

Peer Supports: Focusing on the Experiences of College Students with Intellectual Disability

By Courtney L. Wilt and Mary E. Morningstar

Inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs for youth with intellectual disability recognize students with intellectual disability as contributing members of the broader campus community through academic engagement, career development, and social activities (Grigal & Papay, 2018; Jones et al., 2015). An established strategy for promoting natural and inclusive supports is the use of peer mentors. Research in the K-12 settings has found that peer mentors in high school can promote positive academic, social, employment, and mental health outcomes (Carter, et al., 2016; Asmus et al., 2016). Brock & Huber (2017) identified peer mentors as an evidence-based practice promoting social interactions for secondary students with disabilities in core academics and elective courses. Translating impactful peer support practices to IPSE programs is thus an important and ongoing effort.

Enhancing social capital among students with intellectual disability in IPSE programs is accomplished by broadening their social networks throughout a postsecondary campus. Such efforts increase access to both tangible and intangible resources that are embedded within interpersonal relationships, social institutions, and friendships. The peer support model used in this study promoted peer supports as dynamic and reciprocal, utilizing both formal and informal relationships to facilitate personal development and social inclusion. This IPSE model supports two peer support roles:

PEER MENTORS: same-aged college peers focused on expanding social and emotional supports by building campus connections and increasing a sense of belonging.

PEER TUTORS: same-aged college peers who support IPSE students with academic life, such as coursework, study habits, and organizational skills.

METHOD

This publication draws from a qualitative study that interviewed college students with intellectual disability (n = 5; see Table 1). We were interested to fill a gap toward what is known about IPSE students and their experiences with peer supports. The IPSE students were sampled to include students during their first (n = 2) and second years (n = 3) from a two-year IPSE program. We used focus groups to examine and critique the experiences of IPSE students from individual as well as a collective viewpoint (Gibbs, 2012). Each of the five IPSE students participated in small focus groups consisting of 1-2 other IPSE students.

Example focus group questions:

1. How will the experience of engaging with peer supports impact your future (career, social life, volunteer/activism, etc.)?
2. Have peer mentors helped you in making friends or connections outside of the IPSE program (like clubs, in the dorm, or in other university activities)? If so, how did they do that?
3. What problems or issues arose with the peer mentor? How did you work through these problems?
4. Think about a peer mentor or tutor with whom you have a great relationship. How did you build that relationship? How long did it take? How comfortable are you in asking them for support?

TABLE 1: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

PARTICIPANT	YEAR IN PROGRAM	CAREER ASPIRATION/ MAJOR
Maggie	2	Sign Language Interpreter
Nicole	2	Veterinary Assistant
Lauren	2	Early Childhood Educator
Marcus	1	Environmental Science
Jake	1	Undecided

KEY FINDINGS

IPSE students reported little to no past experience with peer supports from high school. Three types of valued supports were evidenced among the participants including academic, emotional, and informational supports. Students also described peer supports to be critical to social networking and a sense of belonging within the university.

ACADEMIC SUPPORT

Academic supports extended beyond coursework and included organizational and technological skills associated with academic success. All five students indicated that academic supports provided were vital to their success, particularly during the first semester in college when they were experiencing much greater academic challenges and expectations than in high school. Further, academic and social supports were described as intertwined, given that the “studying” was a shared experience of college life, which often involved sociocultural norms specific to the university such as meeting at the student union:

Nicole: *Well, um, I love hanging out with the peer mentors, and I hung out at the Union and I just like, I love hanging out with people because I love to join lots of people hanging out with me. It's really fun and I really enjoyed it, hanging out with peer mentors.*

Informal social exchanges with peers during tutoring, studying together, or through free time added to their expressed expansion of academic supports.

EMOTIONAL SUPPORTS

Students described initial experiences at the university as fun but overwhelming, and they acknowledged the importance of the peer tutor and/or mentor to ease their worries of fitting in. Seeing familiar faces when navigating different locations on the large university campus was emotionally supportive. Students also benefitted from the emotional support of peers through new challenges:

Maggie: *I loved my Coms class, but there was a speech I had to give. I was very nervous. I was very, because it was, um, a part of my past and like I had to bring it up, and, it was very like, challenging and hard and that's when like, I talked to [Peer Tutor] for the very first time about what I was feeling and like, stuff like that, and, I have really enjoyed talking to him about that.*

Maggie's comments indicate how the “formalized” experience of peer supports led to a much richer opportunity to build a trusting relationship in which

she was able to reach out to the peer for personal problem-solving and support. As well, IPSE students expressed increased personal agency to recognize and seek support for complex emotional support needs.

INFORMATIONAL SUPPORTS

Informational supports were described by participants as the “how to” for college (e.g, navigating campus, finding activities to try), as well as guidance around new experiences and problem-solving distinct social interactions, such as how to make plans over text with a new friend or communicate with work supervisors. These supports were imperative as especially when students encountered obstacles to meeting their personal goals and feeling connected:

Marcus: *They've helped me with like, calling my manager at work. I work on campus...I had something else so I couldn't go to work. I called my boss to tell him I wouldn't be at work.*

Interviewer: *Were you nervous to do that?*

Marcus: *I was at first but [Peer Mentor] helped me.*

Interviewer: *Cool. So in the future do you think you would be able to call your manager and tell them that on your own?*

Marcus: *Yeah.*

These supports were helpful at the time needed, as well as in building confidence and reassurance in knowing supports were available.

SOCIAL NETWORKING

Overall, students described peer supports as offering a unique social network. They also felt more comfortable and confident engaging in social activities with other students with the support of peer mentors which were able to gradually fade so that the students were engaging in social networks without support. Finally, students valued the opportunities for new experiences with peer mentors, such as taking a road trip or going to a family-style dinner at a sorority.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Peer supports can positively impact IPSE students across many aspects of college life. Several practice implications are drawn from our results including:

- **Plan frequent peer supports early.** The most valued peer supports occurred early in students' college experiences, suggesting that attention should be placed on planning frequent peer supports early in a student's academic career will lead to stronger long-term success.

- **Strategically recruit peer mentors from existing social and academic networks.** The frequency and quality of social relationships has been known to ward off social and emotional isolation (Eisenman et al., 2017). Our findings similarly indicate that peer mentors can offer emotional supports and shield students from feeling isolated in postsecondary settings. IPSE programs can provide optimal social and emotional support in students' daily lives by strategically recruiting peer supports from within the daily social and academic networks of IPSE students (e.g., campus residential settings, clubs and organizations, academic courses).

- **Foster inclusive mindsets.** Keep in mind that these students with intellectual disability described many of the same struggles, supports, and successes as any other college student. IPSE programs should stress that IPSE students seek many of the same formal and informal academic, emotional, and informational supports that other college students seek. Creating peer support mechanisms that are distinctly different from the typical approaches will create further gaps in how students with intellectual disability are viewed.

This study indicated that peer supports can forge and strengthen social networks for IPSE students, and that these supports are valued by IPSE students in conjunction to the academic, emotional, and informational supports that develop from interpersonal relationships between IPSE students and the peers themselves. IPSE programs can learn from these results to incorporate a dynamic range of peer supports to IPSE students while also attending to the existing networks on their campuses that may offer similar supports in inclusive settings (e.g., library study groups, work-study coworkers, clubs and activities of interest). We hope our findings will inform the future of peer support programming for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities in higher education, and encourage others to center the voices of these students in research and practice.

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FAST FACTS, Issue No. 27, 2020

FAST FACTS is a publication of Think College, a project of the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston, funded by a grant from the Office of Postsecondary Education (Grant No. P407B100002). The opinions contained in this document are those of the grantee and do not necessarily reflect those of the funder.

Recommended citation for this brief: Wilt, C.L. & Morningstar, M.E. (2020). *Peer Supports: Focusing on the Experiences of College Students with Intellectual Disability*. Think College Fast Facts, Issue No. 27. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion.

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