

The Effect of Career Mentoring on Employment Outcomes for College Students Who Are Legally Blind

What Were We Trying to Learn?

College students who are BVI often face unique challenges when trying to find employment. Some of these challenges are due to lack of work experience and limited information about how to navigate the job search in their field of interest as a person with BVI. Career mentors help students by sharing work experiences and discussing specific concerns related to their career field.

We wanted to know if working with career mentors who are blind and in the career area of interest to the student makes a difference in employment outcomes for college students who are BVI. This study focused on pairing legally blind college students who were within one year of graduating with mentors who are also legally blind and employed or recently retired.

Mentors served as role models by addressing questions about the career field of interest and concerns specific to visual impairment, including:

- Job search and interview preparation and process
- Transportation to and from work
- Negative employer attitudes
- Social, communication, and job skills
- Requesting accommodations
- Self-advocacy and assertiveness

Research Takeaway

College students who are blind or visually impaired (BVI) showed increases in assertive job hunting behavior when they worked with a career mentor. Establishing a relationship with a mentor who was blind and working in the same career field was beneficial to students.

What Are the Most Important Things We Learned?

1. Career mentors can help college students who are BVI prepare for the job search process and employment. Students particularly appreciated working with a mentor who is blind because mentors were able to address topics related to blindness, including disclosure, social skills, career exploration, accommodation planning, networking, and using assistive technology in work settings. Results also suggest that students with mentors may have been more focused and efficient in their job search.
2. Students who worked with a mentor noted significant growth in their level of assertiveness in job hunting. Students reported feeling most assertive in asking friends for job leads, asking for more information about jobs, and discussing work experience. For students who did not work with a mentor, there was no improvement in their assertiveness scores.
3. Students in the mentoring program showed some improvement with both confidence in the job search and career adaptability, although they did not increase more than the students without mentors. All students were better able to respond and make adjustments necessary to be more successful.
4. Most participants indicated that the location of the mentor, local or distance, was not as important as other factors (e.g., being blind and being in the same career field) to benefits received from the overall mentoring process.

What Does This Mean For Me as a College Student Who is Legally Blind?

1. **Seek career mentoring throughout your college experience.** Career mentoring is a continual process and should begin as early as possible. The longer you receive mentoring, the more career exploration and skill development you can gain prior to your post-graduation job search.
2. **Students of all ages can benefit from a career mentor relationship.** If you are an older, non-traditional college student or job seeker, a mentoring relationship may be very helpful for you. If you lost your vision later in life and are making a career change, working with a blind mentor may be especially valuable.

3. **Talk to your VR counselor about getting involved with area business professionals.** Professionals who are BVI are extremely interested in mentoring students and offering guidance throughout the employment process. Ask for referrals to local professionals in your career field who are BVI, and find out if mentor groups or interactive learning communities are available in your region.
4. **Consider a distance mentor.** If a local mentor in your career field is not available, consider finding a mentor in another location. AFB's CareerConnect can help with that.

What Does This Mean For Me as a Service Provider?

1. **Encourage student consumers to seek career mentoring throughout the college experience.** Career mentoring for college students who are BVI is a continual process and should begin as early as possible. This study involved a year of participation prior to graduation. A longer mentoring timeline could allow for further career exploration and skill development.
2. **Students of all ages can benefit from a career mentor relationship.** Although our study limited the age for student participants, a strong interest to work with a mentor was expressed by many older students. Older students who are BVI noted challenges for returning to school and pursuing new careers similar to other students; in addition, older students listed changes in technology and transferring existing job skills as distinct challenges. Remember to consider older students for participation in mentoring relationships and programs too. They may be particularly valuable for students who lost their vision as adults.
3. **Involve area business professionals.** Professionals who are BVI that we contacted expressed interest in mentoring students and offering guidance throughout the employment process. This interest continues, as most of the student and mentor participants plan to stay in contact with each other after the year-long study. Suggest career mentoring for your consumers who are students, and help them identify an appropriate mentor, or a mentoring program if one is available.
4. **Consider a distance mentor.** If a local mentor in a student's career field is not available, consider finding a mentor in another location. AFB's CareerConnect can help with that.

How Was This Project Carried Out?

We recruited 51 college students and 26 mentors from across the United States. These participants took part in a year-long study that included several evaluations and reports for sharing information and feedback about their experience working with or without a mentor.

Learn More

The NRTC provides employment and mentoring resources to help guide the mentoring and job hunting process: Employment Mentoring Manual and Resource Sheet for Job Seekers.

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For more information about the mentoring project, see the project overview page: An Employment Mentoring Project for College Students who are Blind

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