



Mentoring for the Future: An Intervention Development Study Promoting Career Development and Customized Employment for Blind, DeafBlind, and Low Vision Youth

The RRTC on Employment among Transition-Age Youth with Disabilities is conducting six studies aimed at developing effective practices to improve employment outcomes of transition-aged youth. This plain language research brief provides an overview of Research Study #5.

The goal of this study is to test how well a peer mentoring program for Blind, low vision, and DeafBlind youth in their senior year of high school works. We want to find out if peer mentoring helps students identify career pathways. Also, we want to know if exploring these pathways will assist students in finding jobs or getting into education programs. Additionally, we want to find out if meeting and working with employees with vision impairments will change employer attitudes and how employers think about hiring people with these disabilities.

Study Overview

Our study will research the impact of a current peer mentoring program between the Virginia Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired and Virginia Commonwealth University.

In this study, we will:

- Examine the journey of rising high school seniors with vision impairments in a nine-month peer mentoring and work-based learning program.
- Pair each student with a peer mentor who also has a vision impairment. Together, they will develop a portfolio based on each student's career goals.

- Observe each student as they participate in a paid, summer work-based learning experience (WBLE) related to their career goals.
- Guide student participants on how to use MediaVoice, a modification of PhotoVoice, to tell the story of their experiences in the peer mentoring program.
- Follow students for up to 28 months to track their progress.
- Enroll three student cohorts of 10-15 students per cohort.

Research Questions

1. What is the effect of peer mentoring on the development of career interests and development?
2. What is the effect of peer mentoring on career pathway outcomes such as PSE and CE attainment?
3. What are the factors that contribute to meaningful peer mentoring for Blind, DeafBlind, and low vision students?
4. To what extent does interaction with Blind, DeafBlind, and low vision interns during WBLE affect workplace attitudes and stereotypes?

Importance of the Study

Adults with vision impairments are more likely to be unemployed, live in poverty, and work part-time (Lund & Cmar, 2019; McDonnall et al., 2022). Contributing factors include difficulty with transportation, lack of mentorship, training limitations, and challenges with self-advocacy (Crudden & Steverson, 2021; Leonard, 2002; O'Mally & Antonelli, 2016). Also, low expectations may keep employers from hiring employees with vision impairments (Leonard, 2002; McDonnall & Cmar, 2022; Victor et al., 2017).

Mentorship can positively impact employment for people with vision impairments (O'Mally & Antonelli, 2016). Previous research on mentoring programs found that mentorship gave students the chance to see what different jobs were like, practice interviewing skills, and get advice on how to get a job. It is particularly beneficial to have a mentor who also has a vision impairment, as they can share real-life experiences (O'Mally & Steverson, 2017).

This study is important because there is little data on high school students who participate in peer mentoring programs. Also, students with vision impairments may not have a career pathway planned before they finish high school. Study results could provide guidance on how peer mentoring programs can help students with vision impairments identify and reach their career goals.

Additionally, we want to discover if working with employees who have vision impairments can improve how employers think about hiring people with vision impairments in the future. In sum, this study hopes to show what can improve outcomes for Blind, low vision, and DeafBlind individuals, ultimately leading to better employment opportunities and quality of life.

Learn More

To learn more about this study or the other studies conducted under VCU's RRTC on Employment among Transition-Age Youth with Disabilities, visit transition.vcurrtc.org.

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