,000 students. On this campus is a fully inclusive postsecondary initiative which uses person-centered planning to develop individualized curricula for students with an ID. As Uditsky and Hughson (2012) demanded of all postsecondary programs, this program is designed around a fully inclusive paradigm and strives to meet all of the Think College standards, quality indicators, and benchmarks for inclusive higher education (Grigal et al., 2012). Students enrolled in the program register in university courses that support their goals, are involved in both paid and unpaid internships, and actively participate in student organizations and/or social activities on campus. Program goals are not focused entirely on employment, but on developing the foundational skills needed for adult independence,

including independent living, meaningful employment, and a good quality of life. The foundational skills of focus include communication, collaboration, self-regulation, self-determination, self-advocacy, and problem solving (Hart et al., 2018).

Students with an ID enroll as non-degree-seeking students, taking one to two classes per semester for credit, with the option to audit as determined by individual need. They are supported entirely by volunteer peer mentors, both in and out of class. Responsibilities of peer mentors vary depending on the individual strengths and needs of their mentoring partners, the context of the classes in which their mentoring partners are enrolled, their social and work involvement, and their person-centered plans. Responsibilities can include but are not limited to attending class with a peer, studying with a peer after class, eating lunch together and attending campus events, partnering for participation in a student organization, or providing support during work-related internships. Peer mentors come from a variety of disciplines across campus, but a majority of them are education majors, with many pursuing double majors in both special and general education. It is this segment of peer mentors who were involved in this study. Many of the peer mentors in teacher education choose peer mentoring to fulfill a service-learning requirement for one of two required courses, although other options for fulfilling this requirement are made available to them. Volunteer peer mentors in teacher education at this university are predominately White females, with the homogeneous population likely a ramification of a White, female-dominated profession and field of study.

Peer Mentoring

The term *mentor*, in the traditional sense, means to be an advisor or supporter. Many mentoring programs match a younger person, typically referred to as the mentee, with an older or more experienced individual, typically referred to as the mentor, who acts "in a non-professional helping capacity to provide a relationship-based support that benefits one or more areas of the mentee's development" (Mentor, 2015, p. 9). Many mentoring programs support a paradigm of disadvantage, viewing the person receiving mentoring support as marginalized in some way, such as disadvantaged youth (Evans, 2005).

The mentoring program that is the focus of this study is a bit different. Mentoring is fostered between two university students of similar age who are peers on the same university campus. Mentoring pairs, both with and without disability, are most often in their first, second, or third year of college. Since both are undergraduate students, negotiating the intricacies of academic and social life of college, it is considered a mentoring partnership because it is expected that both parties fully benefit from the experience. The hope is for college students with an ID to receive social, academic, and overall skill development support, while their mentoring partners without disability realize similar gains in collaboration, communication and accommodation skills, and competence with diversity. The relationship is expected to be reciprocal and to benefit all involved in the experience (Jones & Goble, 2012).

The idea of mentoring partnerships is not unique to this program. Zachary (2000) explained the value of a "learner-centered mentoring paradigm" (p. 3), with both parties involved in a *learning partnership.* Allison and Ramirez (2016) referred to this form of

reciprocal relationship as *co-mentoring*, with each party gaining valuable knowledge and skills through the experience.

Reflection Writing

To maintain awareness of how each mentoring relationship was progressing, peer mentors without disability, who were receiving service-learning credit for mentoring, wrote monthly reflections about their experience. This expectation added a layer of accountability to the volunteer experience. Reflections were guided by a specific set of writing prompts to stimulate reflection on past events while also prompting considerations for future actions.

For the reflections, peer mentors were asked to respond to three simple questions: 1) What? 2) So What? and 3) Now What? Each reflection required the peer mentor to describe a specific situation or experience while mentoring (*what?*), share the significance of the experience (*so what?*), and what they learned from the experience (now what?). It is the three hundred forty-four written reflection responses provided by eighty-five peer mentors over a ten-year period that were analyzed for this research project.

Participant Protections

Per IRB approval, the mentoring partners who received course service-learning credit for their mentoring and reflection-writing were informed of the research from the start, and could choose alternative activities to fulfill the service-learning requirements without reprisal. Peer mentors could opt out at any time from having their reflections included in the research. A qualitative analysis of the mentoring journals was conducted after final grades were submitted and students had completed their respective degree programs. After grading, reflections were blinded, with all identifying information removed, before being added as data in the study.

Grounded Theory

To gain insight into the perspectives of peer mentors, a constructivist grounded theory approach was used. As suggested by Charmaz (2014), this included simultaneous, systematic analysis and data collection, with a constant comparison of the data over a ten-year period. Data were periodically reviewed to determine if new conceptual categories were becoming evident. Reviewers searched for variations within the mentoring reflections, with the goal of constructing a new theory about the benefits of peer mentoring in general, and hands-on experiences with disability overall. This design method adopts Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory approach of induction, constant comparison, emergence, and open-endedness.

The researchers included the coordinator of the inclusive postsecondary program, as well as six former undergraduate students, five of whom had been peer mentors and one who had no experience with the postsecondary program, included to provide an outsider's perspective and help minimize bias in the coding process. As Charmaz (2014) recommended, the researchers had to remain mindful of our personal perspectives and

experiences with the mentoring program, being cognizant of how these perspectives would ultimately be embedded within the research results. Overt strategies of questioning and seeking counter narratives were used to promote reflexive practices and lessen the impact of researcher bias.

The data analysis process involved three phases. These included open coding, axial coding and selective coding, as suggested by Corbin and Strauss (1990) and Taylor-Powell and Renner (2003). During the initial phase of open coding, the reflections were reviewed by the program coordinator to identify conceptual categories and their properties. This was an iterative process conducted over time as reflections were continuously analyzed each semester, twice a year, for 10 years. Categories were developed and revised based on the ongoing data analysis. A constant comparison across previous and current reflections drew attention to many similarities and differences among the written reflections, giving rise to the initial concepts constructed. A process of reflective memo writing was used throughout to assist with identifying themes and addressing potential researcher bias.

The second phase of data analysis involved all seven of the researchers, who engaged in axial coding during which preliminary categories were refined. For this phase, the entire 344 reflections were divided into six data sets, with researchers dividing the sets among them to conduct a deeper level of analysis, reviewing approximately 57 reflections per researcher. Armed with the initial concepts, evidence of each concept was sought, with outliers and potential new concepts identified. Descriptive labels among the emerging concepts were identified, leading to the development of specific categories confirmed through saturation of the data. The data were then organized in a conditional relationship guide for further review and analysis.

The final phase of data analysis involved selective coding. The goal of this phase was to determine a hypothesis and relationships among data sets. The findings from each of the separate analyses were shared, with comparisons made across data sets in order to determine if a theory was evident. Common elements across the independent coding completed by each of the researchers were captured in a reflective coding matrix. This step of the process was conducted to ensure reliable analysis toward a substantive theory, as suggested by Scott and Howell (2008) and Charmaz (2014). The data was then reviewed one final time to confirm findings and identify substantive quotes as evidence of the categories identified.

Results

As a result of this iterative process, four over-arching categories were determined, based on common themes, with subcategories described within each category. These included a) Professional Learning, b) Intrapersonal Learning, c) Broadening Friendship Networks, and d) Challenging [Dis]ability. The first three categories help to explain the personal and professional impact on undergraduate peer mentors who volunteer to support students with an ID on campus. The fourth category, Challenging [Dis]ability, provided insight into a change in perception about disability. A listing of categories and subcategories is provided in Table 1.

Professional Learning

Professional learning involves experiences which nurture the development of the knowledge, skills, practices, and dispositions teachers need to be effective (Learning Forward: The Professional Learning Association, n.d.). Peer mentors often noted how mentoring contributed to their professional learning by improving their overall professional growth, confirming their choice for a profession in education, and developing a variety of applied skills for teaching.

Overall Professional Growth

The mentoring experience frequently included opportunities to support college students with an ID to meaningfully engage in the college classroom, activities, assignments, and assessments. Since the mentoring partners were studying to be teachers, their responses tended to focus on how the mentoring experience "strengthened me as a future teacher," or how the experience "better prepared me to become a teacher for students with and without disabilities." One mentor noted, "It challenges you to use new techniques, new ways of thinking, and even new ways of teaching." Providing the hands-on experience of peer mentoring, working with and learning alongside a peer with a disability contributed to the overall professional growth of the peer mentors studying to be educators.

Confirmation of Profession

The mentoring experience affirmed to many of the mentors that they had chosen the correct profession. Comments like "This experience has given me hands-on experience in my major," and "This experience has forever changed my life. It has made me want to become a special education teacher even more," permeated the final reflections written by peer mentors. The undergraduate special education majors at this institution are required to be double majors in both special and general education. Some add special education, not as a career choice, but to make them stronger general education teachers with enhanced abilities to reach and teach students with diverse abilities in their future classrooms. Some of the reflections demonstrated how peer mentoring may have the potential to recruit special education teachers into the field, as demonstrated by this comment:

> "After doing this, I have put my focus more on special education rather than the middle school math portion, even though that is really important to me too. I like how close you can get with students…"

Confirmation of teaching, particularly in the field of special education, was clearly articulated throughout the reflections.

Applied Skills

Peer mentors consistently reported gaining teaching skills as an outcome of the mentoring experience, as noted by this representative comment: "Overall, this experience gave me

so much knowledge about working with students with disabilities and making accommodations and modifications for them within a classroom setting." The types of applied skills gained by peer mentors varied across a multitude of strategies including "study techniques," "task analysis," teaching "organizational skills," and using "modeling and guided practice." The skills learned seemed to be unique to each mentoring situation, depending on the courses taken, the academic abilities of the mentoring partner, the match between the mentoring partner's strengths and instructor teaching style, and the background knowledge of the peer mentor, which was often affected by how advanced the mentor was in the teacher preparation curriculum.

Most of the specific applied teaching skills mentioned fell into one of the following seven categories: a) Instructional Strategies ("Let students have choices when giving assignments"), b) Building Rapport ("I need to develop a good rapport with my students"), c) Patience ("I have learned to be patient and extend my wait time"), d) Understanding the Importance of Communication and Collaboration ("When helping someone with a disability it is extremely important to communicate with them and everyone who supports them"), e) Setting Expectations ("I need to set high expectations for my students and view them as being able to achieve those high goals"), f) Flexibility ("It is important to be open and flexible with teaching students, especially students with disabilities"), and g) Focus on Student Interests ("[My mentoring partner] helped me to see how important it is to relate students' work with their own likes and interests in order to help them understand"). The strategies highlighted by peer mentors are taught in various teacher preparation courses, but the hands-on experience seemed to provide context and relevance to the professional practices shared by instructors.

Intrapersonal Learning

Intrapersonal learning involves reflection and knowing oneself, with "sensitivity to one's own feelings, goals, and anxieties, and the capacity to plan and act in light of one's own traits" (MI Oasis, n.d., Intrapersonal section, para. 8). Peer mentors expressed expansion in interpersonal learning through reflection of personal insights gained through their interactions with their mentoring partners and the acknowledgement of reciprocal learning that occurred during mentoring.

Personal Insight

Peer mentors acquired personal insight as they learned from and alongside their mentoring partners. As one peer mentor explained, "How can I expect him to get out of his comfort zone and sit with new people at lunch, if I never make that a practice? This has pushed me to want to be more interactive with my peers." Others had similar epiphanies, as noted when a peer mentor wrote "Being with someone who had difficulty keeping conversation, and having difficulty myself, I wanted to make this a goal that I would work on." One peer mentor observed "He thinks outside the box, which is something I need to do more of." These examples demonstrate how peer mentors aspired to model their mentoring partner's positive characteristics, recognizing their own needs and potential areas for personal improvement.

Reciprocal Learning

Reciprocal learning was another aspect of this category, with peer mentors acknowledging how the mentoring experience was mutually beneficial to all involved, recognizing "We can all learn from each other." Early on during the mentoring experience, one peer mentor recognized the potential gains for the mentoring partnership: "I knew after our first initial session that this was going to be just as much, if not more, of an educational gain for me as it was for him." This sentiment echoed throughout the mentoring reflections, as evidenced when one mentor wrote, "Not only did I witness growth in [my mentoring partners], but also in myself," and another said, "I think we can both learn a lot from each other." The give and take at the heart of these mentoring relationships suggests perhaps a symbiotic connection between the mentoring partners, with the partnership acting as a catalyst for personal growth.

Broadening Friendship Networks

The reciprocal relationships often evolved into something more meaningful, with many of the mentors describing friendships instead of mentoring partnerships. Although not expecting to broaden their friendship networks through this mentoring experience, most claimed making new friends, and described attributes of friendship, when sharing about their mentoring experiences. Over the course of the first ten years of this inclusive postsecondary program there were approximately five incidents when mentoring partners were challenged by their relationships, but these were considered outliers in the data. A resounding number of peer mentors reported the establishment of enduring relationships as an outcome of the mentoring experience.

Making New Friends

Sentiments such as "Our friendship has grown tremendously and we have a lot of fun together," "I am lucky to have made a new friend," and "I consider the relationship [we have] more like a friendship than a mentee/mentor relationship," proliferated throughout the mentoring reflections. As one mentor explained, "I quickly learned that it was always MUCH more than just a mentor and mentee relationship. We were true friends and I spent more time with them than I did anyone else this semester."

Even when the term "friend" was not specifically used, descriptions of friendship were provided, as peer mentors explained in the following examples: "We did a lot more socializing than we did homework;" "We both love basketball and really enjoyed watching the first round of the NCAA tournament together;" "He has a great sense of humor and it took no time at all for us to start sending funny text messages to one another throughout the next few days;" and "We went bowling… it was so much fun and I cannot wait until we can go again." In almost all cases, peer mentors described enjoying the company of their mentoring partner, moving beyond the formal peer mentoring expectations. Through fun and having positive social experiences, the playing field was leveled, with everyone recognizing the valuable attributes their partners possess.

Describing Attributes of Friendship

In addition to enjoying each other's company, mentors described attributes of true friendship, sharing examples of how the mentoring partners supported one another emotionally and personally. One peer mentor explained, "I am currently making efforts to become closer with my father and [my mentoring partner] is giving me advice and we have discussed what I can do to further bond with my dad." Others shared similar sentiments, such as "She is a good listener, and she would always remember things that I told her about, which really showed me that she cared about me;" "He seems to enjoy the interaction and banter that we share. He picks on me and me on him;" and "This semester [my mentoring partner] became one of my closest friends. I was able to confide in her just as she learned to trust and confide in me." Instead of referring to their mentoring partners as mentees, peer mentors resoundingly described a deeper relationship, expressing sincere value of their mentoring partner as equals. Although the attributes of friendship varied, the quotes above punctuate the evolution of the relationships, moving from a series of contrived scheduled activities as formal mentors/mentees to the fluid and rich give-and-take indicative of true friendships.

Enduring Relationships

The connection was so strong among many mentoring partners that peer mentors indicated they expected to have an enduring relationship with their mentoring partner, staying in contact through social media, calls and texts, lunch dates, and simply "hanging out," as in these examples: "[My mentoring partner] and I share so many interests and will continue to hang out over the summer and into the future after that;" "I know that we will stay in contact and we plan to Facetime each other a couple times a month;" and "I made a great new friend…We plan to continue to be friends and have built a standing lunch date into her schedule for next semester." Several peer mentors commented on how the peer mentoring program provided them "a chance to make lifetime friends," highlighting the promise, potential, and even personal expectation to stay connected with their mentoring partners.

Challenging [Dis]Ability

The foundation for the friendships formed seemed to consist of three components, with peer mentors recognizing how similar they were to their mentoring partners, challenging basic assumptions of disability by noting how skilled their mentoring partners were, and gaining more than receiving during the mentoring experience. There appeared to be a shift in how the mentors viewed their mentoring partners and disability overall, as relationships developed over time.

Focus on Similarities

Many of the college students who volunteered to be peer mentors had little previous experience interacting with individuals with disabilities, and most had been previously influenced by notions of inability typically associated with disability. It did not seem to take long for the mentoring partners to recognize the fallacy that had been the underpinning of

their understanding of disability, as each began to identify how similar they were to their mentoring partners. As one peer mentor stated, "It taught me that once you get to know a person with a disability you'll find out that you're more alike than different." Peer mentors repeatedly found parallels between themselves and their mentoring partners (i.e. "We keep finding things that we have in common"), as well as their mentoring partners and society as a whole (e.g. "Students with disabilities think and feel the same as individuals without disabilities"). Following are narratives representative of this nascent awareness of the similarities shared with mentoring partners:

> He reminds me of the 'typical' college student. He has talked about how he is short on cash and had to borrow from his parents until he got paid. I do not think I have met a college student who has not said that once or twice during school!

> Talking with [my mentoring partner] has made me realize how similar our lives are…A person who has a disability isn't any different from a person who doesn't have a disability. Priorities, interest, and family are things all people have and want. A disability doesn't change that.

Commonalities are not always about the positives, and can include the common struggles as well. As one peer mentor explained, "Individuals with disabilities can go through the same hard social situations that I also have gone through." Throughout the reflections written, peer mentors provided a variety of examples of how they related with their mentoring partners due to a common negative or stressful experience, as in the following examples:

> The first day, I could tell she was nervous because she walked around the building looking for other people she already knew and told me she hoped to make friends in this class as well. I related to that because I am always nervous to be in a class where I don't know anyone.

> It always makes me laugh, because the first thing that [my mentoring partner] says to me on Friday morning at 8 a.m. is, 'I'm so tired' or 'I don't want to go to class.' Each time, I think about how every college student says this in their college career.

As another peer mentor expressed, "I learned that a lot of the things that we claim set students with disabilities apart, are things that people without disabilities have dealt with as well." Sharing difficult life experiences appeared to be another significant way mentoring partners bonded.

Abilities of Those With [Dis]Ability

The mentoring experience seemed to provide the space in which peer mentors could safely confront the historical perspective of disability they had grown to accept, including the perception that those with disability are considered to be without ability. This cultural perception of inability was so ingrained in the peer mentors' understanding of disability,

they often expressed amazement as they learned of the abilities of their mentoring partners, confronting their own personal biases about ability. The mentors' initial amazement became apparent by the repeated use of terms like *impressed*, *eye-opening*, *amazed, realized,* and *surprised by*, demonstrating an unexpected change in understanding through this experience. The language used in the following narratives exemplifies how astonished peer mentors were to learn of the talents and abilities of their mentoring partners: "His dedication and drive amazes me." "She has really surprised me with her study habits and abilities;" "I was highly impressed with his ability;" and "I realized just how amazing and capable these students are." One mentor expressed, "I have had a change of heart and think of people who have disabilities as able to do everything I can do and sometimes even better than I can do." The fact that it was an unanticipated revelation by many of the peer mentors suggests a pervasive ignorance of the abilities and potential of individuals with disability throughout society.

Critical learning occurred across the peer mentors as each began to identify the strengths individuals with disability can and do possess. In the face of clear evidence provided by mentoring partners with disability, peer mentors often felt compelled to address the dichotomy as traditional perceptions of inability juxtaposed against real-life examples of ability. In doing so, not only were peer mentors driven to address their own initial perceptions of inability, but society's as well. One peer mentor noted, "Many people overlook the abilities of students in special education and focus on their disability." Another peer mentor shared a budding awareness of this reality as a form of social injustice: "It bothers me that so many people view those with disabilities as being uncapable of doing the same exact things as those who do not have a disability." Quotes like these hint at a promising shift in understanding and practice, from a disability-centric and needs-based approach to a person-centered and strength-based approach to understanding and supporting those with a disability.

Received More Than Gave

Initially, many of the mentoring partners assumed there would be a natural inequality within the relationship, with mentors being the givers and their mentoring partners acting as receivers. As peer mentors became aware of the strengths and value of their mentoring partners as friends and capable members of society, peer mentors often commented on how they benefitted more from the experience than their mentoring partners, with countless comments like, "[My mentoring partner] has taught me many valuable lessons; much more than I have taught him;" "I honestly feel like I have learned more working with [my mentoring partner than [he] has learned from me;" and "I could definitely argue that I gained more out of this mentoring experience than [my mentoring partner] did." These narratives demonstrate a change in the dynamics of the mentoring relationship, possibly contributing to the development of genuine friendships. As peer mentors recognized the positive attributes of their mentoring partners juxtaposed with their initial perceptions of disability, their personal and professional growth was compounded, with lessons going beyond the classroom walls and into the realm of society as a whole.

Discussion

Summary of Findings

This study involved an exploration of the perceptions of peer mentors in an inclusive postsecondary program. Based on the volume of responses in each category, peer mentoring appeared to provide the opportunity for observation and self-reflection, leading to personal and professional growth for peer mentors. Similar to previous research findings on mentoring in inclusive postsecondary programs, peer mentors gained knowledge about ID and how best to support individuals with an ID (Carroll et al., 2009), gained knowledge and skills to use in their future professions, and gained insight that influenced career decisions (Carroll et al., 2009; Farley et al., 2014; Harrison et al., 2019). As mentoring research becomes more evident in the literature surrounding postsecondary inclusion, patterns and trends related to the benefits to peer mentors are beginning to emerge, substantiating the use of peer mentoring supports.

Perhaps even more salient from this particular research endeavor was the budding realization by peer mentors that individuals with disabilities have strengths, gifts and talents to share with the world, making valuable contributions to the community through their friendship, their presence, and their interaction with others. The proliferation and detail of comments shared by peer mentors bolster May's (2012) and Harrison's et al. (2019) findings concerning the impact interactions with individuals with disability have on a person's attitude about disability. As mentors graduate, they enter their professions with newfound knowledge of disability, with the potential to influence their social networks and work communities in positive ways. Shifting away from a deficit-driven model of disability (Nevin et al., 2008) toward a strength-based approach to disability may open doors for individuals with disability. A strength-based approach requires co-workers and support persons to focus on an individual's strengths instead of deficits, empowering people with disability to recognize and use their strengths, ignoring the limitations imposed by society (Wehmeyer, 2013).

A strength-based approach to postsecondary inclusion would require the use of flexible curricula that build on student interests, strengths, and goals. For a student with a dream to become a famous disc jockey, and a knack for infusing fun into any situation, courses such as public speaking, creative expression, and broadcast media would be prioritized. If a student preferred a structured routine with minimal distractions, and had a fondness for technology, technology-related courses with office internships might dominate this person's academic experiences on campus. Building on individual strengths and using creative thinking broadens possibilities. With broadened possibilities come challenging opportunities upon which students can grow and learn.

How individuals with ID are perceived can have a direct impact on how well they achieve, as the reality of stereotype threat looms in the lives of individuals with an ID. As defined by Akin and Huang (2019), stereotype threat occurs when individuals with disability are inhibited by low expectations others have of them, confirming the stereotypical notions pervasive in society about disability. In contrast, if perceptions include optimism and

convey possibility, then individuals with disability are given a positive framework through which to view themselves. Inclusive opportunities foster this change in perception. As students achieve in challenging situations, they not only gain knowledge, skills, and confidence, but others witness the successes achieved. This *witnessing* of success perpetuates a positive attitude about differing abilities, fortifying a new schema upon which societal perceptions of ability instead of disability are built. Creating a society in which individuals with disability are recognized as capable can have a lasting positive impact on those with a disability (Nevin et al., 2008) and society overall. The possibilities are remarkable, but hinge on the acceptance of an alternate view of [Dis]ability geared toward possibility and not limitations.

Implications for Program Development

Historically, the response to difference and disability has been exclusion (Sapon-Shevin, 2003), resulting in a superficial understanding of and stereotypical responses to difference and disability. By excluding and segregating individuals with disability, we not only limit individuals from developing to their full potential, but we also limit opportunities for others to learn about and learn from individuals with disability. This cultural ignorance of [Dis]ability has devastating outcomes, including the devaluing of human life.

From a social model or strength-based perspective, disability becomes a challenge of societal "access and acceptance" rather than "a problem in the bodies and minds of individuals" (Gallagher et al., 2014, p. 17). Inclusive postsecondary programs have the potential to model this shift in perspective by developing programs that not only provide access, but cultivate partnerships and collaborations, recognizing how all parties contribute to the community in valuable ways.

The mentoring program under study appeared to create an awakening to the abilities of those with an ID, forgoing perceptions of disability as deficiency. These findings resonate throughout the budding literature on the impact of inclusive postsecondary institutions. Carroll et al. (2009) suggested pre-service teachers who engaged in class alongside peers with an ID believed their peers with an ID were "as capable" (p. 361) as the rest of the class. In a study of peer mentor perceptions, Farley et al. (2014) uncovered a change in perspective on intellectual disability, as peer mentors recognized the importance for student equality across ability levels. Establishing opportunities for college students to interact with individuals with disabilities in a variety of ways could ultimately contribute to a positive social/cultural shift related to disability.

A review of the postsecondary inclusion programs nationwide suggests there are a variety of ways programs offer support to college students with an ID (Think College, n.d.). While some programs provide extensive services through paid tutors and academic coaches, peer mentoring partnerships offers another viable option. This option not only provides students with an ID the support they may need, but also has ramifications for the institution, the entire postsecondary community, and society. Program facilitators may want to consider ways to foster a truly inclusive postsecondary community by creating opportunities for all students to interact with one another in meaningful ways, as college students and peers, and not in imposed hierarchies. Whenever someone has

responsibility over another, equality is diminished, not just in practice, but in how we perceive one another. If students with an ID are to be woven into the fabric of higher education, then programs need to move away from the support provider role, finding ways for students with ID to not only be accepted on campus, but to be valued as contributing members of the campus community. Natural supports and friendships would be encouraged as students in inclusive postsecondary programs engage in student groups with shared interests, attend campus events, and join student organizations, including Greek Life if desired. Students with ID would have autonomy over their daily schedules outside of classes, and be encouraged to build skills in self-determination, including self-advocacy. At the administrative level, students with ID and other disabilities would be included in campus conversations on diversity and inclusive excellence, with representation at the table (Jones et al., 2015). This shift in value and perception starts with us, as program developers and facilitators.

Two valuable resources for inclusive program leaders are the *Think College Standards, Quality Indicators, and Benchmarks for Inclusive Higher Education* (Grigal et al., 2012) and the *Think College Insight Brief,* Building Inclusive Campus Communities: A Framework for Inclusion (Jones et al., 2015). Both of these resources can be used to assess the inclusiveness of postsecondary programs and determine areas for further growth and development.

Limitations

The research results only convey the perceptions of peer mentors at one regional 4-year institution and need to be considered as a single set of voices to add volume to the voices of other peer mentors across the continent. Peer mentors involved in the study were those enrolled in a teacher education program, so results are limited to their perspectives and do not demonstrate how the mentoring experience impacted peer mentors who represented other disciplines at this institution.

Common critiques of qualitative research involve researcher bias, subjectivity in data analysis, and small sample sizes. Confidence in these results can be attributed to the large sample size and data analyzed, allowing for saturation and the projection of reliable results over time. Introducing researchers after the initial coding and increasing the number of eyes on the data, diluted some of the potential researcher bias. Including a data analyst who had no involvement in the inclusive program was an intentional strategy for reducing bias as well.

Implications for Future Research

The program under study has college students with ID being supported entirely by volunteer peer mentors from across campus. This study focused on the perceptions of those peer mentors who were education majors, so investigating how peer mentors outside the field of education perceive their mentoring experience would provide greater insight into the experiences of all the volunteer peer mentors who support students in this inclusive program.

As a promising practice for generating awareness of the potential of individuals with ID, a research inquiry that delves more deeply into this budding awareness among peer mentors would prove insightful. Conducting follow-up studies with the research participants who are now teaching, to learn how their professional practice has been influenced by their peer mentoring experiences in college, would help to determine if the awareness of ability has sustainability within traditional teaching practices in K-12 schools. Examining teacher practices for supporting students with disability may provide better understanding of any long-term outcomes that might exist due to having a positive, personal past experience with someone who has a disability.

Peer mentors in this study shared an array of strategies they used to support their mentoring partners in academics as well as social and work situations. These peer mentors gained skills organically, problem-solving as the need arose. As volunteers, they receive minimal training at the outset since every situation is unique. Instead, all mentoring partners, both with and without disability, learned to use each other as resources. This practice appears to have been sufficient for education majors, but it may fall short for peer mentors from other disciplines. This would be an important point for further inquiry.

Conclusion

The research outcomes suggested clear gains for peer mentors, but the research also suggests implications beyond the personal and professional. Those involved in peer mentoring became advocates for change as each began to recognize discrepancies between their indoctrination to disability through society and the media, and what they were learning about disability from their mentoring partners. The implications progress beyond the benefits for the mentoring partners, with the potential for an eventual shift in how society perceives individuals with disability as these aspiring professionals begin their careers across the country.

These research results highlight the benefit of interactions with diverse populations of people, supporting a cogent rationale for inclusion at the postsecondary level. Current social constructs of disability can be challenged and even demolished as experience leads to awareness and understanding of the capabilities of all humans, regardless of perceived learning and ability differences. Continued use of volunteer peer mentors over paid coaches and tutors may lead to an eventual shift in awareness and understanding of ability, with perceptions changing over time given experience and exposure. Profound social/cultural changes and perceptions could prevail from the systematic development of opportunities for people of varying abilities to work, play, and collaborate together, justifying a serious commitment to establishing peer mentoring partnerships in inclusive postsecondary education settings.

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Table 1

Categories and Subcategories of Mentoring Reflections

Category	Description	Subcategories
Professional Learning	Increased confidence in the choice of profession while learning specific skills and strategies to use when teaching.	Overall professional growth Confirmation of profession Applied skills
Intrapersonal Learning	Reflection on personal dispositions and professional skills, setting goals for potential change.	Personal insight Reciprocal learning
Broadening Friendship Networks	Gaining a friend from the experience.	Making new friends Describing attributes of friendship Enduring relationships
Challenging [Dis]ability	Awareness of traditional notions of disability congruent with inability, challenging those notions by recognizing the strengths of mentoring partners.	Focus on Similarities Abilities of those with [Dis]ability Received more than I gave