

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

For College Graduates who are Legally Blind, Finding a Job Can Be Tough, But Mentoring May Help

A study funded by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR).

About 1.1 million Americans are legally blind, meaning that, even with corrective lenses or surgery, they may not be able to clearly see the largest letter on a standard eye chart at 20 feet or they may only see what appears either in their central or peripheral vision, but not both. As a result, these individuals may have difficulty with job-related tasks. Compared with other disability groups, people who are legally blind are more likely to graduate from college. However, studies have shown that young adults who are legally blind often face difficulties finding employment, even with college degrees. In addition to common challenges faced by college graduates in general, such as navigating a job market with high competition for positions and translating school experience to workplace skills, those who are legally blind may also face blindness-specific challenges such as a lack of transportation access or discrimination from employers.

Guidance from an experienced mentor could help these young people make their way in the world. In a previous NIDILRR-funded study, researchers from the [Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Employment Outcomes for Individuals who are Blind or Visually Impaired](#) found that students paired with a career mentor who was also legally blind reported greater confidence in their employment skills and abilities, assertiveness in looking for jobs, and adaptability to job-related challenges, compared with students who only received general career resources. In a follow-up study from the same center, researchers contacted the students from the previous study at least one year after they finished the mentoring or comparison program to learn about their experiences seeking and gaining employment. The researchers wanted to find out if there were any differences in job-seeking or employment experiences between the students who were paired with a career mentor and those who only received general career resources one year after program completion. The researchers also wanted to find out how many job applications the participants submitted and how many interviews they received, and what challenges they reported encountering during the job search process.

In this follow-up study, the researchers sent surveys to 51 people at least 1 year after they participated in the previous study. The participants were legally blind and began the mentoring program when they were within one year of their expected college graduation. During the previous study, the participants had received either monthly communication with a career mentor who was also legally blind (mentoring group) or online career resources (comparison group).

In the survey, all of the participants were asked how many job applications they had submitted, and how many of those applications led to interviews. The participants were then asked about challenges they had faced during the job search process. Finally, the participants answered questions about their current employment status, and if they were employed, they were asked to describe how they found their job, the type of job they had, their salary and benefits, and their job satisfaction.

Thirty-six of the 51 participants completed the survey: 21 from the mentoring group and 15 from the comparison group. The researchers found that:

- On average, the participants submitted about 18 job applications during the year but averaged only about 5 interviews.
- The participants identified several challenges during the job-seeking process, including trouble securing transportation to and from the job or interview site, discrimination by employers, a lack of suitable job openings, and a lack of accommodations on the job. Some described needing to prove themselves to employers and overcome stereotypes about blindness during the interview process.
- At the time of the survey, 24 of the participants (67%) were employed. Most of them were in skilled or professional positions and reported fairly high job satisfaction.

When the researchers looked at the results between the mentoring and comparison group, they found that:

- The employment rate for the participants from the mentoring group was higher (76%) than that for the participants from the comparison group (53%).
- The employed participants from the mentoring group were more likely to report finding the job on their own (56%) than the participants from the comparison group (25%)
- The employed participants from the comparison group were more likely to report using a recruiter or employment agency to find their job (25%) than the participants from the mentoring group (12%).

The authors noted that the difference in employment rates between the mentoring and comparison groups was larger in this follow-up study than it was immediately after the end of the original study. This may be because the participants had more time to graduate from college and secure jobs. Although the results are encouraging, a small sample size does not allow for a definitive conclusion about the impact of this mentoring program on employment success. More research with larger samples may be useful to determine whether career mentoring has a reliable impact on employment after graduation.

The authors also noted that the participants in this study highlighted a number of challenges that recent college graduates who are legally blind may face when searching for employment. Negative employer attitudes may contribute to the low

percentage of job applications that result in job interviews or offers. In addition, transportation difficulties may make the job search process more difficult for people who are legally blind. Although mentoring may not remove these challenges, mentors may be able to assist students who are legally blind with developing their professional networks and efficient search strategies so that they are better equipped to find jobs that fit their qualifications. In this study, a majority of the participants did find satisfying jobs, suggesting that employment is an attainable outcome for college graduates who are legally blind.

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/>

CareerConnect from the American Foundation for the Blind offers resources job seekers who are blind or visually impaired including job search tools, resume development, interview preparation, and more. <http://www.afb.org/info/living-with-vision-loss/for-job-seekers/12>

National Federation of the Blind also offers many resources for job seekers and employers <https://nfb.org/working>

Earlier results of this study were highlighted in [Career Mentors Can Help College Students Who Are Legally Blind Build Confidence to Find Jobs](#) published in December 2016.

To Learn More About this Study

Antonelli, K., Steverson, A., and O'Mally, J. (2018) College graduates with visual impairments: A report on seeking and finding employment. *Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness*, January-February 2018. This article is available from the NARIC collection under accession number J77929 and [from the RRTC's website](#).

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