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Career Mentoring For College Students: Insights from a Program Participant

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Career Mentoring For College Students: Insights from a Program Participant

One recent NIDILRR grant project focused on employment outcomes for college students who are blind or visually impaired. The project sought to determine whether working with blind career mentors in the career area of interest to the student makes a difference. Legally blind college students within one year of graduation were paired with legally blind mentors who were employed or recently retired.

A highlight of the project was receiving ongoing feedback from student participants about their experiences before, during, and after their college-to-career transition. The following are insights from one program participant that may serve as a model for future transition success stories.

As a college student, Tracy [not her real name] had never really had a consistent mentor. A few people gave her sound advice, but these relationships were informal and never continuous. Above all, none of Tracy's mentors were blind or visually impaired, which she felt led to some awkward situations.

Tracy's undergraduate academic advisor told her that "networking will get you a job." Tracy attended conferences and attempted to network, with the goal of applying to graduate school. As she was not a very social person, networking didn't come naturally. She was missing the support and perspective of someone who understood the college-to-career transition from the perspective of a blind person.

The NRTC's program was set up to bridge this mentoring gap by pairing a blind student with a blind mentor in the student's career field of interest. Tracy learned about the mentoring project as a way to be paired with a person who understood her unique transition questions, concerns, and needs. Following completion of the project, we caught up with Tracy to find out about her personal experience in the program.

Sophie: What did you expect going into the mentoring program?

Tracy: I expected to get advice on how to get into the professional world, the student-to-work transition, and simply how to be an adult. I didn't expect to be matched with someone in my specific career field.

Sophie: You were paired with a blind mentor in your field of interest. How did the match impact your relationship with your mentor?

Tracy: I was shocked and impressed to have a mentor in a related field. She was able to connect me to others in the field and help me build a network of contacts, including hiring managers. I think it is imperative that your mentor be able to help you in your field, and it was also important to be matched with a mentor who was blind.

Sophie: Your mentor was not located in the same geographic area as you. Did location/distance impact your relationship?

Tracy: It would have been different if we could have met face-to-face, because then we could spend more time together and possibly build a closer friendship. We did spend some time together at a conference, which I think helped.

Sophie: Were your expectations of the mentoring program met or not?

Tracy: My expectations were absolutely met. I feel that my mentor and I were, and still are, a great match. The entire experience has far exceeded my expectations.

Sophie: It sounds like you had a good relationship with your program mentor. Are you still in contact?

Tracy: Yes, even after three or more years, we still talk to each other during a monthly phone call, and I continue receiving helpful career and life advice.

Sophie: What was the most valuable part of having a mentor through our program?

Tracy: I had a lot to figure out about life, in general. My mentor gave me valuable advice on how to simply live life, and that helped me to figure things out.

Sophie: What would you say to a young college student about working with a mentor? A mentor who is blind?

Tracy: Working with a mentor does not show weakness. It's just a way to help guide you through the process of becoming an adult. I feel that some advice would have been different (such as utilizing transportation, visual tools, etc.) if my mentor had been sighted; however, my blind mentor could discuss different options available to me if/when my sight or needs changed.

Sophie: What would you say to someone who is considering becoming a mentor?

Tracy: Listen to what your mentee is saying. Don't necessarily only give them your personal opinion. Be willing to research a problem your mentee is having, and give resources to help guide them in the right direction.

After taking part in the NRTC's mentoring program and making the college-to-career transition herself, Tracy is now ready to begin giving back as a mentor. She was, and is, very grateful for the project and the opportunity to take part in this great experience. Her wish is that there were more programs like the NRTC's mentoring program for everybody, not just people who are blind.

Navigating the job search and lack of work experience are two of the challenges that blind college students face when trying to find employment. Career mentors can help blind college students prepare for the transition ahead by sharing work experiences and discussing specific concerns related to the career field of interest. Participants in the NRTC's mentoring program appreciated working with a mentor who was able to address specific topics related to blindness, such as career exploration, disclosure, accommodation planning, transportation, and using assistive technology at work.

As Tracy described, there is much more to the transition process than simply finding a job. There is personal growth to be had and a lot of life lessons to be learned. Program participants also noted that mentors were able to address social, communication, and job skills, as well as self-advocacy, assertiveness, and dealing with negative employer attitudes.

Career mentoring is an ongoing process that should begin as early as possible. There are no age limits to mentoring, and the relationship can be adjusted, depending on individual needs. Blind professionals have shown a lot of interest in guiding students and those making a career change. If you are a student, talk to your vocational rehabilitation counselor or consult local consumer organizations such as the National Federation of the Blind about getting referrals to local professionals in your career field. If a local mentor is not available, consider using your networking skills to find a mentor in another location. CareerConnect, a program through the American Foundation for the Blind, can be a resource. Most participants in the NTRC project indicated that the location of their mentor, local or distance, was not as important as other factors (e.g., being blind and being in the same career field).

The NRTC provides employment and mentoring resources, including the Employment Mentoring Manual and the Resource Sheet for Job Seekers, to help guide the mentoring and job hunting process. You can learn more about participant experiences and outcomes from the project, as well as other research on facilitating employment for persons who are blind or visually impaired, by visiting our website at <http://www.blind.msstate.edu>. You may also contact us at (662) 325-2001 or nrtc@colled.msstate.edu.

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