Motivations and Expectations of Peer Mentors Within Inclusive Higher Education Programs for Students With Intellectual Disability

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Abstract

Although peer mentors play a prominent role in supporting higher education experiences for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), little is known about these college students and the factors leading to their decision to become involved in this particular experience. We examined the motivations, experiences, and expectations of 250 peer mentors attending five diverse universities offering inclusive postsecondary programs for students with IDD. Nearly all (93.7%) of the entering peer mentors had prior disability-related experiences and almost all identified a combination of personal and professional reasons for involvement. Peer mentors anticipated an array of personal benefits as a result of their participation, although beliefs about some areas of potential impact were more mixed (e.g., improvements in grades, study skills, social status). Views regarding the extent to which students with IDD can participate in different aspects of campus life reflected high expectations; predictions about these students' postgraduation experiences were more modest and mixed. We offer recommendations for research and practice aimed at identifying and engaging peers in supporting inclusive college experiences.

Keywords

peer-mediated, college, inclusive higher education, attitudes

Efforts to expand inclusive educational opportunities for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) have permeated policy and practice for nearly half a century. Whereas most efforts have focused on supporting access within preschool, elementary, and secondary school contexts, more contemporary calls have identified higher education institutions as the next horizon for inclusive movements (Grigal, Hart, & Weir, 2013; Stodden & Whelley, 2004). Indeed, more than 260 colleges and universities now offer programs specifically aimed at supporting the enrollment of young adults with IDD (Hart, 2017). This recent and rapid growth in the field of inclusive postsecondary education has been fueled by passage of the Higher Education Opportunities Act of 2008, the funding of model demonstration programs, the advocacy and support of organizations like Think College (Grigal & Hart, 2010), and studies supporting the benefits for students with disabilities (e.g., Butler, Sheppard-Jones, Whaley, Harrison, & Osness, 2015; Moore & Schelling, 2015).

Among the many pressing questions facing this young field of inclusive postsecondary education is how best to support students' access to all aspects of campus life—both within and beyond the college classroom (e.g., employment experiences, social activities, residential life, campus involvement). Although young people with IDD need additional or alternative supports to participate fully in many everyday activities, the cadre of professionals and paraprofessionals present on K–12 campuses is neither available

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nor desirable within a college context. Instead, recommended practices call for greater consideration of natural supports that are more ubiquitous and less stigmatizing (Carter, 2017b). Peer-mediated supports—often referred to as "peer mentors" (see Note 1) within the postsecondary education literature—are among the more widely used of these alternative approaches (e.g., Christopher-Allen, Hunter, Brown, Carter, & Schiro-Geist, 2017; Giust & Valle-Riestra, 2017; Griffin, Wendel, Day, & McMillan, 2016; Hafner, Moffatt, & Kisa, 2011; Jones & Goble, 2012). Moreover, engaging peers in this way is explicitly advocated within current standards for establishing these programs (Grigal, Hart, & Weir, 2012; National Coordinating Center Accreditation Workgroup, 2016).

The involvement of peer mentors within inclusive postsecondary programs can vary widely in terms of the focus of their support (e.g., academic tutoring, social support, job coaching, residential assistance), their commitment (e.g., daily, weekly, sporadically), their selection (e.g., volunteer, program requirements), and their remuneration (e.g., paid, unpaid). Despite the prominence of peer mentor models within inclusive postsecondary education programs, few studies have examined peers' perspectives on their involvement (e.g., Culnane, Eisenman, & Murphy, 2016; Farley, Gibbons, & Cihak, 2014; Griffin, Mello, Glover, Carter, & Hodapp, 2016; Izzo & Shuman, 2013). New research is needed in several areas.

First, little is known about which college students choose to pursue these roles and responsibilities, as well as the background and experiences they bring to this work. Two recent systematic reviews of peer-mediated support interventions conducted in elementary and secondary schools found that most participating peers were female and White (Brock & Huber, 2017; Schaefer, Canella-Malone, & Carter, 2016). Peer mentors may also be somewhat distinct in terms of their prior experience and academic achievements. For example, Carter, Hughes, Copeland, and Breen (2001) found that high school students who volunteered to formally support their schoolmates with severe IDD had significantly more prior experience with people with disabilities than other students at their school who opted not to volunteer. Likewise, high school students who agreed to participate in peer support arrangements or peer networks alongside students with severe IDD tended to have above-average grades (Asmus et al., 2017; Carter et al., 2016). Extending this inquiry to the college context could provide new insights into whether and how peer mentors may differ from others students enrolled on their same campus.

Second, the factors leading college students to become peer mentors have not been extensively explored. As might be true of any campus activity, the motivations of participating students may be multiple and mixed (Astin & Sax, 1998; Gardiner & Iarocci, 2014). Griffin, Mello, et al. (2016) interviewed 17 peer mentors from a single campus about their reasons for volunteering within a fairly new inclusive postsecondary program for students with IDD. These students articulated motivations related to developing new friendships, serving the community, wanting to build on prior experiences with people with disabilities, and furthering their career plans. Knowing why peer mentors might choose to get involved in these roles (e.g., altruism, personal benefits, added income, a social justice commitment) could provide much-needed guidance to program leaders wanting to enhance their recruitment efforts. Such information could also shed light on whether those motivations are appropriate or undesirable.

Third, the benefits college students anticipate receiving from involvement as a peer mentor are likely to influence their decision to volunteer. Several qualitative studies describe college students who report experiencing enhanced attitudes toward disability, personal enrichment, more career clarity, a greater appreciation of diversity, stronger advocacy skills, and lasting friendships by serving as a peer mentor (e.g., Farley et al., 2014; Griffin, Mello, et al., 2016; Izzo & Shuman, 2013; Sowell & Maddox, 2015). It is unclear whether college-age students volunteer expecting these (or other) benefits to accrue as a result of their semester- or year-long involvement. The more salient or substantial the personal impact is considered to be, the more likely students may be to pursue this experience. However, prior studies have not explored the breadth of benefits students anticipate to receive by serving as peer mentors.

Fourth, the expectations peer mentors hold for their fellow students with IDD are especially important to understand. Research shows that expectations held by educators and family members can shape the outcomes young adults with IDD experience during the transition to adulthood (Carter, Austin, & Trainor, 2011, 2012). The same may be true for peers. As a prominent avenue of support for students with IDD on campus, the views of peer mentors on whether students with IDD can successfully participate in university classes, student organizations, career experiences, residential life, Greek life, and other corners of the campus might impact how peers provide support. Likewise, the expectations peer mentors hold for after college graduation—independent living, competitive employment, marriage, and relationships—may serve as an indicator of their underlying attitudes about people with IDD (Scior & Werner, 2016). To date, few studies have examined the attitudes of college students toward this group of their peers (e.g., Ahlborn, Panek, & Jungers, 2008; Westling, Kelley, Cain, & Prohn, 2013).

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences, motivations, and expectations of peer mentors attending universities hosting inclusive postsecondary programs for students with IDD. We addressed the following research questions:

Research Question 1: Who volunteers to serve as peer mentors?

Research Question 2: What factors lead peer mentors to become involved in this campus opportunity?

Research Question 3: What benefits do peer mentors anticipate will accrue to them?

Research Question 4: What expectations do peer mentors hold for their peers with intellectual disability—both on campus and after graduation?

This research was carried as a collaboration of our state's inclusive higher education alliance and spanned five diverse universities. Although we are in the midst of a multiyear study of peer mentors, the present study focuses on findings from our first data collection time point—entry into the peer mentor experience toward the start of the semester.

Method

Participants

Participants were 250 college students without intellectual disability enrolled at five postsecondary campuses in the state of Tennessee. The average age of students was 20.0 years ($SD = 2.0$; range = 17–40). Nearly all (98.4%) were undergraduate students, including 24.4% who were freshman, 26.8% who were sophomores, 26.0% who were juniors, and 21.2% who were seniors. The majority (81.2%) was female, 18.0% were male, and 0.8% did not report their sex. Most students (78.4%) were White, 10.0% were African American/Black, 8.8% were Asian American, 4.4% were Latina/Latina/Hispanic, 2.8% were American Indian or Alaska Native, 0.4% were Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and 1.2% were Other races/ethnicities. In terms of grade point average (GPA) at the start of the semester, 55.2% had a 3.5 to 4.0 GPA, 29.2% had a 3.0 to 3.4 GPA, 6.4% had a 2.5 to 2.9 GPA, 2.4% had a 2.0 to 2.4 GPA, and 1.2% had less than a 2.0 GPA. To be included in this study, students must have (a) been enrolled in a college or university operating an inclusive postsecondary program for students with IDD, (b) volunteered to serve formally as a peer mentor in collaboration with this program, and (c) consented to participate. All peer mentors ($n = 397$) involved in a campus program at any point during the 2016–2017 academic year were invited to participate in this study; the participation rate was 63.0%.

Programs

Participants attended five universities operating inclusive higher education programs for students with IDD. The undergraduate enrollment of campuses ranged from 2,286 to 22,139 ($M = 10,293$) and total enrollment ranged from 3,466 to 28,052 ($M = 14,008$). More than half (57.1%) of all enrolled students were female (range = 49.4%–65.7% across schools). Race/ethnicity of students across universities ranged from 6.6% to 36.5% African American or Black ($M = 15.7\%$), 0.2% to 0.8% American Indian or Alaska Native ($M = 0.4\%$), 2.1% to 12.4% Asian ($M = 4.9\%$), 49.3% to 78.5% White ($M = 64.7\%$), 2.5% to 9.2% Hispanic/Latino ($M = 5.3\%$), 0.0% to 4.9% multiple races ($M = 2.8\%$), and 1.9% to 12.3% unknown ($M = 5.1\%$). The percentage of students receiving federal study loans ranged from 14.0% to 48.0% ($M = 44.6\%$) and admissions rates ranged from 11.0% to 77.0% ($M = 53.8\%$). Two were state-funded schools and three were private schools (two were faith-based).

Although admissions criteria for the inclusive postsecondary programs varied somewhat from one campus to the next, all shared a common commitment to serving students with IDD on their campus and all were designated Comprehensive Transition Programs (CTP). According to the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, a CTP must (a) be delivered to students physically attending the institute of higher education, (b) be offered by an institute of higher education participating in Title IV Federal Student Aid, (c) be designed to support students with intellectual disability in preparation for employment, (d) include an advising and curriculum structure, and (e) provide at least 50% of the program time in academics alongside students without intellectual disabilities (Lee, 2009).

Programs served an average of 35 students with IDD (range = 15–99). Across programs, 37% of students were female and their average age was 20.6 years ($SD = 2.5$). The majority (55%) was White, 43% were African American, and 3% were Other races/ethnicities. Four programs had or previously received federal funding under the Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students With Intellectual Disabilities program. All five programs were 2 years in duration and two included residential options. All of the programs used peers in varied roles by providing mentoring or support in one or more of the following areas of campus life: (a) academics; (b) daily planning, scheduling, or organization; (c) eating meals together; (d) residential life; (e) work or internships; (f) social inclusion; and/or (g) exercise. Although all of these roles were unpaid, service-learning or course credit was available for a subset of students at two of the five campuses. Weekly commitments ranged from 2 or more hours depending on roles.

Instrument

We developed a new survey to address the motivations, expectations, and perspectives of college students volunteering to serve as peer mentors to fellow college students with IDD. We crafted questions addressing the following areas: (a) personal demographics, (b) motivations for their

involvement, (c) past disability experiences, (d) anticipated benefits, (e) expectations for students with IDD, and (f) program feedback. Questions were drawn from previous research addressing the views of youth and young adults involved in peer-mediated interventions (e.g., Carter et al., 2016; Carter et al., 2001; Griffin et al., 2016). Two undergraduate peer mentors collaborated on the design of the survey and we solicited feedback from additional seven peer mentors on an early draft, revising accordingly.

Demographics. We asked participants to report their age, sex, race/ethnicity, year in school, anticipated graduation date, major/minor, and GPA at the start of the semester.

Motivations. We asked participants to rate the extent to which each of 15 factors led them to get involved in this experience (e.g., matches future career plans, aligns with person values, enhances a resume; see Table 2 for actual items). For each item, we asked participants to rate their agreement with each statement using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 4 = *agree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Cronbach's alpha for this section was .65. We included an open-ended section to add other factors not already listed.

Past experiences. We also asked participants whether (and how recently) they had each of the following experiences with people with IDD prior to becoming a peer mentor: (a) volunteering with individuals with IDD, (b) spending time with a student from the university's inclusive postsecondary program, (c) having a family member with IDD, (d) involvement in Special Olympics or a similar program, (e) involvement in Best Buddies or a similar program, and (f) having students with IDD in their classes in school. Response options were *never, more than 3 years ago, in the past 2 to 3 years, in the past year*, or *ongoing*. We included an open-ended section to ask about other experiences not listed.

Anticipated impact. We asked participants how they thought they would be impacted by the experience of being a peer mentor. We listed 15 potential benefits (e.g., I expect to gain more clarity on my career path, I expect to become a better advocate for people with IDD, I expect to gain a great appreciation and understanding of diversity; see Table 3). For each area of participation, we asked participants to rate their agreement using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 4 = *agree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Cronbach's alpha for this section was .90. We included an open-ended section for students to add other areas of anticipated impact.

Expectations. To understand the expectations of peer mentors, we asked participants to rate the extent to which they thought most students with IDD in their campus program could successfully participate in each of 11 activities *while in school* (e.g., participate in clubs and student organizations, life on-campus in the dorms, hold an off-campus job or internship; see Table 4 for items). For each area of participation, we asked participants to rate their agreement using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 4 = *agree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Cronbach's alpha for this section was .85. We also asked about the extent to which they thought most of the students with IDD could successfully participate in each of 10 experiences *after graduation* (e.g., work in a full-time job in the community, get married, experience a high quality of life; see Table 5). For each area of participation, we asked participants to rate their agreement using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 4 = *agree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Cronbach's alpha for this section was .82.

Program feedback. We asked how participants heard about the peer mentor opportunity on their campus and asked for their recommendations for better promoting this opportunity. We also asked whether they had yet received training to be a peer mentor and, if so, to rate their satisfaction and to provide recommendations for improvement. These questions were designed for program recruitment and were not analyzed as part of this study.

Procedures

All study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board at each of the five campuses. Data collection took place during the fall and spring of the 2016–2017 academic year. Using lists provided by program staff, we sent a study invitation by email to every peer mentor, which included a link to complete an online version of the survey. This invitation was sent shortly after each student signed up as a peer mentor at their campus, which may have taken place during either the fall or spring semester. We took several measures to obtain a strong participation rate. First, we indicated that 20 participants—stratified across campuses—would be randomly selected to win a US$25 gift card of their choice of four businesses. Second, we piloted the survey with peer mentors to solicit feedback on its content and length, reducing the final version to approximately 15 min in length. Third, we assured participants their responses would remain confidential and their individual responses would not be shared with project staff. Fourth, we provided up to three follow-up reminders for each peer mentor.

Data Analysis

We used descriptive statistics (i.e., *M, SD*) to summarize all ratings by item related to each of our research questions. As a

Table 1. Prior Experiences of Peer Mentors.

Factors	Never (%)	More than 3 years ago (%)	In the past 2 to 3 years (%)	In the past year (%)	Ongoing (%)
Volunteering with individuals with IDD	31.8	11.3	13.4	18.8	24.7
Having students with IDD in my classes at school	36.1	16.4	13.4	17.2	16.8
Spending time with a student from this program	52.5	2.1	7.1	17.2	21.0
Involvement in Special Olympics or similar program	60.9	9.7	13.4	7.6	8.4
Involvement in Best Buddies or similar program	66.7	5.5	9.7	9.7	8.4
Having a family member with IDD	68.1	3.4	3.4	1.7	23.5

Note. Percentages are based on the number of participants who completed each item. IDD = intellectual and developmental disabilities.

post hoc analysis of the motivation items, we used independent-samples *t* tests to compare the ratings of peer mentors enrolled at faith-based universities versus nonfaith-affiliated universities, as well as between males and females. We used the Bonferroni procedure to adjust criterion alphas for multiple comparisons. We calculated effect sizes (Cohen's *d*) for all comparisons that were statistically significant.

Results

What Are Characteristics and Experiences of Students Who Become Peer Mentors?

Although peer mentors were fairly representative of their campuses in terms of average age and program year, they differed in other areas. Compared with overall undergraduate enrollment, peer mentors were more likely to be female (81.2% vs. 57.1%) and White (78.4% vs. 64.7%). The majority (84.4%) reported GPAs of 3.0 or higher (i.e., B or higher). Most students (82.0%) had *neither* a major nor minor in the areas of education or special education. A total of 78 different majors were represented, the most common major areas being biological sciences (11.6%), special education (10.4%), business/marketing (7.6%), other education (elementary, teaching English as a second language; 7.6%), medicine/health care (7.2%), psychology (5.2%), and social work (4.4%). The occurrence and recency of prior disability-related experiences are displayed in Table 1. The percentage of students reporting *never* having had any of these six experiences was 6.3%; 18.3% reported one of these experiences, 17.9% reported two, 22.5% reported three, 16.7% reported four, 11.7% reported five, and 6.7% reported all six.

What Factors Motivate Students to Become Peer Mentors?

Peer mentors' views on the factors that drew them to this particular college experience are summarized in Table 2.

More than three quarters *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that alignment with personal values (93.6%), the likelihood the experience would be fun (91.2%), a desire to give back to the community (88.2%), and an interest in learning more about disabilities (77.4%) were influential factors. Motivations reflecting external contingencies (e.g., earning extra income, receiving course credit, meeting a program requirement) were identified by a much smaller percentage of peer mentors. Nearly all (99.6%) students affirmed multiple factors as influencing their decision to get involved (*M* = 7.9; *SD* = 2.5). Specifically, 14.6% *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with two to five of the factors, 69.5% with six to 10 of the factors, and 15.5% with 11 to 15 of the factors. More than one fifth (22.0%) added or elaborated on these factors in the optional open-ended section. These tended to emphasize a commitment to people with IDD ("I have a passion for people with special needs, so when [school name] announced this program I was elated." "Working with people with disabilities is my passion. I plan to do this sort of work my entire life."), a desire to help ("I wanted to help people and make a difference in peoples' lives." "I love helping and influencing other people doing their best in school."), pursuit of a personally rewarding experience ("I feel most alive when working with people with special needs." "I think it would help me understand a community I have limited experience with, and strengthen my role as a mentor for others in the future. It would also strengthen my understanding of patience, and how to be patient around others."), prior encounters with individuals in the programs ("I have met some of the [students in the program] and they are great to be around. They make me laugh and also make my days better so I would like to spend more time with them."), a sense of vocation ("I just felt like this was something I was called to do, and it brings me happiness"), and personal connections to disability ("My aunt has special needs so I loved making people with disabilities feel welcomed.").

Our follow-up analyses compared ratings of peer mentors attending faith-based universities with those who attended

Table 2. Factors Leading Peer Mentors to Get Involved.

	% selecting each response					
Factors	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	*M (SD)*
It aligns with my personal values	0.4	0.8	5.0	41.7	51.9	4.44 (0.67)
I thought it would be fun	0.4	0.4	7.9	43.5	47.7	4.38 (0.69)
I wanted to give back to the community	0.4	0.8	10.5	54.6	33.6	4.20 (0.69)
I wanted to learn more about disabilities	1.7	4.6	16.3	55.2	22.2	3.92 (0.85)
I have personal ties to people with disabilities	4.6	10.5	15.9	35.6	33.5	3.83 (1.14)
It aligns with my religious values	11.4	6.8	23.6	36.3	21.9	3.51 (1.23)
This experience aligns with my future career plans	7.1	14.6	24.3	30.5	23.4	3.49 (1.20)
A peer or friend recommended it to me	14.2	10.9	17.6	31.4	25.9	3.44 (1.36)
I have had peer mentor experience in the past	16.7	14.6	14.6	28.0	25.9	3.32 (1.43)
It would enhance my resume	13.0	12.1	27.2	38.1	9.6	3.19 (1.17)
A staff or faculty member recommended it to me	17.8	17.8	22.0	22.5	19.9	3.09 (1.38)
It meets a program requirement	39.5	18.5	14.7	18.1	9.2	2.39 (1.40)
To receive course credit	43.9	22.2	11.7	13.8	8.4	2.21 (1.35)
I have a disability myself	56.7	26.5	10.1	3.8	2.9	1.70 (1.00)
To earn extra income	63.2	23.4	10.0	2.9	0.4	1.54 (0.82)

Note. Percentages are based on the number of participants who completed each item.

universities without such an affiliation. Mean ratings of agreement for peer mentors at the faith-based universities were significantly higher than those of peer mentors at other universities on two factors: It aligns with my religious values (4.01 vs. 2.98; $p < .001$; $d = .92$) and a staff or faculty member recommended it to me (3.35 vs. 2.81; $p = .002$; $d = .40$). Conversely, ratings from the faith-based universities were significantly lower than ratings from other universities on one factor: I have had peer mentor experience in the past (2.99 vs. 3.66; $p < .001$; $d = .48$). We also compared ratings of female and male peer mentors. Mean ratings of agreement for females were significantly higher than those of males on just one factor: This experience aligns with my future career plans (3.62 vs. 2.83; $p < .001$; $d = .73$).

What Benefits Do Peer Mentors Anticipate Experiencing Through This Role?

Peer mentors' views on the ways they anticipated being impacted by their involvement in this experience are summarized in Table 3, arranged from most to least prominent by mean. For 10 of the items, more than three quarters of peer mentors *agreed* or *strongly agreed* they expected to experience the benefit. The items most likely to receive high ratings related to developing new friendships (98.7%), greater appreciation of diversity (97.4%), and more comfortable interactions (96.9%). The items least likely to receive high ratings were expectations related to decreasing their stress levels (41.0%), improving their grades (32.7%), improving their study skills (33.1%), and improving their social status on campus (19.9%). Additional open-ended responses were limited (3.6%) and primarily addressed career clarity ("Before the end of this school year, I expect to have a clearer understanding of my career/job choices will be"), personal impact ("My heart will be impacted. I will learn to love them like my sisters and brothers." "Growing as a disciple of the Lord."), and shared experiences ("I really expect to have a lot of fun on campus with my peer and share in our struggles together and rejoice in our triumphs." "I want to interact more with others around me.").

Table 3. Anticipated Impact of Involvement as a Peer Mentor.

Anticipated impact	% selecting each response					M (SD)
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	
I expect to develop friendships with students with IDD.	0.0	0.4	0.9	27.3	71.4	4.70 (0.51)
I expect to become more comfortable interacting with students with IDD.	0.0	0.0	3.1	30.1	66.8	4.64 (0.54)
I expect to gain a greater appreciation and understanding of diversity.	0.0	0.4	2.2	33.5	63.9	4.61 (0.56)
I expect to have fun.	0.0	0.4	2.2	34.5	62.8	4.60 (0.60)
I expect to become a better advocate for people with IDD.	0.0	0.4	3.1	31.7	64.8	4.61 (0.57)
I expect to become more informed about the challenges and barriers faced by people with IDD.	0.0	0.0	0.9	41.0	58.1	4.57 (0.51)
I expect to learn much more about myself.	0.0	0.9	2.6	42.3	54.2	4.50 (0.60)
I expect to develop more positive attitudes about disability.	0.0	0.9	6.2	41.4	51.5	4.44 (0.65)
I expect to grow professionally.	0.0	1.3	5.3	44.1	49.3	4.41 (0.66)
I expect to enjoy my college experience more.	0.4	1.3	10.2	40.4	47.6	4.33 (0.75)
I expect to gain more clarity on my career path.	2.6	2.9	26.9	30.4	32.2	3.81 (1.06)
I expect my stress level will decrease.	4.0	18.5	36.6	23.8	17.2	3.32 (1.09)
I expect my grades will improve.	2.2	14.1	51.1	18.6	14.1	3.28 (0.95)
I expect my study skills will improve.	4.0	18.9	44.1	19.4	13.7	3.20 (1.03)
I expect my social status on campus will improve.	6.6	20.3	53.3	10.6	9.3	2.96 (0.97)

Note. Percentages are based on the number of participants who completed each item. IDD = intellectual and developmental disabilities.

What Expectations Do Peer Mentors Hold for Students With IDD on Their Campuses?

Peer mentors' level of agreement with whether most students with IDD enrolled in the programs could successfully participate in various aspects of campus life are summarized in Table 4. Overall, expectations were quite high, with more than three quarters of peer mentors indicating *agree* or *strongly agree* for seven of the areas: develop a strong friendship network on campus (95.7%), participate in service and volunteer projects (96.5%), hold an on-campus job or internship (95.2%), participate in clubs and student organization (91.4%), navigate around the campus independently (89.2%), hold an off-campus job or internship (86.9%), and participate in college classes. The lowest ratings were found for living off-campus in an apartment or house apart from family (39.1%).

What Expectations Do Peer Mentors Hold for Students With IDD After Graduation?

Peer mentors' agreement with whether most students with IDD enrolled in the programs could successfully participate

in various experiences after graduation are summarized in Table 5. Expectations here were somewhat lower and more mixed. More than three quarters of peer mentors indicated they *agreed* or *strongly agreed* on four of the postschool areas: work in a part-time job in the community (95.6%), experience a high quality of life (94.3%), have a strong network of friends (93.1%), and work in a full-time job in the community (77.9%). Less than half of peer mentors agreed most students in the program eventually would have children (46.8%) or live in the community independently without other people (41.7%) after graduation.

Discussion

Supporting full access to higher education for students with IDD requires a constellation of supports—both formal and informal. Although peer mentors comprise a promising and often pervasive source of natural support for students with IDD on many college campuses, little is known about who they are and what drives them to this work. Our study focused on the peers who volunteer for this role, the factors that drew them to this experience, and the expectations they

Table 4. On-Campus Expectations for Peers With IDD Regarding Campus Life.

Most students with IDD can successfully . . .	% selecting each response					
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	*M (SD)*
Develop a strong friendship network on campus	0.0	0.0	4.3	40.7	55.0	4.51 (0.58)
Participate in service and volunteer projects	0.9	0.0	2.6	51.1	45.4	4.40 (0.63)
Hold an on-campus job or internship	0.0	0.0	4.8	54.1	41.1	4.36 (0.57)
Participate in clubs and student organizations	0.4	0.9	7.4	53.7	37.7	4.27 (0.67)
Navigate around the campus independently	0.0	2.2	8.7	56.3	32.9	4.20 (0.68)
Hold an off-campus job or internship	0.0	3.0	10.0	53.9	33.0	4.17 (0.73)
Participate in college classes	0.4	2.2	10.0	65.4	22.1	4.06 (0.67)
Live on-campus in the dorms	0.4	4.3	21.2	47.2	26.8	3.96 (0.83)
Participate in dating relationships	1.3	2.6	28.7	43.5	23.9	3.86 (0.86)
Participate in sororities or fraternities	3.0	13.9	26.1	37.4	19.6	3.57 (1.05)
Live off-campus in an apartment or house (not with family)	2.2	19.6	39.1	27.8	11.3	3.27 (0.97)

Note. Percentages are based on the number of participants who completed each item. IDD = intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Table 5. Postgraduation Expectations for Peers With Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities.

Most graduates of our program will . . .	% selecting each response					
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	*M (SD)*
Experience a high quality of life	0.0	0.0	5.7	43.0	51.3	4.46 (0.60)
Work in a part-time job in the community	0.0	0.0	4.3	53.2	42.4	4.38 (0.57)
Have a strong network of friends	0.4	0.0	6.5	52.4	40.7	4.33 (0.64)
Work in a full-time job in the community	0.0	3.5	18.6	50.6	27.3	4.02 (0.77)
Live at home with family members	0.4	3.5	28.1	50.2	17.7	3.81 (0.78)
Live in the community (with 1–2 people without disabilities)	0.4	3.5	28.1	53.2	14.7	3.78 (0.75)
Get married	1.7	3.0	31.3	43.5	20.4	3.78 (0.87)
Live in a group home (with 2+ others with disabilities)	0.4	9.1	32.5	46.3	11.7	3.60 (0.83)
Have children	2.2	9.1	42.0	31.6	15.2	3.48 (0.93)
Live in the community independently (without other people)	0.9	14.3	43.0	32.6	9.1	3.35 (0.87)

Note. Percentages are based on the number of participants who completed each item.

hold. We discuss key findings from this study and their implications for inclusive higher education programs.

First, the peers who pursued this avenue of community involvement reflected both expected and unexpected qualities. The relatively high proportion of female volunteers was consistent with findings from peer-mediated programs implemented in elementary and secondary schools (Brock & Huber, 2017; Carter et al., 2016). For example, a review of 53 studies by Schaefer et al. (2016) found that the percentage of participating peers who was female was substantially higher than the percentage who was male (62% vs. 38%). Because the majority of students with IDD on participating campuses in our state—as well as nationally—are male (Grigal, Migliore, & Hart, 2014), it may be

prudent to consider avenues for recruiting more male peer mentors. Where friendship formation is one goal of peer mentoring, ensuring students can meet peers of the same sex may more closely mirror the friendship patterns of other college students. Likewise, the prominence of prior disability-related experience among volunteering peers was not surprising. Prior experience is a consistent predictor of future contact (e.g., Carter et al., 2001; Scior & Werner, 2016) and likely primes college students to seek out similar opportunities on their campus. Indeed, nearly 94% of peers reported having one or more disability-related experiences in the past. Yet, if one goal of program leaders is to shift individual and campus attitudes about individuals with IDD, additional recruitment avenues and

approaches may be needed to reach students who lack prior connections to disability (e.g., personal invitations from faculty, program leaders, current peer mentors).

The diversity of disciplines and colleges from which peer mentors came was surprising. Inclusive programs focused on students with IDD often have strong links to special education or education departments—either through formal affiliation, program leadership (e.g., faculty advisors, principal investigators), or student support (e.g., research assistants, volunteers). Although nearly one fifth of participating peer mentors came from these departments, the large majority (82%) did not. This broad involvement has implications for the reach of inclusive of higher education programs within a campus and beyond. College students reported fields of study as diverse as the arts, business, engineering and technology, health and medicine, literature and languages, and both social and hard sciences. Peers' involvement in the lives and learning of students with IDD holds potential to shape their thinking about their own discipline, as well as influence their future professional work and pathways after graduation.

Second, the motivations of peer mentors were multiple, but mostly internal. For example, the factors most often identified by peer mentors as spurring their involvement focused on values, anticipated enjoyment, relationships, and personal growth. Similarly, the benefits peers anticipated accruing reflected many of these same themes. External influences related to academic studies or remuneration (e.g., pay, course credit) were infrequently mentioned and only in tandem with other factors. Such motivations may not be unique to disability-related experiences and may resemble motivations to volunteer more broadly (Astin & Sax, 1998; Winniford, Carpenter, & Grider, 1997). It would be interesting to learn whether these peers also were involved in other campus activities and articulated different motivations for doing so. We were struck by the fact that almost every participating peer identified a combination of factors influencing their participation. Indeed, peers affirmed an average of nearly eight different motives.

Third, the expectations peer mentors held for their fellow college students with IDD were generally high. When it came to campus life, peers anticipated that most students with IDD could successfully participate in opportunities related to friendships, volunteering, employment, extracurriculars, coursework, and residential living. The only areas reflecting some reluctance were Greek life and off-campus housing independent of family. Such overall optimism aligns with views reported in other smaller scale studies addressing single college campuses (e.g., Haney & Fisher, 2017; Westling et al., 2013). The affirmation by peers lends support to calls for a swifter shift from segregated programming to broader campus access for college students with IDD (Carter, 2017a; Hart, 2017). Expectations related to life after graduation presented a similar pattern. The majority of peer mentors envisioned graduates with IDD experiencing a high quality of life, working in the community, establishing a network of friends, and getting married. In contrast, living independently in the community and having children was accompanied by more uncertainty. The extent to which these expectations ultimately influence how peers provide support to the students they mentor will be important to consider in future research. In other words, the expectations others hold can shape the opportunities students with IDD receive, the encouragement they are given, the conversations they are part of, and the supports they are provided (Ajzen, 1991; Blustein, Carter, & McMillan, 2016; Carter et al., 2012).

Implications for Practice

Findings from this study have several implications for practice. First, the diversity of disciplines represented by these peer mentors suggests a fairly broad pool of students may be available to draw upon as supports within inclusive higher education programs. Some published program descriptions involved peers participating in disability studies programs (Izzo & Shuman, 2013), experiential learning courses (Culnane et al., 2016), or special education departments (Hafner et al., 2011). Programs should also consider avenues through which this opportunity might be disseminated to college students not already connected to education- and disability-related programs. Second, the peers on these campuses affirmed a constellation of factors that led them to become involved as a mentor. Such findings have implications for how this volunteer opportunity is framed to potential peer mentors when recruiting campus wide. Because different factors may resonate with different students, recruiting efforts ought to highlight diverse aspects of the peer mentoring experience. Third, this study illustrates the sort of cross-site research collaborations that will be needed to support the growth of this new field of inclusive postsecondary education moving forward. Most programs maintain small enrollments of students with IDD; as a result, answering many research questions with confidence will require sample sizes that exceed what is available at a single institution. In our own state, we saw this project as an avenue for addressing a question of interest to all of our institutions, but in a way that was stronger than any of our teams could have accomplished on our own. Although campus-specific studies will continue to be important, multi-institution collaborations will serve to ensure the field is founded on both rigorous research and strong principles.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations highlight directions for future research. First, we cannot speak to whether the expectations and

experiences of participating peer mentors differed substantively from those of other college students on the same campuses who did not sign up. Prior research indicates that individuals' expectations and previous experience related to disability predict both intention and decision to volunteer (e.g., Carter et al., 2001; Gardiner & Iarocci, 2014). Future studies should employ a comparison group of randomly selected college students to determine whether their views and backgrounds are distinct from those of volunteers. Second, the motivations and expectations of peer mentors are likely to vary across campuses that differ in terms of their locale, culture, mission, and inclusivity as it relates to disability. For example, we identified some differences in the motivations of peer mentors based on whether they attended a faith-based institution. Although our study spanned five different universities, the degree to which these findings would be reflected in any of more than 260 campuses that host inclusive programs should be explored. Third, a number of additional, unexplored factors might influence whether and why college students choose to become involved as peer mentors. For example, their availability or competing activities, their overall commitment to volunteerism, their understanding of what the peer mentor experience would entail, and who else they knew would be involved. The addition of a companion qualitative study—involving individual interviews or focus groups—would provide deeper insights into students' pathways into this experience.

Conclusion

The place of peers in supporting higher education access represents an important, but understudied, line of research in this new field of inclusive postsecondary education. Our study introduces new insights into the characteristics, motivations, and expectations of these essential partners within inclusive higher education. Such information has implications for how programs invite, equip, and retain peers as a source of ongoing support. Although much attention has focused on the benefits of college for students with IDD, we see a much broader set of stakeholders to consider. We hope our findings will spur future research aimed at identifying how best to draw upon (and maximize) this ubiquitous and natural source of campus support.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Note

1. The K–12 literature refers to fellow students who provide academic, social, behavioral, and other supports as *peer partners, peer supports, peer buddies*, and *peer tutors* depending on the context and their roles. For the present article, we adopt the phrase *peer mentors*.

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