Qualitative Analysis of Peer Mentoring: Motivations and the Impact of Mentoring

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Abstract

Although peer mentors play a vital role in supporting students with intellectual disability enrolled in inclusive postsecondary education programs, their peer mentoring experiences have not been explored extensively. This qualitative study examined the experiences and perspectives of university students serving as formal peer mentors in an inclusive postsecondary education program. Nineteen peer mentors participated in standardized open-ended interviews. Results provide additional insight as to why individuals choose to become peer mentors, and as a result of their mentoring experience, what the peer mentors learned about themselves and gained from their experience.

Keywords: peer mentors, inclusive postsecondary education, students with intellectual disabilities

Plain Language Summary

- College programs for students with disabilities are expanding, especially for students with intellectual disabilities. In many of these programs other students serve as mentors to guide participation in all aspects of college life. Little is known about these mentors. We talked with 19 mentors and asked them four questions. Here are the questions and what we learned.
    1. Why did you become a mentor?
        - They became mentors for many reasons. The most common were to help others, to volunteer, try new things, be with people, have fun, and understand myself more.
    2. Have you done things before that led you to become mentor?
        - Most said they had done things before that made them want to mentor.
    3. What have you learned about yourself from mentoring?
        - They learned about what they liked, how patient they were, and how much they were alike the student they mentored.
    4. What do you get out of peer mentoring?

- ▪ They had fun, developed patience, grew and developed new skills, learned about themselves, made new friendships, and were able to help others.
  - **Conclusion:** As a result of these interviews, we know more about why people mentor and how it influences them. This information can be used to improve college programs and encourage more people to become mentors in college.

Over the past decade, there has been an increase in both the number of inclusive postsecondary programs (IPSE) and students with intellectual disabilities (ID) enrolled in these programs (Grigal et al., 2021). Currently, more than 300 IPSE programs exist across 49 states (Think College, n. d.). Although these programs vary widely in educational setting (e.g., community college, 4-year colleges and universities, technical schools), supports, services, and the degree of involvement in inclusive activities, the majority use peers to facilitate the academic and social inclusion of students with ID (Krech-Bowles & Becht, 2022). In their Annual Report of The Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability (TPSID), 97% of the projects reported providing some form of peer mentor support (Grigal et al., 2023). The use of peer mentors has been explicitly promoted within current standards for establishing IPSE programs (Grigal et al., 2012; National Coordinating Center Accreditation Workgroup, 2020).

Peer mentors play a vital role in supporting students with ID across many IPSE program models (Carter et al., 2019; Carter & McCabe, 2021). Program models differ in titles given to peer mentors (e.g., coach, tutor, ambassador) and how peer mentor supports are utilized. Peer mentors may attend classes; help their mentee with course requirements, employment internships, and independent living skills; and/or participate in social activities with their assigned mentee (Carter et al., 2019). Peer mentors become involved in IPSE programs either as volunteers, paid student workers (e.g., program-paid, federal work study), or through service-learning courses taken for academic credit (Krech-Bowles & Becht, 2022). Carter and McCabe have characterized peer mentoring as either formal or informal. Formal peer mentors provide support through the program and receive formal and informal supervision and training, whereas informal peer mentors may be classmates, co-workers, or roommates who interact regularly with the student with ID.

Along with research focused on IPSEs, peer mentoring research has increased. Thus far, researchers have found that peer mentors are often female undergraduate students (Carter & McCabe, 2021). Peer mentor areas of study vary, but common majors include education, psychology, social work, biology, and therapeutic recreation (Carter & McCabe, 2021). Peer mentors report becoming involved for a variety of reasons (Carter et al., 2019; Carter & McCabe, 2021). They describe their peer mentoring experience as positive and enriching (Farley et al., 2014; Harrison et al., 2019; Ryan et al., 2017). Not only does mentoring lead to personal and professional growth, but in addition, mentors mention a change in their attitudes and beliefs towards individuals with ID (Carter et al., 2019; Carter & McCabe, 2021; Jones et al., 2020). These findings are consistent whether the peer mentors' involvement was voluntary, or through the peer mentors' enrollment in a service-learning course (Gibbons et al., 2018; Griffin et al., 2016).

In their systematic review, Carter and McCabe (2021) identified 37 studies related to the perspectives of peer mentors based on their formal or informal experiences mentoring in their school's IPSE program. The purpose of their review was to identify and summarize the findings related to eight research questions such as motivations to mentor, effectiveness as a mentor, experiences, attitudes toward inclusion and disability, and impact of mentoring on themselves and the IPSE programs. Although their review provided valuable information about the perspectives of peer mentors involved in IPSE programs, the number of studies addressing each question and the methodologies used across studies varied considerably. For example, the number of studies exploring each research question ranged from five to 24 and methodologies included qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods. Most common methodologies included questionnaires or surveys (e.g., Carter, 2018; Griffin et al., 2012; Westling et al., 2013) and individual interviews (e.g., Manikas et al., 2018; Rillotta et al., 2020; Schwantes & Rivera, 2017). Formal scales, observations, reflections, and focus groups were used the least. Given these variations and a lack of details reported in the literature (e.g., peer mentor roles, compensation, responsibilities, paradigms, etc.) more research is needed in the use of peer mentors. In addition, Carter et al. (2019) discussed the need for more qualitative studies involving individual interviews that "would provide deeper insights into student's pathways into this experience" (p. 179). This study was developed to address the needs identified by Carter and McCabe (2021) and Carter et al. (2019). This study was designed to address the following research questions:

1. Did peer mentors have previous experiences that led them to volunteer as peer mentors?
2. What initially motivated peer mentors to volunteer to mentor?
3. What impact did peer mentors feel that mentoring had on them in terms of what they learned about themselves and what they got out of mentoring?

Method

This phenomenological study (Johnson & Christensen, 2020) focused on how peer mentors experienced their participation in an IPSE program for young adults with ID. Standardized open-ended interviews elicited participants' perceptions and personal experiences serving as peer mentors. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), interviews serve the purpose of "obtaining here and now constructions of persons, events, activities, organizations, feelings, motivations, claims, concerns, and other entities" (p. 268) and encourage interviewees to expand upon ideas, which allows the researcher to generate abstract ideas through descriptive material (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Quantitative demographic data and all qualitative data were obtained during the interviews.

Postsecondary Education Program

The model demonstration program for individuals with ID (ages 18-28) originated in 2015, and is an inclusive 2-year and 4-year Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary program for students who have completed high school. The non-degree certificate program focuses on increasing students' academic, social, independent living, self-determination, self-advocacy, community integration, and employment

outcomes. The course of study includes enrollment in inclusive classes (traditional college courses) based on students' individual interests as well as specialized classes focused on life, social, and employment skills. Each semester, on-and off-campus work internships (paid and unpaid) provide students experiences in integrated competitive employment settings. Students in the program take the equivalent of 15 hours of coursework each semester and have work internships that increase in duration as they progress through the program.

The formal peer mentors who participate in the IPSE program are predominantly undergraduate students who mentor anywhere from one to 20 hours a week. Mentors accompany students in their IPSE to classes and work experiences, as well as socialize with them during the day. When mentoring, regardless of the setting, mentors are expected to model appropriate behaviors, encourage and foster student independence, presume student competence, focus on the positive, create learning experiences, and allow for natural consequences to occur. Mentors complete a log documenting the student's performance and behaviors after each mentoring shift. In our program, all peer mentors begin as volunteers or complete required service-learning opportunities for courses in which they are enrolled. Each semester, existing mentors are asked if they would like to be paid for mentoring in the next semester. Peer mentors are eligible for a limited number of paid mentor positions after volunteering and consistently fulfilling their responsibilities (i.e., attendance, complete data collection logs, positive interactions). Ten percent (or less) of our mentors are paid each semester.

After background checks are completed, peer mentors are paired with students based on their time availability and preferences for involvement. Peer mentors accompany their mentees to academic, employment, and/or social activities. Program staff conduct regular check-in visits with the mentors and mentees to make observations, collect data on student performance, and provide strategies and feedback. Planned mentor training occurs at multiple times: during the peer mentor interview, at the beginning of the academic year, and monthly. The training is focused on program- and peer mentor-initiated topics. In addition, program staff are always available to provide ongoing support to peer mentors.

Participants

The authors invited 70 formal peer mentors who had mentored for at least 10 weeks in the previous semester to voluntarily participate in an interview to evaluate their peer mentoring experiences. The study was conducted at a medium-sized public university in the southeastern United States. The final sample consisted of 19 peer mentors. Participants identified their age, gender, racial/ethnic group, academic major, academic classification, length of peer mentoring involvement, and peer mentoring settings. The participants ranged in age from 19-22 years of age ($M = 21.05$, $SD = 1.08$). The participants had mentored for the program for an average of 3.47 semesters ($SD = 1.98$). Participants were predominantly young women who varied in their racial/ethnic group, academic majors, academic classification, the length of time they mentored, and the settings in which they mentored. Nine of the participants (47%) had served as paid

mentors in the semester prior to their participation in the interviews. These data are summarized in Table 1.

Instrument

The questions used for the standardized open-ended interviews were developed by the authors. The interview questions were developed by reviewing previous researchers' questions related to mentoring students in IPSE programs (Athamanah et al., 2020; Carter et al., 2019; Farley et al., 2014). The questions reflected participants' demographic information and perceptions of their mentoring experiences. The entire standardized open-ended interview consisted of a total of 26 questions. This study focused on nine questions related to demographic variables and three research questions. This article reports on participants' responses to questions asking peer mentors: (a) their previous experiences related to peer mentoring, (b) why they became a peer mentor, and (c) the impact of peer mentoring in terms of what they learned about themselves and (d) what they gained from the experience.

Procedure

All peer mentors who had mentored for at least 10 weeks of a previous semester were contacted by email and asked to volunteer to be interviewed about their peer mentoring experiences. Nineteen peer mentors expressed a willingness to participate by completing a Google form identifying three available times for participation. An individual interview was conducted over Zoom by one of the authors at a time convenient for the participant. The interview began with the peer mentor's verbal assent to participate and be video and audio recorded. All participants agreed. As the interviews were recorded, no additional notetaker was utilized during the interviews. Demographic information was collected first and then the open-ended questions were asked. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The interviews were automatically transcribed by Zoom. One of the authors then watched and listened to the recorded interviews and edited the transcripts for their reliability and validity before coding began. All transcripts were coded by all three coders to improve reliability. Differences were discussed until consensus was reached.

Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed by three of the authors. Responses to each of the four open-ended questions were identified as units of analysis before coding began. Coding and theming the data were completed question by question. First, the three coders independently read all transcripts for a question to identify potential descriptive codes for that specific open-ended-question (Saldaña, 2013). Codes were single words or phrases that summarized participants' responses (Saldaña, 2013). The transcripts were read in the same numerical order (i.e., 1¬-19) for each question. Then, using inductive first-stage coding (Johnson & Christensen, 2020), the coders met and reviewed each participant's responses to develop and discuss codes for each question. Code saturation was reached when no more codes emerged within a question. Next, the coders more closely compared and organized their codes into inductively developed themes

which reflected what the codes signified or meant (Saldaña, 2013). This process was repeated for each open-ended interview question.

The coders then independently open-coded the interview questions (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) by assigning each unit of analysis to one or more themes. The coders met again to discuss any theme disagreements and consensus was reached through discussion. This continued until themes had been applied and consensus was reached within all questions for all 19 transcripts.

Results

The results are presented for each research question. The first question addressed participants' previous experiences that led them to become peer mentors.

Previous Experiences Related to Peer Mentoring

To address our first research question, participants were asked, "Have you had any previous experiences that have led you to become a peer mentor?" Thirteen of the 19 participants reported having previous experiences that led them to become a peer mentor. Participants described either having relationships with people with disabilities or community experiences. Of those reporting previous experiences, three indicated they had family members ($n = 3$) with ID. One of these participants stated, "I have a sister with Down syndrome." Another three individuals said they had a friend ($n = 3$) with ID that led them to become a peer mentor. One participant explained, "One of my best friends in high school, her brother, had Down syndrome. So, I was hanging out with him a lot." Similarly, another participant stated, "When I was younger, we had a family friend with an intellectual disability. I interacted with her a lot and ended up becoming friends." The remaining participants' ($n = 7$) experiences were in their communities, such as at a summer camp, church, daycare, or while in high school. One participant in particular stated, "I worked at a summer camp, since I was around like 11 or 12. My mom is a special education teacher." Another shared, "My church had a daycare for children with special needs and their siblings, so I would just go there and hang out with them and sometimes play games, or just talk or whatever." Other participants explained, I ate lunch with a girl in high school. I'm not sure what her actual diagnosis was, but she could have benefited from a program like this" and "I've worked with a special needs class since high school and middle school."

Thus, many of the participants reported having previous experiences that motivated them to become peer mentors. Their previous experiences reflected personal relationships with people with ID (e.g., sibling or friend) to extended interactions with people with ID in community settings such as school, camp, and church.

The second research question addressed participants' motivations to become peer mentors. The last research question asked participants about the impact of mentoring in terms of what they learned about themselves and what they got out of their peer mentoring experience. The coded themes are summarized in Table 2. Interestingly, some of the themes were similar across the research questions. This will also be discussed below.

Initial Peer Mentoring Motivations

To address this second question, participants were asked "Why did you become a peer mentor?" All participants' responses fit into at least one of the themes developed for this question. More than half of participants' responses (n = 11) fit into more than one theme; they provided between one and four motivations for becoming a peer mentor. Eight themes for becoming a formal peer mentor were identified: to help others, to get service hours, to socialize, to have fun, to understand oneself more, to expand one's experiences, it seemed interesting, and because it was an ongoing activity. Participants most frequently cited becoming a mentor to help others, get service hours, socialize, have fun, understand themselves more, and expand their experiences as their most common motivations. In the sections that follow each theme is described, beginning with those themes discussed most frequently.

Helping Others

The most frequently cited motivating factor for becoming a peer mentor was to help others (n = 6). This theme included comments related to helping others and having empathy towards others. One participant shared, "I've always kind of had a big heart for them, so that's what led me to do it in college." Similarly, another participant shared "I just feel like they're kind of singled out," and "Helping them feel involved and you know, make them feel included in student life." Another participant stated, "I wanted to make their transition from a high school to a college environment as easy as possible."

Service Learning

The next most frequently cited initial motivation for becoming a peer mentor was for service-learning purposes. Four of the five participants with this motivation were enrolled in a class with a service-learning requirement. For example, a participant stated, "It was my practicum class for my major." Another shared, "It was in my practicum class, it was like right when we got back from COVID. Y'all were the only people taking volunteers." While these four participants initially became peer mentors to meet practicum requirements for their degrees, they all continued as peer mentors after the practicum requirements had been fulfilled. In their program, the practicum is typically completed at the end of the sophomore year. These particular participants remained peer mentors for at least three more semesters after completing their practicum. The other participant was using peer mentoring to meet an honor society's volunteering requirement.

Socializing

Socializing was another reason that participants (n = 4) gave for becoming a peer mentor. This theme included comments related to meeting people, making friends, or building relationships. One participant shared that, "I feel like it helped me get out of my shell. You're more to yourself, so I wanted something more social." Another participant stated, "I think, honestly, I wanted to get out and just be around people and I knew this would be a great way to find more people and work with them."

Having Fun

Participants also reported becoming peer mentors to have fun or for enjoyment (*n* = 4). For example, some of the comments related to this theme included, "I knew I would enjoy it," "It honestly seemed like a lot of fun," and "I just enjoy being around the students."

Understanding Myself More

A better understanding of oneself also emerged as motivating students to become peer mentors (*n* = 4). This theme included comments related to getting out of their comfort zone, addressing social anxiety, and growing as a person. For example, one participant stated, "I really wanted to…learn more about myself and also grow into myself as a person." Another participant shared, "I wanted to step outside my comfort zone, and I was like you know what, I'm just going to try it and see how it goes."

Expanding Experiences

Gaining experience, knowledge, and skills also encouraged participants (*n* = 4) to become peer mentors. This theme included comments related to learning more about individuals with ID, diversity, and understanding people. One participant in particular expressed, "I wanted to check out more of this program for my sister. Maybe she will be able to become involved in the future." Another participant stated, "Joining things like that helped me understand other people in that community more." Another participant reported, "I wanted something more hands on and something more one-on-one that I can develop…. I guess people skills," and "I wanted experiences that will help me grow as a person." Likewise, another participant stated, "I want to make sure I kind of have the experience and the skills to interact with and serve to the best of my ability." Some of the participants were interested in expanding their life experiences for their future careers. For example, one participant stated, "I wanted volunteer experience for medical school." Similarly, another participant reported that, "I'm pre-med, and I guess my first instinct was I need experience in other communities."

The above six themes did not encapsulate all of the participants' responses. Two participants also expressed a general interest in the program as motivating them to become peer mentors. For instance, one participant reported, "I think I just joined because I was interested in it." Another participant shared, "The fact that it was even a program at this school, I thought that was just amazing, so that's why I was interested in it." Additionally, the ongoing nature of being a peer mentor as opposed to a one-time volunteer experience was noted by some participants. For example, one participant explained, "I really liked the idea that it was an ongoing thing that you went back to every single week, and I feel like that really allows you and the students to develop a better relationship." Another participant stated, "I wanted to spend more time with them beyond just that one semester." She went on to explain, "It's this ongoing thing where you're accompanying them to different aspects in their life."

In summary, participants expressed a variety of reasons that motivated them to become peer mentors. While many gave more than one reason for choosing to become

involved, none of these motivating factors were identified by a majority of the participants. Although helping others, service-learning requirements, socializing, having fun, learning more about oneself, and expanding one's experiences were cited most frequently, other motivators were also provided. Thus, it appears that while many factors motivated participants to become peer mentors, there is no consensus about why participants decided to become peer mentors. Interestingly, most of the motivating factors were focused on benefits that potential peer mentors anticipated the mentoring experience would provide.

Mentoring's Impact on Peer Mentors

To answer the final research question, participants were asked two separate questions to gauge the impact of peer mentoring on the mentors themselves. The questions were: "What do you gain from peer mentoring?" and "As a result of peer mentoring, what have you learned about yourself?" These questions were coded and themed separately. Seven themes emerged for the question asking participants what they gained from peer mentoring: personal growth, different perspectives, enjoyment and fun, socializing, patience, building relationships, and helping. Five themes were identified for the learning about themselves question: self-awareness, enjoyment, patience, interest in people with ID, and similarities among people. Three similar themes emerged for these two questions: personal growth and self-awareness, enjoyment and fun, and patience. These three common themes for the two questions are discussed first and then the unique themes for the two questions are discussed.

Personal Growth and Self-Awareness

The most frequently cited theme for what participants (n = 13) gained from their peer mentoring experience was personal growth. This theme included comments related to being a better person and increasing their self-esteem. For example, one participant explained that, "I feel like it helps me grow as a person because it's not like they're my responsibility, but in a way they kind of are because, I mean, you're still mentoring them." Another participant described how "I've learned a lot of different ways to react to situations .... and had a lot of experiences that I don't think I would have experienced without [the program]."

Personal growth was also expressed by an awareness of peer mentoring being a mutually beneficial relationship. For example, one participant stated how "I always feel like I've done something to help somebody, and I just feel like it gives you a sense of fulfillment because they brighten your day." Another participant discovered that, "They teach me just as much about myself as they teach me about them." Finally, a sense of role fulfillment was expressed by the participants in terms of a feeling of satisfaction or pride. For example, one participant described how "It's pretty enriching, seeing students grow academically and socially." Others explained, "It was something that made me happy to just see them progress" and "Seeing them be able to do these things on their own after you've been working with them for weeks and weeks is really cool to see."

Self-awareness was the most frequently coded theme ($n = 11$) in response to what participants learned about themselves from peer mentoring. For example, one participant explained, "Mentoring has opened me up to being nicer to everyone in general and understanding that everyone has a story, everyone has a background, and everyone's human." Another participant stated, "They're teaching me how to be a better person and how to be more hands-on and how to be more open-minded about things." One participant described how he/she realized:

> That I have more time on my hands than I think I do. If I prioritize my day more, I could spend more time doing things that I wouldn't originally think that I would have time for. So, by learning about myself, figuring out time management and trying to figure out my priorities of my day there's always going to be openings I didn't really realize.

Another participant shared the following:

> I've really grown and learned to see people with ID, I guess, in a better light. I mean they're all different. So, it's like if you only meet one person, you've only met one person with an ID. So, it's like putting them all in a bucket was something that I shouldn't have been doing because they're all so unique and they all have their own little unique traits to the world.

The participant also went on to express how, "I talk football with __ and __, and we just have normal conversations. I never thought that you would be able to do that."

Patience

Patience was seen as an outcome of the mentoring experience by participants. Seven of the participants reported that they learned about their own patience through the peer mentoring experience. Six of the participants identified that they gained more patience as a result of peer mentoring. However, only three participants responded that they learned about their patience and became more patient due to peer mentoring. Three of the participants responded that mentoring helped them become more aware of how patient they were (or were not). One participant stated, "I grew patience and having better communication skills [sic]."

Patience was also something participants learned about themselves. One participant reflected,

> So when I first started, I wasn't really patient, so after so long I'd be like 'okay, I can help you do this.'…but I've learned to let them figure it out a bit and wait for them to ask for help.

Another participant shared, "I found that from my freshman year to my senior year, I wasn't as patient in my freshman year as I am now." Another participant responded, "My patience is something I struggle with and so it definitely helps being in an environment with the students where you have to be patient regardless of if you want to or not." Another

participant stated, "I grew patience …" Yet another response was, "People ask me this all the time and I always say the biggest thing I learned is patience."

Enjoyment and Fun

When asked about what they got out of mentoring and the impact of mentoring on them, five participants' responses to each question were coded as "fun or enjoyment." It should be noted that only one participant's responses were coded as fun or enjoyment for both the "what did you gain" and "what did you learn about yourself" questions. The participants who reported fun as something they gained from mentoring described it like this: "It was something that I genuinely enjoyed. It was something that made me happy to just see them progress." Another participant explained, "We have a lot of fun with the students." In terms of learning about themselves as a result of mentoring, five of the participants reported that they learned that they enjoyed themselves and working with people with ID as a result of peer mentoring. Some of the comments representative of this theme include, "I actually love this population more than I thought that I would," and "I've learned that I really enjoy volunteering and working with people with ID." One participant in particular stated, "So it made me venture out of my own hobbies and enjoy some other hobbies that they had."

Socializing and Building Relationships

The participants ($n = 4$) expressed being able to spend time with their mentees and others as a theme when answering the question about what they had gained from peer mentoring. For example, one participant said, "I like making new friends and hanging out with them." Similarly, another participant expressed, "I really enjoy hanging out with them." In general, this theme related to comments from the participants such as, "I've met great friends through it and I love hanging out with the students."

Another theme expressed by some of the participants ($n = 3$) was gaining the ability to build relationships or friendships with others. One participant described, "I've made friends with the mentees. I've made friends with the mentors." Another shared "I've met great friends through it." A participant also discussed building connections out of being a peer mentor. They stated, "…and you know you gain friendships out of it, you gain connection and stuff. It's like joining a club, you get to meet new people and figure out things about yourself too."

Differing Perspective

A new way of looking at things emerged as a theme as to what the participants ($n = 3$) gained from peer mentoring. One participant shared, "Just learning to be patient and have a whole new perspective on how to do everyday tasks." Similarly, another participant stated, "Like just seeing a new perspective of life, I guess it is a general vague way of saying it. You just look at the work differently, look at people differently."

Helping

Helping emerged as a theme related to what participants get out of peer mentoring (n = 3). One participant described, "When I leave, I always feel like I've done something to help somebody." Another participant stated, "I like helping people with stuff." One participant in particular discussed how she not only provided assistance, but also received it. She revealed that, "They make me so happy, so I want to help people who make me happy and they do it too, they help me out and stuff or even they'll buy me food."

Interest in People With ID

As a result of peer mentoring, interest in people with ID was expressed as something participants (n = 3) learned about themselves. For example, one participant stated, "Ever since I was a little kid I've always loved the concept of not only having my own children but adopting….Since joining [the program], I've definitely settled on the idea of adopting someone with an intellectual or physical disability." Another participant described how he/she was considering working with individuals with disabilities in the future as a result of peer mentoring:

> My major is Therapeutic Recreation, but I'm considering going to school after this, and I haven't really figured out what I want to do yet, so special education is definitely an option. It just basically showed me this is something that I like to do, and that I think that I'm pretty good at.

Similarities Among People

Participants (n = 3) also discussed learning how they were very similar to individuals with ID as a result of mentoring. For example, one participant stated, "I'm not very different from them, like it just takes a couple more steps for them to figure out how to do something, and they can do it just like we do." Another participant said, "They're just so capable of doing more than what people think, and they're capable of having feelings too because a lot of people don't think that they are aware of what's going on, but they are."

In summary, participants reported that peer mentoring was associated with knowing themselves better. They also identified personal benefits associated with peer mentoring. Participants reported further developing their understanding of themselves and others as well as identifying multiple personal outcomes from their peer mentoring experiences. Peer mentoring led to enjoyment, patience, self-awareness, and personal growth. Peer mentoring led to the further development of patience as well as getting to socialize, gaining a different perspective, helping others, and building relationships with others.

Discussion

The experiences and perceptions of formal peer mentors who participated in an IPSE program for students with ID were examined. Specifically, the findings addressed the following three research questions. A discussion of each question is provided below.

Overall, the results of this study further validate the findings of previous research on peer mentors; however, some unique results were also obtained.

Have You Had Any Previous Experiences That Have Led You to Become a Peer Mentor?

More than half of the participants in this study reported having previous experiences with individuals with disabilities that led them to become a peer mentor. These experiences ranged from having a family member or friend with ID to participating in community activities with people with disabilities in the past. These results are consistent with other research reporting that prior experience with an individual with ID leads to seeking additional experience as a peer mentor (Bauer & Harlin, 2016; Carter et al., 2019; Griffin et al., 2016). The results of this study also support the idea that direct experience with an individual(s) with ID makes a positive impact that increases the likelihood that a person will become involved again. In our IPSE program, most of the peer mentors who originally become involved to fulfill service requirements for a course return to mentor as volunteers in subsequent semesters. Throughout the country, IPSE programs offer traditional college students an opportunity to either continue their inclusive experiences or to begin engaging in a meaningful peer mentoring experience that may lead to lasting friendships. However, it may be important for IPSE programs to realize that peer mentors may or may not have had exposure to people with disabilities in the past. As a result, IPSE programs may want to ask potential peer mentors about their previous experiences to better prepare them to be effective peer mentors.

Why Did You Become a Peer Mentor?

The reasons for becoming a peer mentor varied. Helping others, getting service hours, socializing, having fun, understanding myself more, expanding my experience, and because it was interesting and offered an ongoing activity were common motivations described by participants. Similar to other studies examining the reasons college students chose to become peer mentors, the reasons identified had more to do with selfless reasons (i.e., giving, kindness, compassion) rather than selfish reasons (i.e., fulfill course requirement, pay, boost resume). For example, Bauer and Harlin (2016) and Carter et al. (2019) reported an interest in serving others as a reason college students became peer mentors. Carter et al. also reported reasons such as having fun and developing a greater knowledge of disability while Bauer and Harlin also reported developing friendships as motivations for college students to become peer mentors.

In their review of research, Carter and McCabe (2021) identified 20 different motivations for becoming a peer mentor across five studies. Although most of the reasons for becoming a peer mentor in this study were similar to those summarized by Carter and McCabe, we found additional motivations to becoming a peer mentor. Some participants in this study chose to become mentors to understand themselves more and to immerse themselves in a different experience to grow as a person. Participants reported that mentoring did lead to personal growth and greater self-awareness. Although the literature cites these variables as what mentors have reported getting out of the mentoring experience, our data indicate that self-awareness and a desire for personal growth may also motivate people to serve as peer mentors. This would be interesting to explore in

future research. Another reason found in this study for becoming a peer mentor was that it provided an ongoing volunteer experience. These last two reasons can be shared as incentives to recruit more peer mentors to volunteer in postsecondary education programs.

As a Result of Peer Mentoring, What Have You Learned About Yourself?

This study provides evidence that involvement as a peer mentor leads to positive benefits for the mentors. Five themes emerged regarding what the participants learned about themselves as a result of peer mentoring. In order of the frequency most cited they were: self-awareness, patience, enjoyment, interest in people with disabilities, and similarities among people. These qualitative findings provide evidence to support what previous researchers found peer mentors may learn about themselves (Carter et al., 2019; Carter & McCabe, 2021; Gibbons et al., 2018).

In many studies involving peer mentors in IPSE programs, the majority of mentors were majoring in education (e.g., Carter et al., 2019; Farley et al., 2014; Griffin et al., 2016; Jones, 2020). In this study, only one of our participants was majoring in an educational field: special education. The majority of participants were majoring in a wide variety of programs such as biomedical sciences and recreational therapy, as well as engineering, Spanish, and communications. These results support that the positive impact of peer mentoring seems similar across all participants regardless of whether or not they are seeking a career in an education-related or other degree.

What Do You Gain From Peer Mentoring?

Many benefits of peer mentoring were identified in this study. More specifically, seven themes were identified for what participants gained from their mentoring experience: personal growth, patience, enjoyment/fun, socialization, a different perspective, relationships, and helping others. In this study, 50% of the themes identified by the participants as motivators to become peer mentors were also reported as what they had gained from their mentoring experience. For example, helping others, socializing, having fun, and understanding themselves more were identified as motivators for becoming a peer mentor as well as benefits of peer mentoring. These results show that many of the reasons peer mentors become involved is what they also report getting out of the experience. In Carter and McCabe's (2021) review, four reasons for becoming involved with the students in IPSE programs were also given as benefits of their involvement: making friends, gaining experience, knowledge, and extra money. Mentors also reported learning about their level of patience and improving their patience through being peer mentors. While no participant expressed a motivation to become more patient, peer mentoring appears to have further developed their patience. Finally, as a result of their mentoring experience, some of the participants in this study discussed having a better understanding of individuals with disabilities and acknowledged a reciprocal relationship where each benefitted. This is consistent with what Foster Heckman and colleagues (2007) described as the "ideal mentoring relationship," (p. 2) where mentors and mentees learn from and teach each other.

Limitations

As with all studies, certain limitations should be noted. Given that the participants were a small convenience sample of formal peer mentors at a university-based IPSE in one region of the United States, generalizations of the findings across all peer mentors in other IPSE programs is restricted. Another limitation to the study is that the responses of both paid and unpaid peer mentors were combined, making it difficult to determine whether being paid impacts their perspectives differently. Previous studies are often not clear about whether mentors are paid or not. It is possible that the answers of paid and unpaid mentors would differ but, in many programs, both types of mentors are used. This should be investigated in the future. Other limitations included the method of data collection, specifically the self-reporting nature of the interviews as well as the lack of using a validated instrument.

Conclusion

The results of this study provide additional evidence regarding the perspectives and experiences of peer mentors who are involved in a formal peer mentoring program in an IPSE program. The findings show that peer mentors who support individuals with ID in IPSE programs are positively impacted by their mentoring experience. Peer mentoring provides a mutually beneficial relationship where each partner in the relationship learns and grows from interacting with each other. Peer mentors also form an on-campus community that expands their social networks and promotes acceptance towards individuals with ID. Last, peer mentors provide valuable insight as to their experiences and perceptions of the postsecondary program, individuals with ID, and the impact of their involvement on themselves.

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Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Mentor	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Academic Major	Classification	Semesters	Settings*	Paid
A	22	Female	White	Management	Senior	4	A	No
B	22	Female	Asian	Professional Health Sciences	Senior	2	A	No
C	22	Male	White	Recreational Therapy	Senior	3	A, E, S	Yes
D	21	Female	Vietnamese	Biomedical Sciences	Senior	6	A, E, S	Yes
E	22	Female	Asian	Professional Health Sciences	Senior	3	A, E, S	No
F	19	Female	White	Biomedical Sciences	Sophomore	2	A, E, S	Yes
G	19	Female	Black	Communication	Sophomore	1	A, S	No
H	22	Female	White	Psychology	Graduate	6	E, S	No
I	22	Female	Hispanic	Communication	Senior	2	A, E, S	Yes
J	21	Female	White	Recreational Therapy	Senior	2	A, E, S	Yes
K	21	Female	White	Recreational Therapy	Junior	2	A, E, S	Yes
L	21	Female	Egyptian and Lebanese	Biomedical Sciences	Senior	4	A, S	No

M	22	Female	White	Special Education	Graduate	8	A, E, S	Yes
				Speech and Hearing				
N	22	Female	White	Sciences	Senior	2	A, S	No
O	19	Female	White	Mechanical Engineering	Sophomore	2	A, E, S	No
P	21	Male	Asian	Spanish	Senior	6	A, S	No
Q	21	Female	Black	Recreational Therapy	Senior	3	A, E, S	Yes
R	20	Male	White	Biomedical Sciences	Junior	2	A, S	Yes
S	21	Female	White and Asian	Biology	Senior	6	A, E, S	No

Table 2

Themes for Research Questions (two and three)

Motivators:	Learned about Self:	Gained from Experience:
Understand Self More	Self-Awareness	Personal Growth
Have fun	Enjoyed the Experience	Enjoyment/Fun
Expand Experiences	a) Peaked [sic] interest in people with ID b) Similarities with people with ID	a) A different perspective b) Building relationships with people with ID.
Helping Others		Helping Others
Socialization		Socialization
	Patience	Patience
Service Hours		
Interesting Experience		
On-going Opportunity		