Transformative Learning for Peer Mentors Connected to a Postsecondary Education Program for Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

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Though research on service-learning is growing, little is known about how service-learning interventions can support and prepare peer mentors. This article discusses a bounded case study that examined the learning experiences of peer mentors working with students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) through a formal service-learning course for undergraduate students. Current and former peer mentors, instructors, and the I/DD postsecondary education program director participated in semi-structured interviews that focused on mentors' experience of peer mentoring. The case study showed that mentors gained valuable real-world experience and professional development as well as increased empathy and self-awareness. In addition, staff noted the transformative nature of the experience for peer mentors, including enhanced cognitive and emotional connections, decreased anxiety, and increased self-confidence. Staff intentionality regarding the design of the course and classroom experiences represented both prior planning and responsiveness to mentor needs throughout the service-learning experience. This case study illustrates the impact of service-learning for those working with a postsecondary education program for students with I/DD.

*Keywords***:** program evaluation, disabilities, service-learning

In 2008, the Higher Education Opportunity Act opened a funding stream for postsecondary education (PSE) and vocational training programs specifically for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD). As a result of this legislation, along with associated funding from the U.S. Department of Education, over 260 postsecondary programs specifically for students with I/DD exist across the United States today (Think College, n.d.). Nearly every state has at least one PSE program. Postsecondary programs for students with I/DD offer programming that would not otherwise be available for this population. In a survey of 44 of these programs, researchers found that PSE programs for students with I/DD were available at both two- and four-year colleges, and had an average of 13 students per site (Grigal, Hart, Papay, Domin, & Smith, 2017); these students typically took both specialized and typical college courses, engaged in on-campus activities, such as clubs or student organizations, and participated in some type of employment preparation. Most students in these programs earn a certificate upon completion.

A majority of these programs engage peer mentors who provide academic, employment, and social supports for program students (Grigal et al., 2017). Programs demonstrate a range of methods for finding peer mentors, from solely engaging volunteers to offering college credit for peer mentoring participation. Indeed, peer mentoring can serve as an important service-learning activity in which undergraduate students engage in direct-contact activities with students with I/DD to support their educational and social development. However, the research on peer mentoring is still developing, and only one study has explored the effects of using a formal service-learning course as an avenue for peer mentoring. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the learning experiences associated with participating in a service-learning course for peer mentors offered at one university.

Postsecondary Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013), an intellectual disability includes impairment in overall mental abilities that also impacts adaptive functioning in one or more areas. These impairment areas are classified as *conceptual*, relating to language, math, and memory; *social*, including empathy, communication, and social judgment; and *practical*, relating to activities like self-care and money management. Developmental disabilities include several types of long-term disabilities, such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), cerebral palsy, and fragile X syndrome (Centers for Disease Control, 2017). Both groups tend to demonstrate poor employment outcomes; for instance, according to a 2013 Bureau of Labor Statistics report, only 18% of adults with ID and 58% of those with ASD were competitively employed, and few enter any type of postsecondary education program.

To combat these negative employment outcomes, the Higher Education Opportunity Act (2008) created new opportunities specifically for students with I/DD. As a result, over 200 programs now provide some type of postsecondary options for these students, typically resulting in a certificate, with the goal of preparing them to successfully enter the workforce and live more independently. These programs provide inclusive opportunities for students to attend program-specific courses in life skills and career planning, audit traditional college courses, and engage in social activities across campus. Nearly 90% of existing programs include peer mentors as part of their programming (Grigal et al., 2017).

Peer Mentoring

A key component of most PSE programs is peer mentoring. Peer mentors typically help address the social and practical adaptive skills often lacking in people with I/DD. Programs need to recruit, train, and support peer mentors as they work with students with I/DD. Griffin, Wendel, Day, and McMillan (2016) described how peer mentors were trained and supported at one PSE program. Similar to most programs, this program's peer mentors assisted with academic, goal-setting, and social activities. The researchers noted the importance of program communication and support, training for mentors, and intentional partnering of mentors with mentees as necessary components of a successful PSE peer mentoring program. Giust and Valle-Riestra (2017) studied the activities and skills used by peer mentors in their work with students with I/DD. The researchers coded written comments from mentors about their mentoring experiences and identified the themes of inclusion, self-determination, and adaptive behavior. Mentors discussed the importance of helping mentees become involved in activities, increase self-knowledge, and gain career, social, and personal wellness skills.

Peer Mentoring as Service-Learning

Service-learning instruction, often associated with the work of John Dewey, was first introduced in the early 1990s and is increasingly used as a pedagogical strategy within educational settings (Giles & Eyler, 1994). Researchers have described service-learning as an experiential teaching strategy in which faculty and students engage with a community to meet identified needs (Midgett, Hausheer, & Doumas, 2016; O'Brien, Risco, Castro, & Goodman, 2014; Weiler et al., 2013). Service-learning instruction has proven

effective in increasing understanding of specified populations while offering opportunities to connect directly with groups in need (Conway, Amel, & Gerwien, 2009; O'Brien et al., 2014).

In an effort to prepare students beyond the classroom setting, service-learning instruction combines community service or outreach with academic learning (Jett & Delgardo-Romero, 2009). Jett and Delgardo-Romero (2009) noted that service-learning instruction emphasizes both academic and community goals throughout the learning experience. While participating in service-learning courses, students demonstrate development of multicultural competence and sensitivity, professional identity growth, increased knowledge and understanding of social issues, growth in communication skills, and increased self-efficacy (Bjornestad, Mims, & Mims, 2016; Gehlert, Graf, & Rose, 2014; Midgett et al., 2016; Weiler et al., 2013).

In PSE programs, students with I/DD represent the community being served by peer mentors. Peer mentoring, therefore, functions as a type of service-learning specific to this type of programming. Jones and Gasiorski (2009) recognized that the most powerful service-learning occurs when students work directly with the population the course is focused on within their chosen academic discipline. They found that this hands-on experience increased understanding and awareness of the communities the students served; other researchers have noted opportunities for further exploration and development of vocational interests and values (Nikels, Mims, & Mims, 2007; Rutti, LaBonte, Helms, Hervani, & Sarkarat, 2015). In the few studies of the impact of peer mentoring on college students, hands-on experience, increased awareness of served communities, and vocational exploration were identified as mentoring components. Farley, Gibbons, and Cihak (2014) surveyed volunteer peer mentors at a PSE program around the benefits of participating in peer mentoring. Participants noted that they gained personal growth, learned more about people with I/DD, and gained friendships as a result of mentoring. In another study focusing on students' reasons for volunteering to be peer mentors and what they gained from the activity, Griffin, Mello, Glover, Carter, and Hodapp (2016), peer mentors noted personal and professional growth that resulted from volunteering; mentors also indicated that they gained friendships through their participation. These earlier studies suggest that peer mentoring may achieve results aligned with those of service-learning.

Increased awareness, community engagement, and self-efficacy are common objectives of service-learning courses, and reflection serves as an essential service-learning best practice for supporting these goals (Godfrey, Illes, & Berry, 2005; Weiler et al., 2013). Service-learning courses often incorporate reflective processes through the use of journals and papers that promote self-awareness (Weiler et al., 2013). Reflective activities also engage students in self-exploration, which promotes professional and personal growth (Bjornestad et al., 2016; Weiler et al., 2013). Budge (2006) highlighted the importance of appropriate training and regular reflective opportunities for those involved in peer mentoring experiences.

Overall, previous research has supported peer mentoring as a service-learning activity; however, less is known about service-learning courses that focus on peer mentoring for students with I/DD. Evidence suggests that mentors grow both professionally and personally as a result of their experiences and tend to be relational and value helping others. Earlier studies have also shown that understanding course material, faculty time and expertise, student time and commitment, resources, and coordination of service all contribute to successful implementation of and engagement in service-learning instruction (Holland, 2001). Through the integration of course material, practical experience, and reflective processes, students and faculty develop greater understanding of social issues and unmet needs, while enhancing their personal and professional development. For PSE programs, we believe that peer mentoring can serve as an important service-learning activity for student development, but research is needed to better understand how peer mentoring helps students grow.

We sought to understand the effects of participating in a service-learning course focused on peer mentoring for students with I/DD. Because the program on which the current study focused is now seven years old and the service-learning course is in its third year, we knew that the course provided an ongoing stream of peer mentors, but we were less certain about how the course impacted those enrolled. The research team set out to examine whether the service-learning aspect of the undergraduate course was meeting course objectives and impacting students' personal and professional development, thus serving as a positive service-learning experience. We anticipated that the insights gained would help improve the course and, in turn, better support the experience and learning for program students and other PSE programs, while also

ensuring that we were providing a thoughtful learning experience for undergraduates and not simply serving the PSE program. Using a bounded case-study model, we explored the experiences of students who completed a service-learning course designed specifically to engage peer mentors in one PSE program. The following research question guided our study: What is the learning experience of peer mentors connected to a PSE program for students with I/DD enrolled in a service-learning course?

Method

We conducted our research using a case study approach. To be useful, the case was bounded, with clear delineations regarding what was included. A case study model provides opportunities for depth and rich detail, allowing consumers of the research to determine its usefulness and applicability to their own purposes (Flyvbjerg, 2011). Effective case studies use multiple data sources to allow researchers to examine the case from multiple perspectives (Hays & Singh, 2012). Because the purpose of the current study was to determine the impact on peer mentors participating in a service-learning course focused on a specific population, the case study approach was appropriate for framing our analysis.

The PSE Program

Our case study focused on peer mentors from a single postsecondary program for students with I/DD. The goal of the program is to prepare young adults with intellectual disabilities or autism spectrum disorders for the world of work. Located at a southeastern U.S. college campus, the program includes courses on career and life planning, digital literacy, and life skills; participation in traditional college courses through audit opportunities; and internships. Students complete two years of coursework in related experiences, culminating in a certificate of completion. The program is designated by the U.S. Department of Education as a Comprehensive Transition Program (CTP). To gain CTP status, programs must have on-site students on a college or university campus, offer support for employment preparation, include advising and a concrete curriculum, and offer at least half of the program time in programming with other students who do not have an intellectual disability (Think College, n.d.). On average, eight students enter the program each year; approximately 85% of graduates are currently employed or in job-training programs.

Peer mentors—undergraduate students who partner with program students to provide academic, social, and vocational support—are integral to the program. Each semester, over 40 traditional university students serve as peer mentors. To provide an incentive and a more formal learning structure for peer mentors, we created the service-learning course in fall 2014. The course began as an elective opportunity for undergraduates, who could enroll for one to three credit hours. As the course developed, we adapted it to a standard three-credit course that currently meets an academic requirement for students majoring in special education and audiology/speech pathology. Course objectives include developing an understanding of the importance of service, increasing understanding and competence in working with people with I/DD, and creating a meaningful service-learning project related to the program.

Service-learning students engage in 60 hours of peer mentoring, attend class, and create and complete a formal service-learning project centering on one of the following areas: academic success, career development, digital literacy, student wellness, social development, or program development. Projects can directly involve program students or focus on supporting the overall program. Recent project topics have included development of social activities, addressing literacy issues, identifying potential local employers, and increasing digital literacy skills. Sixty-seven undergraduates have completed the course, with another 27 currently enrolled.

Participants

The participant pool for this bounded case study included the following: 27 undergraduate peer mentors (22 female, five male) currently enrolled in the service-learning course; 25 peer mentors (21 female, four male) who completed the course in the previous three semesters and were still at the university; the current and previous instructors of the course; and the program director. From this group, five peer mentors (three

current, all female; two former, one female and one male) agreed to participate in an interview, and 13 current peer mentors (all female) completed some part of the online questionnaire.

One current and one former instructor (both female) and the program director (male) were also included in the participant pool for the study. The first instructor of the course, who helped in its development and implementation, was a doctoral student in counselor education assigned to the program as part of her graduate assistantship. Therefore, she was familiar with both the program and its students and had worked previously with the volunteer peer mentors. She taught the course for its first four semesters. The second instructor (the second author of this article) was hired by the program specifically to teach the service-learning course. She was also a doctoral student in counselor education and had prior experience teaching both undergraduate and graduate courses. Finally, the program director was in his third year with the program. Prior to being hired, he served as a director for a nonprofit agency that provided services for people with ASD. Though he was not directly involved with the service-learning course, he interacted regularly with the peer mentors and was very active in identifying potential service projects for mentors.

Data Collection
In order to obtain the richest picture of the intricacies of the service-learning course and its impact on peer mentors, several forms of data were collected and reviewed upon gaining approval for the study from university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Current peer mentors in the course were offered the opportunity to complete three rounds of an online survey, consisting of three demographic questions and four open-ended questions. The open-ended questions asked students to describe their experiences up to that point in the semester. Peer mentors provided their names on the survey so that repeated responses could be tracked, but all names were replaced with pseudonyms prior to analysis. Additionally, we offered current and former peer mentors the option to participate in an individual interview with a research team member. The interview protocol was semi-structured and included seven primary questions designed to solicit the experiences of those involved with the course, positive and negative features, and the overall impact of the course on their learning experience. The interview was designed to help students further elucidate their experiences and, for current mentors, allow them to elaborate on their survey responses.

Former and current instructors and the program director also participated in semi-structured individual interviews, which were conducted to ascertain their thoughts and experiences developing and teaching the course, facilitating the development of service-learning projects, observing students' learning, and, in the case of the director, ensuring quality service delivery and balance. Each interview included six primary questions, with prompts for follow-up if needed. We asked instructors about their experience teaching the course, student interactions, and challenges and successes in teaching. We asked the program director how the course impacted the overall program and how program students responded to the peer mentors.

The surveys and interviews represented the principal data collected for the project; however, to increase richness and complexity, and to provide further information regarding impact of the course, the research team also collected course evaluation data for the previous three semesters and reviewed the syllabi for course components. Because one of the research team members was the current instructor for the course, care was taken to ensure that she did not collect any data from her former or current students and that data analysis began only after the semester was complete.

Data Analysis
Using the constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the research team broke into pairs to code the transcripts, first independently and then by obtaining consensus with their partner. Partners created a shared codebook and re-coded the transcripts, adding new codes or modifying codes as partners agreed. Themes and patterns were identified and relationships among codes explored. Finally, the team reconvened to share findings and triangulate with the findings of other team members. A member of the research team also examined data from the syllabi and course evaluations, extracting themes from each of these data

sources to triangulate with themes that emerged from the transcripts. We continued meetings until achieving consensus on all aspects of the data.

Trustworthiness

This study followed Tracy's (2010) recommendations for demonstrating rigor in qualitative studies. First, we identified a topic that was worthy of research. Our literature review demonstrated that more information was needed around the impact of service-learning on peer mentors and whether service-learning might serve as a model for recruiting and retaining peer mentors. We then followed a standardized data collection process by using semi-structured interviews and recording and transcribing all interviews. Tracy (2010) also recommended that researchers consider all of the data and their underlying meaning; therefore, we kept analytic memos and an audit trail to document this process. In addition, triangulation occurred as we met regularly to discuss coding and identify themes. The university's IRB approved all aspects of the study, ensuring the ethical conduct of research. Lastly, we sought to connect the findings to previous and future research to increase its meaningfulness.

Findings

Given the large amount of qualitative data collected, results were collapsed into two categories, summarizing peer mentor perspectives and staff perspectives. A complete, detailed report of the results can be obtained from the first or second author upon request. Figure 1 depicts an overview of the findings.

Peer Mentor Perspective

While data were collected through various means, common threads ran throughout many of the peer mentors' stories about their experience of service-learning. Primary commonalities fell into two main themes: real-world experience and professional development. In addition, one subtheme within real-world experience, personal development, was highlighted by several participants.

Real-world Experience. The opportunity to gain real-world, hands-on experience played a critical role in peer mentors' service-learning experiences. The majority of mentors discussed their enjoyment engaging in this form of experiential learning, such as one who shared that "actually DOING something to learn was much more helpful than just reading a textbook and writing papers. I loved this class!" The real-world experience seemed to help mentors connect the content learned in the classroom with skills needed in practice. As another peer mentor stated:

> My favorite part about this course is how we learn in class about disabilities but we also get to see them in the real world when we work with the program students. It is cool to see a real-world perspective but at the same time learn about it in the classroom.

Students also discussed the value they found in learning from their peers and the students they mentored as a result of their real-world experiences.

> The opportunity to engage in hands-on learning seemed to help mentors feel as if they gained a better understanding of the population as a result. Many felt that their service-learning experiences broadened their perspective and addressed their own misconceptions about the population. This was exemplified in an interview with a mentor:

> It's one of those things where like people always have these stigmas or stereotypes or assumptions about people with special needs, but actually working with them you find out they're just special people, I mean they're regular people that just happen to have special needs. Like that sounds contradicting but interacting with the students is just like we're into the same things.

Some peer mentors even felt that their service-learning experience helped them learn how to work with many types of individuals who were different than themselves, not just those with intellectual and developmental disabilities. One former mentor shared, "You might take [the service-learning course] thinking it's just going to be pertaining to these students with intellectual disabilities … but like it teaches you more in the long run about working with populations different from yourself." Peer mentors appeared to benefit from the real-world activities inherent in the service-learning course.

Figure 1. Impact of service-learning experience on peer mentors.
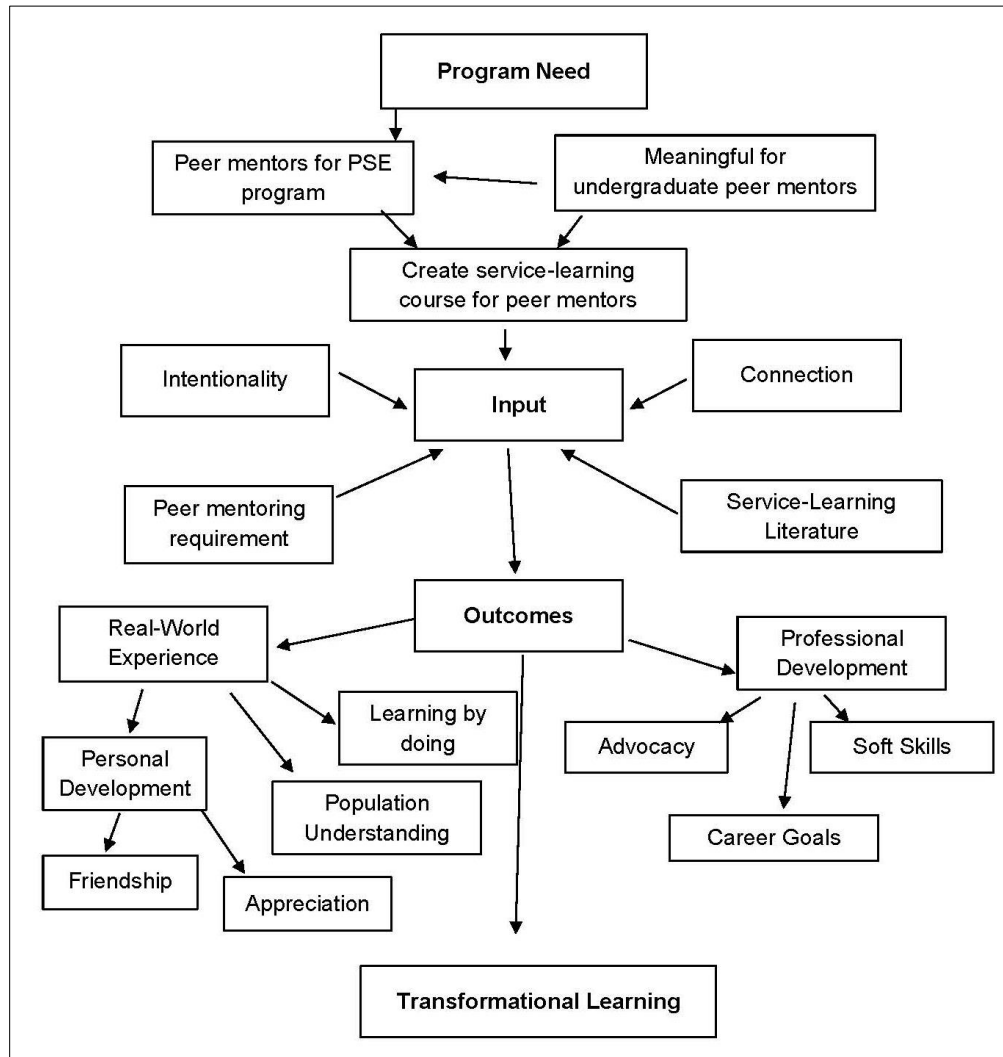
Personal Development. Several participants described personal development that arose from these real-world experiences. For example, one remarked, "I have learned to appreciate and acknowledge people's talents and different personalities," and later commented, "I have learned how to be understanding and to always be on time." Another stated, "I have learned a lot about myself." Other participants commented about the friendships they developed with the program students. One noted that these friendships were what stood out most for her about the course; another explained, "I just loved getting to know the program students on a very personal basis. They all have very different personalities and all are so fun to be around." For these mentors, the hands-on learning experiences affected them personally.

Professional Development. The participants also articulated ways in which their service-learning experiences added to their professional development and had a positive effect on their future career goals. Peer mentors often shared that the course helped them learn about, narrow, or solidify their career interests. For example, one stated, "I got an idea of what it would be like to work in a helping profession like social work or counseling or psychology," while another discussed that "the course helped me realize that I wanted to help minority populations specifically." Other peer mentors who had solidified their career goals prior to taking the course felt that service-learning gave them valuable experience in their future field of interest.

As one student shared, "Because this is the population I want to work with … it gave me more experience especially on days where, you know, there may have been issues with a student."

In analyzing the perspectives of mentors, it became clear that they believed they had gained important professional soft skills, including acceptance, flexibility, and adaptability. For example, one mentor shared how service-learning had added to her skills:

> You know, just like being accepting, and not even just people with special needs, but like as a whole accepting and patient. You know, just a lot of the skills I've had to bring to the table working with program students.

When discussing the flexibility and adaptability learned from the course, another peer mentor cited the benefit of "learning to adapt and change and go with the flow and work with [the students]," while another shared, "Even if it's not this specific population it teaches you to be more ready to not just have to go with exactly the plan you set up in the first place."

Participants also described gaining a desire to become advocates as professionals due to their service-learning experiences and increased knowledge about the population. Peer mentors discussed becoming advocates for the program; one mentor stated, "Getting the word out there has been really cool too, and like introducing my parents and just like random people that would not ever know about it." Others described becoming advocates for individuals with I/DD: "It made me want to … professionally and personally … speak out for them." Gaining skills as advocates seemed to be empowering for students in the course.

Staff Perspective. Research team members conducted individual interviews with two former service-learning instructors as well as the program director in order to ascertain the staff experience around service-learning and mentorship. The team also conducted a syllabus review to corroborate staff perspectives. The interviews revealed staff perspectives on the impact of service-learning on student growth, learning, and development. In analyzing the staff perspective, four themes emerged: transformation, intentionality, connection, and experience.

Transformation. Staff described the service-learning course as being a transformative experience for many peer mentors. They felt that mentors found meaning and value in the service-learning course. One staff member shared:

> The fulfilling nature of the course, helping an underserved group of people and developing and providing a project to serve that group of people, I think tends to be a really rewarding and fulfilling thing for students. And they have a meaningful product at the end of the semester that they are really proud of.

Staff felt that transformation also resulted from peer mentors being challenged to take on new experiences and then connecting those experiences to their own worldview. By asking mentors to synthesize their mentorship experiences with societal problems and a larger worldview, staff facilitated transformative learning. A former instructor described this transformation: "Learning how to work with this population is also helping [students] to prepare and be more open in working with other populations."

Intentionality. When asked about their approach to guiding peer mentor learning, staff described intentionally structuring the course to provide important learning opportunities. As part of the course, mentors were asked to engage in extensive reflection, discussion, role playing, and group problem solving to address the real-world problems they were experiencing as mentors. For example, one former instructor described providing time at the start of each class for peer mentors to bring up or discuss their experiences and difficulties as mentors. "They would bring moments they wanted to share, and they could be really positive and impactful moments, or questions. They tended to bring the questions, and the panic moments." The class as a whole would then discuss and brainstorm possible ways to approach the mentor's situation. The instructors created a consistent, safe space where mentors were encouraged to discuss their moments of panic. Staff felt that by intentionally providing these types of learning experiences, students increased their self-awareness and problem-solving skills.

Connection. All of the staff interviewed reported on the important cognitive and emotional connections experienced as a result of service-learning—connections between service-learning students and program students, and between staff and students. Forming these important connections helped students feel

supported in their work and gave mentors a sense of purpose in which they could take pride. When asked about peer mentors' feedback in the service-learning course, a former instructor described the strength of these connections:

> The overwhelming feedback that I got every semester, was that they loved spending time with the program students. They loved talking about their time with the program students. They loved writing about their time with the program students…. The more it connected with their time with the program students, the more positive feedback that I got.

Experience. Staff described how the initial reactions from peer mentors entering into their service-learning experiences were often filled with hesitancy, uncertainty, and ambiguity. Mentors are asked to take on new roles and responsibilities, unlike in many other college courses, and work with real people in real-world situations. This experience in and of itself seemed anxiety provoking for many, so staff worked to provide support and problem-solving skills to mitigate this initial worry. When discussing the service-learning project, one former instructor shared:

> It's a big undertaking for a lot of them, and so I really try to work to break it down and work on it slowly in steps throughout the semester so that it's not this overwhelming thing at the end.

Although it seemed that mentors' initial experiences of service-learning were marked by uncertainty, the majority ended their experience with feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction. One staff member described this process:

> When they talk about their experiences, a lot of them talk about being hesitant and nervous, uneasy at the beginning, not really sure what they are getting into. But the majority of the students talk about, by the end of the semester, how valuable the experience was for them on a personal level, their personal development as well as professionally.

Discussion

This research constituted a bounded case study exploring the learning experience of peer mentors connected to a program for students with I/DD. Consistent with previous service-learning research, peer mentors and staff alike in this case observed multiple positive impacts on mentors' personal and professional development as a result of course participation. The broadened perspectives, personal and professional growth through experience, opportunities to learn and practice soft skills and advocacy, and the increased ability to connect what mentors learned in the classroom with their mentoring are all characteristic of service-learning in general (Conway et al., 2009; Jacoby, 2003; Nikels et al., 2007; O'Brien et al., 2014; Peterson, 2009; Rutti et al., 2015). In addition, the intentionality with which staff structured the course itself created an atmosphere fostering connection and reflection for mentors. Through various methods, peer mentors connected what they did in their mentoring with what they were learning, leading to transformative meaning making for many. This process also encouraged emotional support and connection among students and between service-learning students and staff, nurturing a supportive learning environment, a finding that, again, is consistent with previous research particularly on peer mentoring (Jett & Delgardo-Romero, 2009; Midgett et al., 2016).

The real-world experience was perhaps the most impactful element for peer mentors. The opportunity offered the chance to actually engage in semester-long interactions with people with I/DD, which led to the positive changes described earlier. In addition, the mentors noted that this style of learning was more influential than more formal classroom structures. This finding aligns with previous research on service-learning activities (Schelbe, Petracchi, & Weaver, 2014; Simons & Cleary, 2006), suggesting that peer mentoring is an appropriate and impactful service-learning activity for students. The real-world experience offers perspectives outside the classroom, increasing mentors' understanding of different populations and giving them an opportunity to explore what it would be like to work in the real world with these different populations. Peer mentoring for students with I/DD provides an easy, on-campus way to offer this real-world experience.

Staff also described their perceptions of the impact of the service-learning experience. Importantly, they highlighted the need to support their mentors and normalize their anxiety. They also discussed the

significance of intentionally structuring the course to include time for reflection, discussion, and group problem solving. Bringle and Hatcher (1995) highlighted this intentionality in their overview of creating service-learning experiences. For PSE programs for students with I/DD, ensuring that instructors create a warm and supportive environment for their peer mentors seems vital. Doing this in a formal class environment creates a way for this intentionality to occur throughout the semester rather than just prior to the peer mentoring process.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. Because we employed a bounded case study model, the sample size was limited to only one service-learning course focused on undergraduate student service-learning experiences with students with I/DD. The population size was small and limited to individuals who self-selected to participate in this study. Only female students participated in completing the three rounds of surveys, and only one male student participated in the interview process. Although that parallels the overall enrollment for the course, the gender inequality is still an issue, as it limited the conclusions that could be drawn from this research. Lastly, throughout the three rounds of surveys, mentor respondents were not always consistent, so we did not have three rounds of responses from all 13 participants. In an effort to address the limited sample size and diversity among participants, we gathered data from multiple sources to include course instructors, the program coordinator, past and current mentor interviews, and current mentor survey responses.

Implications and Next Steps

Given the value of broadening students' perspectives, using self-reflection as a tool to make connections with and practical applications of academic material, and the opportunity for personal growth and career development, the marriage of service-learning with peer mentoring for the ultimate benefit of individuals in PSE programs for I/DD seems ideal. Programs can create service-learning courses that provide avenues for peer mentors while also offering professional and personal growth opportunities for undergraduate students. Courses should be structured, provide opportunities for reflection, and engage students by helping them link didactic learning with experiential activities.

The results of this study can be used by other PSE programs (or other outreach programs) as they consider how to effectively engage peer mentors. The positive reactions from mentors and staff suggest that a service-learning course creates a meaningful learning experience for peer mentors. Considering that nearly all PSE programs utilize mentors, this outcome is very important. We know that service-learning positively impacts students, and this study strongly suggests that peer mentoring as a service-learning activity works.

In this study, the primary investigators designed the service-learning course, with course delivery provided by graduate assistants. Instructors offer formal spaces for mentors to explore the impact of peer mentoring while also normalizing the initial uncertainty they might have about working with people with I/DD. Additionally, using graduate students to teach the course can be valuable in several ways. First, it provides an opportunity for them to experience teaching. Second, it keeps the cost for course delivery fairly low. Using a graduate student from a helping profession (e.g., counseling, psychology, social work) in particular to teach the course may increase the likelihood that a warm and supportive environment exists in the service-learning course, which participants cited as valuable for their learning. Ultimately, transformational learning can occur through peer mentoring activities that are part of a service-learning course.

Continued research as well as practical implementation of this model are needed. Practice could be expanded by developing similar service-learning courses for peer mentors helping different populations, such as children or clients at psychiatric inpatient facilities. Future research should focus on the impact of peer mentoring on the mentees themselves, potentially offering insights into how the internal and external reflective processes engaged in by mentors lead to changes in the mentoring relationship as seen through the eyes of mentees, and how mentoring generates change in mentees, whether positive, negative, or neutral.

This study specifically examined the learning experiences of peer mentors in a service-learning course connected to a PSE program for I/DD. While previous studies have explored the impact of other types of service-learning on students or the impact of volunteer peer mentoring particularly in the context of PSE programs, none has explored how these two concepts can work together to enhance peer mentor development. Our findings suggest that service-learning in the form of peer mentoring for PSE programs can be a powerful option to both increase student learning and meet program needs.

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