

Research In Focus: A Weekly Digest of New Research from the NIDILRR Community

Career Mentors Can Help College Students Who Are Legally Blind Build Confidence to Find Jobs

An estimated 1.1 million Americans are legally blind, meaning that they have central vision of 20/200 or less, or a visual field smaller than 20 degrees. Compared to other disability groups, Americans who are legally blind have a higher college graduation rate. However, they still face disadvantages when seeking employment: These students may not have the same early work experience as other students and may not have developed their job search or interview skills. They may also face outside barriers, such as transportation challenges, inaccessible job websites, or negative attitudes among employers. Only about half of Americans ages 25-34 who are legally blind are employed, either full or part time.

One strategy which may help these job seekers is the use of career mentors. Career mentors who are also legally blind can help job seekers build self-confidence and learn how to manage difficult job-seeking situations. In a recent NIDILRR-funded study, researchers developed and evaluated a mentoring program pairing college students who are legally blind with mentors in their field who are also blind. Researchers wanted to see if the program could improve the students' employment self-efficacy, assertiveness in looking for jobs, and adaptability to employment-related challenges.

Researchers at the [Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Employment Outcomes for Individuals Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired](#) enrolled 51 students throughout the United States to participate in the year-long mentoring program. The students were all legally blind, 35 years old or younger, and planning to graduate from an undergraduate or graduate program within 1 year from the time of their enrollment in the study, and then look for employment. Half of the students were randomly assigned to receive mentoring along with online career resources (mentoring group), while the other half received only the online career resources (control group).

The students in the mentoring group were each matched with a mentor in the same career field. All mentors were legally blind and were either working or recently retired. Each student communicated with his or her mentor at least once a month over the study period, either face-to-face or by telephone. The researchers provided mentors and mentees with a manual including suggested discussion topics and general guidance on building good mentoring relationships. Participants in the control group received a career planning information sheet by email, which contained links to educational websites on topics like requesting accommodations, exploring career interests and obtaining blindness skills that the participants could explore if they chose.

Before and after the program, all of the students completed online questionnaires. To measure self-efficacy, the students indicated how confident they felt about their job-related skills such as interviewing, presentation skills, and working independently or on a team. To measure assertiveness, the students indicated how likely they would be to engage in assertive job-seeking activities such as asking friends for job leads or contacting employers to request job information or interviews. A third scale asked the students to rate their career adaptability, which was how well they thought they could keep control over their career success and handle unexpected challenges. At six months and one year, the students reported their employment preparation activities, challenging aspects of finding employment, and their current employment status. Finally, the students in the mentoring group rated their satisfaction with their mentoring experience.

The researchers found that the students who were paired with mentors improved in their self-efficacy, job-hunting assertiveness, and career adaptability over the 1-year study period. The biggest gain was in job-hunting assertiveness, where the students in the mentoring group increased their scores by an average of 12%. The students in the control group, who only received the online resources without mentors, had some small, individual improvements but no significant gains as a group.

The students were also very satisfied with the mentoring program. Most of the students in the mentoring group (92%) completed the program, and they rated it positively. Most indicated that they wanted to stay in touch with their mentors and that they would participate in a similar program again.

By the end of the study, 47 students from both the mentoring and the control group had graduated. About half of those students, were employed full- or part-time. Nine of the students, one from the mentoring group and eight from the control group, had not yet graduated by the study's end hence data on their employment status were not included in the analysis. Although the researchers did not find any differences in post-study employment rates between the mentoring and the control groups, they indicated that this could be because of the reduced sample size. The authors suggested that it might be useful to look at the effects of a mentoring program on employment rates over a longer time period or with a larger sample.

The authors noted that mentors can help students who are legally blind to become more confident, assertive, and adaptable job-seekers. Mentors who are also blind and who have been successfully employed can serve as role models and offer encouragement during the job-seeking process. Mentors can also teach strategies for managing specific disability-related challenges, such as disclosing disability, requesting accommodations and overcoming transportation barriers. Rehabilitation professionals and vocational counselors can facilitate these mentoring connections by collaborating with disability consumer organizations. Researchers may want to explore the benefits of longer-term mentoring relationships for students with blindness and other disabilities.

To Learn More

The Employment Mentoring Manual is available free of charge, along with a wealth of other resources for job seekers, counselors, and educators, at <http://blind.msstate.edu/our-products/employment-resources/>

The American Foundation for the Blind has an online career mentoring resource, Career Connect, at <http://www.afb.org/info/living-with-vision-loss/for-job-seekers/12>

To Learn More About this Study

O'Mally, J., and Antonelli, K. (2016) [The effect of career mentoring on employment outcomes for college students who are legally blind](#). Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness, September-October, 295-307. This article is available from the NARIC collection under Accession Number J74xxx.

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