



NATIONAL RESEARCH
& TRAINING CENTER
ON BLINDNESS & LOW VISION

Employment Mentoring Manual



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Living, and Rehabilitation Research

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Table of Contents

Introduction	5
Section 1: Understanding Career Mentoring	5
What Is a Career Mentor?	5
Types of Mentoring	6
Benefits of Career Mentoring	6
Section 2: Finding and Connecting with a Mentor	7
How People Connect with Mentors	7
How Many Mentors Should I Have?	7
Should My Mentor Be Blind or Have Low Vision?	7
Should My Mentor Be in My Career Field?	8
What Matters Most in Selecting a Mentor?	8
Section 3: What Makes a Mentoring Relationship Effective	8
Focus on Career Support and Role Modeling	8
Keep the Relationship Primarily Professional	9
Practical Guidance for Mentors	9
Mentoring Relationship Quality	9
Communication Frequency	10
Section 4: Recommendations for the Mentoring Relationship	10
Shared Responsibilities	10
Responsibilities of Mentors	10
Responsibilities of Mentees	11
Section 5: For Program Developers - Setting Up a Mentoring Program	11
Program Design Considerations	11
Matching Mentors and Mentees	12
1. Prioritize values similarity above all else.	12
2. Consider matching on B/LV status.	12
3. Career field match should also be considered.	12
4. Demographic matching (gender, race) is less important.	13
Mentor Training	13
Mentee Orientation	13
Section 6: Discussion Topics for Mentors and Mentees	13
Disability Disclosure	14
Questions to consider	14

Resources	14
Accommodation Planning	14
Questions to consider	14
Accommodation examples	14
Resources	15
Assistive Technology and Technology Skills	15
Questions to consider	15
Resources	15
Blindness Skills	15
Questions to consider	15
Resources	16
Getting Established in an Organization	16
Topics to address	16
Resources	16
Social Skills and Professional Behavior	16
Topics to address	16
Resources	16
Networking and Career Advancement	17
Topics to address	17
Resources	17
Transportation	17
Topics to address	17
Resources	17
Section 7: Job Seeking Activities	17
Career Planning	17
Questions to consider	17
Resources	18
Job Shadowing	18
Resources	18
Job Seeking Skills	18
Resources	18
Getting Assistance for the Job Search	18
Topics to address	18
Resources	18

Additional Resources	19
Appendix A.....	19
Appendix B.....	19
Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ-21).....	19
Life Values Inventory (LVI)	19

Introduction

This manual is designed to help professionals, organizations, mentors, and mentees strengthen employment mentoring supports for individuals who are blind or have low vision (B/LV). It provides practical guidance for setting up mentoring structures, supporting mentors and mentees with clear expectations and boundaries, and important topics for mentoring conversations and activities to promote career success. This manual uses the terms “employment mentoring” and “career mentoring” interchangeably to refer to this type of mentoring relationship.

This manual draws on findings from two research studies conducted by the National Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision (NRTC), focusing on career mentoring for people who are B/LV: an earlier study of mentoring among college students, and a more recent study of mentoring among adults (see [Appendix A](#)).

The first study involved employment mentoring for college students who are B/LV. That project paired students with mentors in their fields of interest and engaged them in activities such as job shadowing, career planning, and discussions related to accommodations, assistive technology, and workplace expectations.

The second study examined career mentoring among adults who are B/LV through surveys of adults aged 30 to 70 who had ever had a career mentor. This study explored how adults connected with mentors, what characteristics made mentoring relationships most effective, and how mentoring support functions relate to relationship quality and job satisfaction. The recommendations in this manual are grounded in findings from both NRTC studies.

Because mentoring needs and dynamics may differ between youth and adults, the manual includes guidance relevant to each group, as well as guidance that applies to both. The goal is to provide mentors, mentees, families, professionals, and program staff with evidence-based guidance that supports effective mentoring for people who are B/LV at different stages of career development.

Section 1: Understanding Career Mentoring

What Is a Career Mentor?

Mentoring is a developmental relationship in which an experienced person offers support or guidance to help a mentee explore life or career events or transitions. Mentoring relationships typically involve a one-on-one relationship focused on the mentee's needs, with mentors encouraging mentees to develop to their fullest potential while helping them set and achieve realistic goals.

A career mentor is a person who serves as a role model and provides support, direction, and feedback regarding career plans or employment. This is a more specific role than general mentoring, which can involve many aspects of a person's life. Career mentoring focuses on professional development – helping someone navigate the world

of work, build the skills and connections needed to succeed in their chosen field, and develop a clearer sense of their professional identity and goals.

Types of Mentoring

Mentoring relationships can form in different ways, and understanding these distinctions can help mentors and mentees establish realistic expectations for how the relationship will function. Most mentoring relationships fall into one of two categories: formal or informal.

- **Formal mentoring:** Formal mentoring typically occurs within a structured program in which mentors and mentees are paired by a third party and follow program-defined expectations.
- **Informal mentoring:** Informal mentoring develops naturally through shared interests, professional interactions, or personal rapport.

Both forms of mentoring can play a meaningful role in supporting the career development of people who are B/LV. Research on adults who are B/LV found that informal mentors were more common and more likely to be identified as the most influential mentor. Most adults reported having more than one career mentor over their lifetime. This finding suggests that while formal programs are valuable, particularly for helping people get started, but mentors and programs should also encourage mentees to identify and cultivate informal mentoring relationships in their workplaces and professional networks. If you are seeking a mentor, see [Section 2](#) for suggestions on finding an informal mentor.

Benefits of Career Mentoring

Mentoring has been shown to improve employment outcomes for people in general, and research across both NRTC studies confirms its value for people who are B/LV specifically.

For youth and students, career mentors can:

- Help with developing career-related goals
- Provide job shadowing experiences
- Assist with job seeking and job placement activities
- Discuss blindness-related topics specific to their career field
- Provide information about job accommodations
- Give tips for interviewing and disability disclosure
- Coach how to network with professionals in a chosen field
- Provide encouragement and support for the job-seeking process

For adults, career mentors have been found most helpful for:

- Building self-confidence in the workplace
- Developing new knowledge and skills
- Performing the job more efficiently

- Getting established in an organization
- Networking and career goal setting
- Navigating career advancement

Adults in our research also received help with disability-specific topics such as accommodations, assistive technology, disclosure, and connecting to agencies serving people who are B/LV, though help with these topics was less commonly received than the career-focused areas listed above.

Section 2: Finding and Connecting with a Mentor

This section is designed for individuals seeking a career mentor.

How People Connect with Mentors

Research on adults who are B/LV found that most people connected with their most influential mentor through their workplace or through a professional network or organization. Fewer connected through agencies or organizations serving people who are B/LV. This suggests that while organizations for the blind are one avenue for finding a mentor, mentees should also actively look within their own workplaces and professional communities.

Common ways to connect with a mentor:

- Through your workplace (a supervisor, co-worker, or other professional contact)
- Through a professional organization or network in your career field
- Through personal connections
- Through a university or college
- Through a vocational rehabilitation agency or organization serving people who are B/LV
- Through a formal mentoring program

How Many Mentors Should I Have?

Research found that most adults who are B/LV had more than one career mentor over their lifetime, with an average of about two to three. Having multiple mentors is beneficial because different mentors can offer different types of support. For example, a mentor with B/LV may be especially valuable as a role model, while a mentor in your career field may offer the most relevant career-specific guidance. Any mentor may be able to help you think about how to identify and connect with additional informal mentors in your field or workplace.

Should My Mentor Be Blind or Have Low Vision?

Many formal mentoring programs for people who are B/LV are dedicated to matching mentees with B/LV mentors. Research found that having a mentor who is also B/LV was

associated with higher perceived career helpfulness and with stronger role modeling support. Seeing a successful professional who shares your lived experience of vision loss can be powerful – it can shape your understanding of what is possible in your own career.

That said, having a mentor who is B/LV is not required for a strong, effective mentoring relationship. The research found that shared values, not shared disability, was the strongest predictor of mentoring effectiveness. A mentor who does not have B/LV but who shares your general outlook and professional values can be just as helpful to your overall career success.

Should My Mentor Be in My Career Field?

Most adults in our research had a mentor who worked in the same career field, and most rated this as important. However, being in the same career field was not associated with higher perceptions of career success helpfulness in our research. Career field match is a reasonable consideration when selecting a mentor, and it may be more important for some people than others, depending on the help you want from a mentor. Just be aware that successful career mentoring relationships do not require your mentor to be in the same career field.

What Matters Most in Selecting a Mentor?

Values similarity is the most important matching factor. NRTC research found that the greater the perceived similarity in outlook, perspectives, and values between mentees and their mentor, the more likely they were to rate the mentoring relationship as extremely helpful to their overall career success. This perceived similarity was also important across all mentoring support functions – career support, role modeling, and psychosocial support.

When looking for or selecting a mentor, consider asking:

- Do we share similar professional values and a similar outlook on work?
- Do we see things in a similar way?
- Do I respect how this person has approached their career?

These questions matter more than whether the mentor has the same disability, works in the same field, or shares your gender or background.

Section 3: What Makes a Mentoring Relationship Effective

Focus on Career Support and Role Modeling

Research on adults who are B/LV found that the most effective mentoring relationships focused on career support and role modeling. These are the mentoring functions most strongly linked to relationship quality and, ultimately, to job satisfaction.

- **Career support:** Career support includes helping the mentee navigate career challenges, providing information and resources, making professional introductions, and offering feedback on career decisions.
- **Role modeling:** Role modeling involves the mentor demonstrating professional behavior, sharing their own career experiences, and serving as an example of what is possible, particularly important when the mentor shares the mentee's experience of vision loss.

Keep the Relationship Primarily Professional

Findings from the study of adults with B/LV suggest that mentoring relationships with high levels of close personal friendship are associated with lower relationship quality and job satisfaction, compared to relationships that prioritize career support and role modeling. Although rapport and comfort with the mentor are important, focusing the relationship on career guidance and professional development, rather than on building a close friendship, may result in a more effective career mentoring relationship.

Adults who are B/LV and employed tend to have established social support networks. What they may need most from a career mentor is candid professional guidance, career-relevant information, and examples of professional success. A relationship that leans heavily toward friendship or becomes primarily social may shift time and attention away from the career support that is most valuable to people who are B/LV in a career mentoring relationship.

Practical Guidance for Mentors

Keep interactions focused on career goals, professional development, and workplace navigation. Offer encouragement and genuine interest in your mentee's progress, but maintain a professional tone. Provide honest, constructive feedback, which is easier to do when the relationship remains professional rather than primarily personal.

Mentoring Relationship Quality

The quality of the mentoring relationship – meaning how satisfied the mentee is with the relationship overall and how well it has met their expectations – linked mentoring support to job satisfaction. It is not enough just to have a mentor; the quality of the relationship needs to be good.

NRTC research indicated that relationship quality is shaped by:

- The degree to which mentor and mentee share values and outlook
- The level of career support and role modeling the mentor provides
- Regular and consistent communication

But this is not an exhaustive list; other factors not measured in the study certainly matter.

Communication Frequency

NRTC research found that frequent communication between mentor and mentee was associated with better career support. While there is no single right answer for how often to communicate, more frequent contact – at least biweekly, and ideally weekly or more – is generally better. Mentors and mentees should agree on a communication schedule at the outset and revisit it as needed.

Section 4: Recommendations for the Mentoring Relationship

Shared Responsibilities

Successful mentoring relationships are collaborative. Both mentors and mentees share responsibility for maintaining communication, setting goals, and honoring agreed-upon expectations.

- Establish expectations about frequency and format of contact and revisit them as needed.
- Maintain regular communication – at least biweekly – using agreed-upon methods (phone, virtual, in-person, or a combination).
- Set aside time for the mentoring relationship and respond to correspondence in a timely manner.
- Respect one another's time, schedules, and commitments. Do not be late or miss appointments.
- Come prepared for discussions and activities.
- Keep the relationship primarily focused on career and professional development goals.
- Communicate openly about challenges, questions, or changes in availability.
- Recognize that mentoring needs may evolve over time.

Responsibilities of Mentors

Mentors play an important role in guiding, supporting, and modeling professional behavior.

- Provide guidance based on your own experience in finding and maintaining employment. Be positive, supportive, and enthusiastic.
- Focus primarily on career support, such as sharing information, resources, professional connections, and feedback on career decisions. Personal rapport is good and needed, but professional topics should remain the priority.
- Be intentional about role modeling. Share your own career experiences openly, including how you have navigated challenges related to vision loss if applicable. Your mentee may benefit greatly from seeing how you have approached your career.

- Help your mentee think about building a broader network of mentors. A formal mentoring relationship is a good starting point, but most adults benefit from having multiple mentors across their career.
- Problem solve together. Listen carefully and offer possible solutions without passing judgment.
- Respect the mentee as a unique individual and give constructive feedback when needed. Avoid criticizing, preaching, or lecturing.
- Remember that people who are B/LV have different experiences, and accommodations and approaches are not one size fits all. Your mentee may have different or more current ideas for accomplishing tasks.
- Encourage mentees to discuss concerns and ask questions.
- Avoid giving personal advice about controversial topics (dating, politics, family matters).
- Avoid pressuring mentees to join any specific consumer organization.

Responsibilities of Mentees

- Get to know your mentor. Share a little about yourself and your career goals early in the relationship.
- Think about what you want from the relationship and communicate those needs clearly.
- Be open to advice and guidance from your mentor.
- Be a positive, engaged participant – come with questions, contribute to discussions, and take part in planned activities.
- Respect your mentor as an individual and respect their time.
- Keep the relationship centered on career and professional goals. Your mentor is not a therapist or substitute for other forms of personal support, but they can offer advice on a wide range of career-related topics.
- Consider how your formal mentor might help you identify and connect with additional informal mentors in your field or workplace.

Section 5: For Program Developers - Setting Up a Mentoring Program

Program Design Considerations

Mentoring programs for people who are B/LV can take many forms. When designing a program, consider the following:

- **Define the purpose and population.** Determine whether the program will be for transition-age youth, adults entering the workforce, or experienced workers seeking career advancement. The needs and dynamics will differ across these groups.

- **Decide on program structure.** Determine whether the program will use formal matching, focus on helping participants identify and connect with informal mentors, or both. Research suggests that informal mentors are often the most influential, so programs may consider supporting participants in developing informal mentoring relationships in addition to, or instead of, formal matching.
- **Set clear expectations for duration and communication.** A formalized mentoring relationship should begin with an established timeline so both parties understand the length of commitment. At the end of that period, a more informal relationship can be continued if both parties agree.
- **Plan for ongoing support.** Mentors and mentees benefit from resources, check-ins, and access to support when questions arise.

Matching Mentors and Mentees

Matching is one of the most important decisions a mentoring program makes, and research offers guidance on prioritizing matches.

1. Prioritize values similarity above all else.

Values similarity – shared outlook, perspective, and ways of seeing the world – was the strongest predictor of mentoring effectiveness. Programs should use a values assessment or profile to identify compatibility before making matches. One option is the [Portrait Values Questionnaire](#) (see [Appendix B](#) for access information), a well-validated measure of personal values (e.g., self-direction, achievement) that can help gauge overall outlook and compatibility between potential mentors and mentees. Programs can use responses to this or a similar values assessment, such as the [Life Values Inventory](#) (see [Appendix B](#)), as the primary basis for matching.

2. Consider matching on B/LV status.

Having a mentor who is also B/LV is associated with stronger role modeling and higher perceived career helpfulness. Many programs for people who are B/LV already prioritize this match, and the research supports its value – particularly for role modeling. However, values similarity should be weighted more heavily than shared disability when making a match.

3. Career field match should also be considered.

Most mentees value being matched with someone in their career field or industry. Among adults who are B/LV, those whose mentor shared their career field were more likely to rate that match as important than those whose mentor also had a visual impairment were to rate shared disability as important. This finding differs from an earlier NRTC study of college students who are B/LV, in which participants rated having a mentor who is also B/LV as more important than sharing a career field.

4. Demographic matching (gender, race) is less important.

Research does not support prioritizing gender or racial matching. These demographic similarities were not associated with mentoring outcomes in our study of adults who are B/LV, nor are they typically associated in other mentoring research.

Mentor Training

Mentor training should address the following:

- **Role clarity.** Clarify what the mentor role involves: career support, role modeling, and professional guidance – not friendship or personal counseling.
- **Career support skills.** Help mentors understand how to share career information and resources, make professional introductions, and provide constructive feedback.
- **Role modeling.** Encourage mentors to share their own career experiences openly. Mentees benefit from seeing how mentors have navigated workplace challenges, including those related to vision loss (if applicable).
- **Respecting individual differences.** Help mentors understand that mentees' experiences, accommodations, and approaches to blindness or low vision vary widely. They should avoid assuming a one-size-fits-all approach.
- **Keeping interactions professional.** Train mentors to maintain a professional focus and to resist drifting toward primarily social interaction.
- **Communication.** Encourage regular, consistent communication. Discuss how to establish a communication schedule with the mentee.
- **Supporting broader networks.** Encourage mentors to help their mentees identify and connect with informal mentors.

Mentee Orientation

Mentee orientation should address the following:

- What to expect from a career mentoring relationship
- How to communicate goals and needs to the mentor
- How to access program support when needed
- How the formal mentoring relationship can serve as a foundation for building informal mentoring connections
- The value of having multiple mentors across a career

Section 6: Discussion Topics for Mentors and Mentees

The following topics are recommended for discussion during the mentoring relationship. Not all topics will apply to every mentee, and the relevance of each will vary depending on career stage, level of vision loss, and individual circumstances. Mentors and mentees should work together to identify the most relevant topics for the mentee. Some

resources listed under a specific topic may also be relevant to other topics in this section; these lists are meant as a starting point rather than an exhaustive directory of discussion topics.

Disability Disclosure

Mentor and mentee can discuss how and when to disclose a visual impairment in career-related situations, such as job interviews or when requesting accommodations.

Questions to consider

- How did/does the mentor handle disclosure in their own career?
- What are the potential benefits and risks of disclosure in different situations?
- How can the mentee communicate their disability, needs, skills, and abilities effectively?

Resources

- [Department of Labor \(DOL\) Youth, Disclosure, and the Workplace](#)
- [Job Accommodation Network \(JAN\) Disability Disclosure](#)
- [NRTC Who Needs to Know? When and How to Disclose Vision Impairment](#)
- [VCU Disclosure Decisions to Get the Job](#)

Accommodation Planning

Mentor and mentee can discuss what accommodations are needed on a day-to-day basis and the procedures for requesting accommodations on the job.

Questions to consider

- What specific job tasks are affected by vision loss?
- What accommodations are available to address these challenges?
- Has the mentee worked with an employer or vocational rehabilitation counselor to identify and request accommodations?

Accommodation examples

Accessing printed materials:

- Optical character recognition (OCR) software
- Braille formatted documents
- Closed-circuit television or electronic magnification devices
- Qualified human reader

Accessing computer information:

- Screen reading software (third-party or built-in)
- Refreshable braille display
- Magnification software (third-party or built-in)

Writing notes and completing forms:

- Electronic note-taking devices with speech output or braille display
- Digital recorders, smartphones, or other smart devices for personal notes
- Braille slate and stylus

Accommodations are not limited to technology. A vocational rehabilitation counselor or employer's accommodation process can also help identify options such as workplace modifications (e.g., desk location, lighting, or reassignment of certain duties or tasks).

Resources

- [ADA National Network Fact Sheet: Reasonable Accommodations in the Workplace](#)
- [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission \(EEOC\) Visual Disabilities in the Workplace and the ADA](#)
- [Job Accommodation Network \(JAN\) Blindness and the ADA](#)
- [JAN Low Vision and the ADA](#)

Assistive Technology and Technology Skills

Mentor and mentee can discuss which assistive technology (AT) the mentee currently uses, how those skills transfer to the work setting, and whether additional training or new technology would be helpful.

Questions to consider

- What AT does the mentee currently use, and is it sufficient for the demands of their job?
- Does the mentee need training on new or updated technology?
- How is the mentee's employer supporting AT access in the workplace?

Resources

- [American Foundation for the Blind \(AFB\) Technology Resources for People with Vision Loss](#)
- [American Printing House for the Blind \(APH\) Connect Center Products and Technology](#)
- [Hadley – free workshops on technology and accessibility](#)
- [NTAC Blindness-Related Products and Services](#)

Blindness Skills

Mentor and mentee can discuss blindness-related skills specific to the career and whether the mentee would benefit from additional training in this area.

Questions to consider

- Does the mentee use braille, and is their proficiency sufficient for their work?

- What orientation and mobility skills does the mentee have, and are these sufficient for navigating their work environment?
- Would the mentee benefit from additional skills training through a vocational rehabilitation agency or other provider?

Resources

- [Rehabilitation Services Administration: State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies](#)
- [APH Orientation and Mobility: Getting Around](#)
- [Hadley – free workshops on braille and daily living](#)

Getting Established in an Organization

For mentees who are new to a job or organization, mentor and mentee can discuss strategies for becoming established and effective in the workplace.

Topics to address

- Learning the culture and expectations of a new workplace
- Building relationships with supervisors and colleagues
- Navigating the physical work environment
- Communicating proactively with an employer about access needs
- Performing core job functions efficiently and independently

Resources

- [APH Connect Center Job Seeker's Toolkit](#)
- [APH Employment Skills for People who are B/LV](#)

Social Skills and Professional Behavior

Mentor can discuss how they have navigated social situations at work and in other professional settings, and can give mentee advice for navigating different situations – especially when starting a new job.

Topics to address

- Professional communication norms (email, meetings, phone)
- Social interactions at work, including events and informal settings
- The role of social media in professional life and its potential impact on employment

Resources

- [APH Career Connect: Social Skills Lesson Plans](#)
- [AccessATE Workplace Communication for B/LV Employees](#)
- [DOL Soft Skills: The Competitive Edge](#)

Networking and Career Advancement

Mentor and mentee can discuss strategies for building a professional network and advancing in a career. Research found that networking was one of the most commonly helpful areas mentors addressed with adult mentees.

Topics to address

- How to identify and join relevant professional organizations
- How to build and maintain professional relationships
- How to use networking to identify career opportunities
- How to approach career advancement conversations with employers
- How to identify additional mentors within a career field or workplace

Resources

- [APH Principles for Expanding Your Professional Network When You Are B/LV](#)

Transportation

Mentor and mentee can discuss transportation options for getting to and from work and other career-related activities.

Topics to address

- Public transportation options in the mentee's area
- Rideshare, paratransit, carpooling, and other alternatives
- Strategies for navigating transportation challenges when relocating for work

Resources

- [NRTC Transportation Guide](#)

Section 7: Job Seeking Activities

The following activities are particularly relevant to college students and young adults preparing to enter the workforce. They are also relevant to adults planning a career change.

Career Planning

The mentor can help the mentee develop career-related goals and think through the steps needed to achieve them.

Questions to consider

- What type of job does the mentee want after graduation?
- What specialties exist within the chosen career area?
- What relevant work experience does the mentee have?

- Has the mentee connected with their university career center?

Resources

- [APH Connect Center Job Seeker's Toolkit](#)
- [CareerOneStop: Explore Careers](#)

Job Shadowing

The mentee can engage in job shadowing at the mentor's workplace to observe work activities and develop a realistic understanding of the job. If the mentor and mentee are not in the same location, the mentor may encourage job shadowing and help the mentee find someone local to job-shadow.

Resources

- [Indeed.com: How to Job Shadow](#)

Job Seeking Skills

The mentor can assist the mentee with online job searches, updating their resume, filling out applications, and understanding the job market.

Resources

- [APH Career Connect: Conducting a Successful Job Search](#)
- [CareerOneStop: Job Search Tips](#)
- [NRTC Fact Sheet – Resume Facts That Matter: Insights for B/LV Job Seekers](#)

Getting Assistance for the Job Search

The mentor can guide the mentee in networking activities and connecting with relevant services and organizations.

Topics to address

- Identifying and joining professional organizations
- Connecting with vocational rehabilitation services
- Contacting the university career center
- Identifying employers who actively recruit candidates with disabilities

Resources

- [Rehabilitation Services Administration: State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies](#)
- [DOL Workforce Recruitment Program](#)
- [CareerOneStop: Toolkit](#)

Additional Resources

- [NRTC 4to24 App](#)
- [NRTC Navigating VR Services](#)
- [NRTC Resource Sheet for Job Seekers](#)
- [NTAC Continuing Education Courses](#)
- [NTAC Finding a Job](#)
- [American Council of the Blind \(ACB\) Peer Support & Mentoring](#)
- [National Federation of the Blind \(NFB\) Employment-Related Resources](#)

Appendix A

The following research informed the guidance in this manual.

- Antonelli, K., O'Mally, J., & Steverson, A. (2018). Participant experiences in an employment mentoring program for college students with visual impairments. *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness*, 112(3), 274-286.
- Antonelli, K., Steverson, A., & O'Mally, J. (2018). College graduates with visual impairments: A report on seeking and finding employment. *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness*, 112(1), 33-45.
- Boydstun, J., & McDonnall, M. C. (in press). Career mentoring experience and perceptions of career helpfulness among adults with visual impairments. *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness*.

Appendix B

The following information provides instructions for accessing the values assessments suggested in the [Matching Mentors and Mentees](#) section.

Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ-21)

To access the PVQ-21, visit <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/orpc/vol2/iss2/9/> and scroll to the “ESS21 (PVQ21)” section. Download the “[English m&f](#)” file for the questionnaire and “[0 Coding and syntax](#)” for coding and scoring instructions.

Life Values Inventory (LVI)

The LVI is available at <https://www.lifevaluesinventory.org/>, and requires creating a free account to access and learn more about the online assessment. Those interested in using the assessment to match mentors and mentees may also find the following PDF version helpful: <https://campus.kennesaw.edu/current-students/academics/academic-advising/owl-advising/docs/life-values-inventory.pdf>.