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STUDENT LEADERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PEER MENTORING IN AN INCLUSIVE CAMPUS ORGANIZATION

Carly B. Gilson, The Ohio State University
Luis Morissette, University of Idaho
Sehrish Shikarpurya, University of Maryland
Ghazaleh Raei Dehaghi, The Ohio State University
Anna Fedewa, Princeton University

Peer mentors facilitate access and social integration for college students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) in inclusive postsecondary programs. There is limited research regarding how these experiences are shaped within student-led campus activities rather than a formal staff-facilitated mentorship structure. This study used a multi-year survey to explore how two cohorts of college student leaders in a registered student organization (N = 69) perceived the personal, professional, and relational impact of their peer mentoring roles during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mentors reported high levels of perceived impact in the areas of interpersonal connection, advocacy, and personal development. Mentors described their relationships with students with IDD in ways that reflect elements of friendship, while noting tensions with role expectations and boundaries. These findings suggest that student-led mentoring organizations may serve as unique contexts for co-curricular engagement and leadership development. Implications are discussed for campus activities professionals and university staff.

The landscape of modern higher education emphasizes the role of co-curricular engagement in promoting student success, leadership development, and a sense of belonging (Astin, 1997; Strayhorn, 2018). Registered student organizations serve as primary vehicles for this engagement, as they provide avenues for college students to grow and refine their leadership skills, build peer networks, and navigate diverse social ecosystems (Dunkel et al., 2014). Involvement in student organizations offers college students an opportunity to co-create and navigate peer-to-peer environments that mirror broader societal contexts, such as workplaces or community spaces with embedded hierarchies and expectations.

Many student organizations are formed based on the traditional models of shared interests, hobbies, ideologies, or professional goals. Student organizations are often a "safe space" to support

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minoritized or historically marginalized student populations (Museus, 2013). In campus programming, peer leaders are frequently utilized to scale student support services, facilitate orientation activities, and broker campus life for incoming students (Shook & Keup, 2012). Although these interventions are highly effective, there is an inherent tension regarding the professionalization of peer relationships that reduces the "peer" element. In other words, when volunteers are placed in a formalized "peer mentor" or "support role," an artificial social hierarchy emerges that can transform the possibility of an organic friendship into a transactional, compliance-driven task for the peers involved (Newton & Ender, 2010). It is important to examine how this hierarchy emerges in the context of student organizations developed with the explicit mission of promoting friendships and inclusion on campus for non-traditional, marginalized students. Specifically, this need is made more essential given the rapidly evolving nature of inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs, which have introduced an entirely new subsect of diverse learners to college campuses who have historically been excluded from collegiate pursuits and activities (Grigal et al., 2022).

The expansion of inclusive higher education in the United States for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) has made an indelible impact on college and university campuses within the past two decades. The passage of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA, 2008) extended access to individuals with IDD by providing incentives for institutions to offer collegiate opportunities for individuals with IDD (Lee, 2009). There are now more than 375 postsecondary programs in the United States serving students with IDD housed at institutions of higher education (Think College, n.d.). The "inclusive" element of most IPSE programs is often orchestrated by a network of peers without IDD who are also enrolled at the institution as degree-seeking undergraduate or graduate students. Although the exact model varies across programs, peers typically serve in a variety of paid or unpaid roles, including academic tutors, residential mentors, job coaches, or social support networks (Grigal et al., 2022).

Prior research in inclusive peer mentoring programs demonstrates personal and professional benefits for the mentors without IDD (e.g., Culnane et al., 2016; Griffin et al., 2016). Mentors describe their experiences as transformative, whereby they gained more knowledge, eliminated their biases about students with IDD, built close friendships with their mentees, and improved their social skills and networks (Wilt & Morningstar, 2020). Carter and McCabe (2021) conducted a systematic review of the rapidly growing body of literature focusing on peer perspectives within IPSE programs. Although many peers describe their mentor-mentee relationship with similar qualities of "friendship," it is important to note that much of this literature is situated within staff-directed program models in which peers often receive an incentive to participate, such as monetary compensation, course credit, or service hours (Carter & McCabe, 2021). Thus, even when friendships do emerge, the inherent nature of the formal role implies a hierarchical structure that labels the peer without IDD as a "mentor" and the peer with IDD as a "mentee." Although the

formal structure of peer support is valuable for the consistency and predictability it provides for mentees, the hierarchy hinders the extent to which reciprocal relationships can blossom based on authenticity and equity (Singh & Gilson, 2020). Prior literature suggests that reciprocity in peer relationships is shaped not only by compensation structures but also by role expectations, organizational context, and opportunities for shared decision-making (Newton & Ender, 2010).

However, far less is known about how mentors conceptualize relational impact within co-curricular settings and how these perceptions map onto broader theories of student involvement and belonging. Based on the knowledge that student organizations can serve as spaces for co-creation and leadership development (Dunkel et al., 2014), this represents an ideal setting to understand the potential for cultivating inclusive relationships. Despite their central role in fostering engagement and belonging, less is known about how student-led organizations structure peer relationships when inclusion is the mission, rather than shared interests. In particular, there is a need to better understand how these environments navigate the balance between organic relationships that blossom from shared experiences and structured support roles inherent to mentor/mentee dynamics.

Purpose of the Study

In the present study, we sought to understand the ways that student leaders conceptualize the impact of peer mentoring and how the characterization of impact differs based on whether they are considering impact on themselves or their mentees. We were particularly interested in understanding the impact within the context of the COVID-19 global pandemic, given that its longstanding disruption to typical campus life changed how college students navigated relationships. The central aim of the study was to examine how peer mentoring functions as a form of student engagement in a registered student organization. Specifically, we addressed the following research questions:

1. How do student leaders perceive the impact of their involvement in an inclusive peer mentoring student organization?
2. How do student leaders perceive the impact of their mentorship as a mechanism for facilitating access to campus life for peers with IDD?
3. How do these perceptions differ across cohorts, particularly when disrupted by a global pandemic and major institutional crisis?

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Method

Setting

All participants in the study attended a large, public research university in the south-central United States that housed a four-year IPSE program for students with IDD. The peer mentors are members of a registered student organization operating under the purview of the institution's campus activities office and supported by a faculty advisor. It is open to all undergraduate and graduate students of all majors and disciplines. Importantly, all recruitment, selection, and training of the peer mentors are led by the officers of the student organization, rather than staff members in the IPSE program. This is a key defining feature that distinguishes the context of this study from others previously explored in research (Carter & McCabe, 2021).

The primary mission of the organization is to broker campus life, facilitate social integration, and foster institutional belonging for college students with IDD enrolled in the IPSE program on campus. Specifically, the mission statement of the organization is to "help students accomplish their goals of the program and build friendships with them by providing them with individualized support and mentorship." The mentoring structure is guided by the Circle of Support model, which involves a group of people who volunteer with "varying levels of formality to support a single individual through relationships of trust and intimacy" (Bigby & Araten-Bergman, 2018, p. 3). Each IPSE student receives a circle of peers who fulfill a variety of roles across traditional collegiate routines and activities, based on their individual interests and needs. Formally assigned roles include: (a) *academic mentors* who assist with academic coursework and promote good study habits, (b) *lunch and dinner partners* who focus on social skills and healthy eating goals, (c) *wellness partners* who engage in a workout or game to encourage safe and healthy exercise habits, (d) *planning partners* who focus on organizational skills, self-advocacy skills, and financial management. Additionally, the organization has less-defined roles, broadly called "members at large," to participate in group activities or substitute for peers who cannot make their scheduled time for one week. Weekly commitments average two or more hours, depending on the peer mentor's role and how many IPSE students they support.

Participant Recruitment

All study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board. Participants were recruited from the membership roster of the student organization across two distinct operational cycles: Cohort 1 (Spring 2020) and Cohort 2 (Spring 2022). The organization had approximately 100 active members registered each year. First, we distributed a flyer, which included information about the study, the online survey link, and the researchers' information, to all members of the peer mentoring organization. We also asked the leadership team to distribute the flyers at their monthly meetings and include the study information in their weekly communications. We asked three IPSE students to distribute the study information to their circles using text messages and emails. Recruitment occurred at the end of each spring semester (e.g., March-May) and typically lasted

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two months. Of note, the analysis for the present study drew from an annual survey given by the IPSE program to understand the experiences of peer mentors. Although a survey was administered to peer mentors in Spring 2021, the data related to the present analysis were limited and not usable due to a substantial amount of missing data.

Participants

Survey respondents included 69 peer mentors, with 40 participants at Cohort 1 in Spring 2020 (C1) and 29 at Cohort 2 in Spring 2022 (C2). All participants had been mentors for at least one academic year, with 34.5% of participants in C2 who had mentored for two or more years. Most participants in both cohorts identified as white (90% in C1; 100% in C2) and female (85% in C1; 82.8% in C2). Mentors were varied in their major of study, including education (40% in C1; 24.1% in C2), health sciences (20% in C1; 27.6% in C2), liberal arts and social sciences (17.5% in C1; 17.2% in C2), biological sciences (10% in C1; 20.7% in C2), business (10% in C1; 3% in C2), and engineering (2.5% in C1; 0% in C2).

All peer mentors with formal roles were paired with one IPSE student at C1. During C2, they were paired with either one (69%) or two IPSE students (31%) and served in a variety of roles. They served in various mentoring capacities, including as lunch or dinner partner (32.5% in C1; 27.6% in C2), wellness partner (22.5% in C1; 20.7% in C2), academic support (15% in C1; 27.6% in C2), planning partner (17.5% in C1; 13.8% in C2), and officer in the organization (5% in C1; 17.2% in C2). A smaller group (22.5% in C1; 6.9% in C2) participated as members at large, engaging informally with multiple students without specific assignments to IPSE students. See Table 1 for the full demographic summary table.

Table 1

Survey Participant Demographics

Item	Spring 2020 (C1)		Spring 2022 (C2)	
	N	(%)	N	(%)
Gender				
Female	34	85	24	82.8
Male	6	15	4	13.8
Other	0		1	3.4
Race/Ethnicity				

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Item	Spring 2020 (C1)		Spring 2022 (C2)	
	N	(%)	N	(%)
White	36	90	29	100
Asian	1	2.5	0	0
Other	3	7.5	0	0
Mentorship Entry Time				
Fall 2019	40	100	6	20.7
Spring 2020	0	0	4	13.8
Fall 2020	0	0	3	10.3
Spring 2021	0	0	5	17.2
Fall 2021	0	0	11	37.9
Class Year				
Freshman	6	15	1	3.4
Sophomore	11	27.5	8	27.6
Junior	15	37.5	12	41.4
Senior	7	17.5	7	24.1
Graduate Student	1	2.5	1	3.4
Mentor Role				
Planning Partner	7	17.5	4	13.8
Academic Support	6	15	8	27.6
Wellness Partner	9	22.5	6	20.7
Lunch/Dinner Partner	13	32.5	8	27.6
Member at Large (non-assigned role)	9	22.5	2	6.9
Officer/Leader	2	5	5	17.2

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Item	Spring 2020 (C1)		Spring 2022 (C2)	
	N	(%)	N	(%)
Major				
Business	4	10	3	10.3
Education	16	40	7	24.1
Health Sciences	8	20	8	27.6
Liberal Arts and Social Sciences	7	17.5	5	17.2
Biological Science	4	10	6	20.7
Engineering	1	2.5	0	0

Note. The percentages of mentor roles may exceed 100% as individuals may have assumed multiple roles simultaneously.

Survey Instrument

We adapted an existing measure (Carter et al., 2019) to develop a survey that could be used annually to evaluate the experiences and perspectives of the peer mentors. The survey had six sections focused on the following topics: (a) Demographic Information, (b) Motivations for Peer Mentoring, (c) Summary of Experiences as a Peer Mentor, (d) Future Expectations of Peer Mentees, (e) Impact of Mentorship on Self, Mentees, and Campus, and (f) Feedback on IPSE Program Support. The present study's analyses focus primarily on Section E of the original survey, which relates to the impact of the peer mentor role on students, self, and the broader campus community. Participants were asked to report the perceived impact by indicating the extent of their agreement with statements provided using a 5-point Likert-type scale (5 = *Strongly Agree*, 4 = *Agree*, 3 = *Neutral*, 2 = *Disagree*, 1 = *Strongly Disagree*). In the first part of this section, participants rated the perceived impact on IPSE students (e.g., stronger academic support, more engaged in class, sense of belonging, greater feelings of inclusion on campus). There were open-ended items in which participants were given a text box to share any positive or negative impact of peer mentoring on the IPSE students. In the next section, participants rated the perceived impact on themselves using the same Likert-type scale (e.g., professional growth, developed friendships, decreased stress level, improved study skills). Similarly, there were two open-ended items in which participants could write about other positive or negative impacts that being a peer mentor had on themselves. Participants could also comment on whether or how being a peer mentor has shaped their career path or influenced future plans.

The first survey was administered in March 2020, during a period in which the world was still beginning to understand the long-term impact of the pandemic. As such, the peer mentors' responses describing their involvement in the present academic year were mostly framed *before* the onset of the pandemic, when most students were abruptly sent home for "spring break" and did not return to campus until August 2020. We revised the survey prior to C2 to add items related to online/virtual interactions to better understand the experiences of peer mentors within the virtual context. Specifically, we refined the items asking about peer mentor responsibilities and time spent with their mentee to include "virtual time" together, such as talking on the phone, video calls, or text messaging.

Before administering the first surveys in 2020, we asked two peer mentors from the leadership team (e.g., president and vice-president) to pilot the survey for feasibility, language, consistency, and contextual appropriateness. They offered suggestions to simplify the language of the survey items, add options for open-ended responses, and define intellectual and developmental disabilities for participants. The complete online survey took approximately 25-35 minutes to complete. Survey peer mentors had the option to enter into a drawing to be one of 20 participants randomly selected to receive a $25 Amazon gift card.

Research Design and Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

We conducted a descriptive, multi-year survey using trend grouping and repeated measures (Lynn, 2009). In trend grouping, similar samples are surveyed at each time point with repeated measures, but the peer mentors in the sampling units may be different. This approach allowed us to track overall trends and compare changes between groups while accounting for the differences in cohorts. We used descriptive statistics (quantitative) for ordinal responses and direct content analysis for open-ended responses (qualitative).

We analyzed the quantitative data using SPSS. First, we conducted Cronbach's alpha for survey items related to the perceived impact on peer mentors. Survey items assessing the impact on mentees demonstrated strong reliability (α= .827, N = 13). Similarly, items measuring the impact on mentors demonstrated robust reliability (α= .817, N = 13 items). Second, we calculated descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation, to understand peer mentors' perceived impact of the program. Given the modest sample size and ordinal nature of the data, we used the Mann-Whitney U test to explore the perceived impact between the two mentor cohorts (C1 vs. C2). This test was selected considering the non-normal distribution of the data as indicated by significant results from both Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests ($p < .001$ for all variables) and the ordinal nature of the survey responses. This non-parametric test was selected due to its appropriateness for comparing two independent samples where the assumption of normality is not met (Hart, 2001). We grouped the data based on the survey timepoints and examined differences in responses using the selected test criteria.

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Based on a review of the extant literature (e.g., Carter & McCabe, 2021), we developed a priori hypotheses, in which we hypothesized that peer mentors would report higher levels of impact related broadly to societal and professional influences for themselves (e.g., increased awareness, increased advocacy skills) and higher levels of direct social impact (e.g., having fun) and academic growth (e.g., class engagement) for the mentees.

Qualitative Analysis

We used qualitative content analyses to code the open-ended responses in which participants described the positive and negative impact of being a peer mentor on themselves, the mentees, and the broader campus community (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Participants also commented on how these mentorship experiences shaped their career paths or plans. The first author reviewed the open-ended responses and clustered them into primary and secondary code categories, where applicable. The third author reviewed the categories and indicated agreement or disagreement. We discussed disagreements to establish consensus.

Results

How do Student Leaders Perceive the Impact of their Involvement in an Inclusive Peer Mentoring Student Organization?

Peer mentors' perceptions of impact were compared across two time points to explore how they evolved over time. Overall, mentors indicated the highest degree of agreement with the following types of impact: having fun (M = 4.95; C1), growing as an advocate for people with IDD (M = 4.90; C2), and developing friendships with their mentees (M = 4.88, C1). Areas with the lowest levels of impact reported pertained to the extent to which the experience of being a mentor improved their social status (M = 3.15; C1); improved their study skills (M = 3.24; C2); and decreased their stress levels (M = 3.41; C2). Table 2 summarizes the perceived impact of being a peer mentor on themselves in professional and personal ways at C1 and C2.

Peer mentors could use the open responses to share any other types of impact of being a peer mentor that they considered to be "positive" or "negative." "Positive" impact was related to friendship (n = 6), social connection (n = 4), patience (n = 3), learning to advocate (n = 2), shared passion (n = 2), stress relief (n = 1), and positive outlook (n = 1). One peer mentor wrote, "My relationship with my [mentee] is something that will last a lifetime. I am very confident that I will invite my [mentee] to my wedding one day." An education major commented, "I think it is really important for future teachers to learn how to advocate for all students. I think [my peer mentoring experience] helped me understand students with IDD better."

A small group of mentors described the negative impacts of being a peer mentor (n = 8). These comments pertained to the mentees refusing support, mentees not respecting their mentors' time or personal boundaries, and the tension between trying to have a "genuine friendship" and also

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being "good stewards and models." As one peer mentor wrote, "I want to provide as much support as possible, but sometimes the students did not want help or were not communicative of their needs and wants."

Participants were also asked how being a peer mentor shaped their career path or influenced their future plans. Six participants responded that the peer mentoring experience had no impact on their professional goals. Several participants described the impact of the organization on their career path of becoming a teacher (n = 5), working in medicine, allied health, or related fields to support people with disabilities (n = 4), or becoming advocates for inclusion in a different field (n = 6). One participant wrote, "It just showed me how much I love caring for other people in need and has shown me how rewarding it feels to be able to serve other people in the ways they need it most."

Table 2

Self-Perceived Impact of Peer Mentoring on Personal and Professional Development

Survey Item	Cohort	Extent of Agreement with Statement					Mean (SD)
		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	
I grew professionally.	1	70.0%	15.0%	15.0%	0%	0%	4.55 (.75)
	2	62.1%	31.0%	3.4%	3.4%	0%	4.52 (.74)
I became a better advocate for individuals with IDD.	1	82.5%	7.5%	7.5%	0%	2.5%	4.68 (.83)
	2	89.7%	10.3%	0%	0%	0%	4.90 (.31)
I had fun.	1	95.0%	5.0%	0%	0%	0%	4.95 (.22)
	2	86.2%	10.3%	3.4%	0%	0%	4.83 (.47)
I learned much more about myself.	1	65.0%	22.5%	10.0%	2.5%	0%	4.50 (.79)
	2	79.3%	13.8%	6.9%	0%	0%	4.72 (.59)
I developed friendships with [my mentees].	1	87.5.0%	12.5%	0%	0%	0%	4.88 (.34)
	2	86.2%	13.8%	0%	0%	0%	4.86 (.35)
	1	87.5.0%	10.0%	2.5%	0%	0%	4.85 (.43)

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Survey Item	Cohort	Extent of Agreement with Statement					Mean (SD)
		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	
I became more comfortable interacting with [my mentees].	2	86.2%	13.8%	0%	0%	0%	4.86 (.35)
My stress level decreased.	1	42.5%	27.5%	17.5%	10.0%	2.5%	3.98 (1.1)
	2	20.7%	24.1%	34.5%	17.2%	3.4%	3.41 (1.1)
I became more informed about the challenges and barriers faced by [my mentees].	1	77.5%	22.5%	0%	0%	0%	4.78 (.42)
	2	82.8%	17.2%	0%	0%	0%	4.83 (.39)
I gained a greater appreciation and understanding of diversity.	1	82.5%	12.5%	5.0%	0%	0%	4.78 (.53)
	2	82.8%	17.2%	0%	0%	0%	4.83 (.38)
My social status on campus improved.	1	15.0%	22.5%	40.0%	7.5%	15.0%	3.15 (1.23)
	2	31.0%	24.1%	34.5%	6.9%	3.4%	3.72 (1.10)
I developed more positive attitudes toward people with IDD.	1	67.5%	27.5%	5.0%	0%	0%	4.63 (.59)
	2	86.2%	13.8%	0%	0%	0%	4.86 (.35)
I enjoyed my college experience more.	1	87.5%	10.0%	2.5%	0%	0%	4.85 (.43)
	2	86.2%	10.3%	3.4%	0%	0%	4.83 (.47)
My study skills improved.	1	22.5%	22.5%	47.5%	0%	7.5%	3.53 (1.09)
	2	20.7%	13.8%	44.8%	10.3%	10.3%	3.24 (1.22)

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Note. Cohort 1 = 40 participants. Cohort 2 = 29 participants. Percentages are rounded to the nearest tenth decimal point. Percentages are based on the number of respondents to each item.

How do Student Leaders Perceive the Impact of their Mentorship as a Mechanism for Facilitating Access to Campus Life for Peers with IDD?

Table 3 summarizes the perceived impact that their mentorship has on their mentees in personal and professional ways at C1 and C2. Most of the types of impact evaluated were extremely high (i.e., means higher than 4.5). Mentors considered the impact on mentees to be highest across the following areas: having fun (M = 5.00; C1); strong social support (M = 4.95; C1); feeling included in campus life (M = 4.95; C1); and developing new friendships (M = 4.95; C1). The areas with relatively lower levels of mentee impact reported were related to exhibiting fewer behavior challenges (M = 3.93, C1); higher class engagement (M = 4.28; C1 and C2); and developing career-related skills (M = 4.45; C2).

In the open-ended responses, peer mentors described the perceived benefits of the peer mentoring relationship on their mentees in the IPSE program. Their responses related to friendship (n = 6), college immersion and a gateway to broader social networks (n = 8), fostering a sense of community (n = 3), and supporting the transition to college (n = 3). One peer mentor wrote, "[We] help [IPSE] students get to have the college experience like any other student." Another peer mentor commented, "I think the students feel a lot more included and accepted because of the [peer mentors]. They feel treated more 'regularly' like they should be."

Nine peer mentors provided examples of the negative impact of the peer mentoring experience on the IPSE students. These comments related to an overdependence on the peer mentors (n = 4), lack of reciprocity in friendship (n = 3), and an unequal college experience (n = 1). One peer mentor wrote, "Students can rely too much on [peer mentors] for tasks they could be completing independently." Another peer mentor commented:

> Some [mentors] might allow the [IPSE] students to do things that shouldn't be done or just allow them to sort of push the limit more than the 'normal' real world would allow… I think a lot of [mentors] are just very loving and patient with their assigned student, and this might cause more allowance for babying, whining, and things of that nature.

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Table 3

Peer Mentors' Perceived Impact on Mentees with IDD

Survey Item	Cohort	Extent of Agreement with Statement					Mean (SD)
		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	
My mentees accessed strong academic support.	1	80.0%	20.0%	0%	0%	0%	4.80 (.41)
	2	69.0%	20.7%	10.3%	0%	0%	4.59 (.68)
My mentees were more engaged in class.	1	52.5%	25.0%	20.0%	2.5%	0%	4.28 (.88)
	2	41.4%	44.8%	13.8%	0%	0%	4.28 (.70)
My mentees had access to strong social support.	1	95.0%	5.0%	0%	0%	0%	4.95 (.22)
	2	86.2%	13.8%	0%	0%	0%	4.86 (.35)
My mentees developed social and communication skills.	1	90.0%	10.0%	0%	0%	0%	4.90 (.35)
	2	89.7%	10.3%	0%	0%	0%	4.90 (.31)
My mentees developed virtual and technology-assisted social and communication skills.	1	72.5%	25.0%	2.5%	0%	0%	4.70 (.52)
	2	79.3%	20.7%	0%	0%	0%	4.79 (.41)
My mentees had fewer behavior challenges.	1	20.0%	55.0%	22.5%	2.5%	0%	3.93 (.73)
	2	37.9%	48.3%	13.8%	0%	0%	4.24 (.69)
My mentees developed independent skills.	1	82.5%	15.0%	2.5%	0%	0%	4.80 (.46)

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Survey Item	Cohort	Extent of Agreement with Statement					Mean (SD)
		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	
	2	72.4%	24.1%	3.4%	0%	0%	4.69 (.54)
My mentees developed self-determination skills.	1	67.5%	22.5%	10.0%	0%	0%	4.58 (.68)
	2	62.1%	34.5%	0%	3.4%	0%	4.55 (.69)
My mentees developed career-related skills.	1	60.0%	27.5%	12.5%	0%	0%	4.48 (.72)
	2	48.3%	48.3%	3.4%	0%	0%	4.45 (.57)
My mentees developed new friendships.	1	95.0%	5.0%	0%	0%	0%	4.95 (.22)
	2	86.2%	13.8%	0%	0%	0%	4.86 (.35)
My mentees developed a sense of belonging.	1	92.5%	7.5%	0%	0%	0%	4.93 (.27)
	2	86.2%	13.8%	0%	0%	0%	4.86 (.35)
My mentees had fun.	1	100.0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	5.00 (.00)
	2	93.1%	6.9%	0%	0%	0%	4.93 (.26)
My mentees felt included in the campus activities and culture.	1	95.0%	5.0%	0%	0%	0%	4.95 (.22)
	2	93.1%	6.9%	0%	0%	0%	4.93 (.26)

Note. Cohort 1 = 40 participants. Cohort 2 = 29 participants. Percentages are rounded to the nearest tenth decimal point. Percentages are based on the number of respondents to each item.

How Do these Perceptions Differ Across Cohorts?

Collectively, the level of impact did not change significantly across cohorts, even with the pandemic influencing how the peers could convene and communicate with one another. The only

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statistically significant difference observed was between the decreased stress levels reported by mentors in 2020 compared to 2022 ($U = 412.00$, $Z = -2.120$, $p = .034$).

While not statistically significant, other interesting trends emerged. For instance, mentors in C2 reported a greater improvement in their social status ($U = 432.50$, $Z = -1.867$, $p = .062$) and more positive attitudes toward people with IDD ($U = 467.50$, $Z = -1.823$, $p = .068$). Other measures, such as professional growth, self-awareness, and advocacy skills, remained relatively stable across time, suggesting that the benefits of being a mentor were consistent regardless of the year. However, enjoyment and the perception of personal growth showed a slight decrease, although not statistically significant. One notable, though not statistically significant, trend was the belief that students exhibited fewer behavioral challenges in C2 compared to C1 ($U = 448.00$, $Z = -1.761$, $p = .078$). While there were no significant changes in academic support, social engagement, or skill development, mentors in both years consistently perceived their role as beneficial to student success. However, slight declines were observed in areas such as perceived social support and fun. The summary tables for the inferential statistics are available on Open Science Framework in a folder titled "Supplemental Tables" at https://osf.io/pmgyx/?view_only=52216128e8a742d1b1b3246c57eb69b8

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how college student leaders within a registered student organization perceived the personal, professional, and relational impact of their involvement in an inclusive peer mentoring program for college students with IDD. As the number of IPSE programs continue to grow exponentially across the United States (Think College, n.d.), these types of peer mentoring opportunities will become more abundant for college students across a wide variety of campuses and institution types. The context of this peer mentoring model within an entirely student-led organization (i.e., rather than staff-facilitated) presents a unique opportunity to situate the study in the context of campus activities and student leadership, rather than staff-facilitated support as is typically the case in IPSE programs. Moreover, the findings of this study are especially relevant to scholars and professionals in the field of college student engagement in several important ways.

First, peer mentors characterized the impact of peer mentoring as overwhelmingly positive for themselves and their mentees. They consistently reported that their peer mentoring experience shaped their own lives in emotional, social, and professional ways, including increased opportunities for personal growth and empathy and a deeper understanding of disability. These findings align with foundational theories of student involvement, which signify the importance of meaningful engagement in campus life on identity development, skill acquisition, and social integration (Astin, 1997). Mentors emphasized relational aspects, which mirrored elements of authentic friendships more closely than fixed social hierarchies. Although these findings echo previous literature on peer mentors of students with IDD (e.g., Griffin et al., 2016; Jones et al.,

2020), the context of an entirely peer-led student organization suggests that these relationships can develop organically even in the absence of staff-imposed structures. The student organization served as a structured yet flexible environment through which peer mentors could foster connections that extended beyond task-oriented mentoring roles.

Second, perceptions generally remained positive across cohorts, even amid the COVID-19 pandemic in which increased isolation and social distancing disrupted the natural dynamic of interpersonal connections on college campuses. The stability is surprising given the added logistical challenges of sustaining relationships when campuses were closed and lockdowns were in place. However, this finding is consistent with other literature broadly examining social resilience of other age groups during this time period, underscoring how relationships grounded in reciprocity and shared purpose can serve as protective factors against loneliness (e.g., Loades et al., 2020; Strayhorn, 2018). Indeed, the mentors collectively reported a decrease in perceived stress levels during the pandemic, which may indicate that the expectations of communication and interaction set by the peer mentoring program may have actually helped mentors and mentees retain a sense of campus connection and interpersonal engagement during a period fraught with upheaval and uncertainty.

Third, situating these findings within a student organization context provides a more nuanced understanding of how hierarchical norms may be understood differently in peer-led environments. Unlike many IPSE programs that rely on professional staff to assign roles and structure interactions, the organization in the present study was governed entirely by volunteer student leaders, which indicates intrinsic motivation (Carter & McCabe, 2021). This is noteworthy, considering the implication that staff facilitation may not be required for strong relationships to blossom. However, our findings indicate that the absence of compensation does not remove the hierarchical dynamics embedded within mentoring roles. Even in this context, mentors expressed difficulty in balancing the formal mentor-mentee relationship with the desire for a genuine friendship. While many mentors reported developing close, meaningful friendships with their mentees, the inherent dynamic of the mentor role often complicated this process. Mentors emphasized the importance of setting clear boundaries in their relationships with mentees, including holding mentees accountable socially and academically to ensure the mentoring experience remained effective. Even in a student-led environment where mentors would ostensibly have greater latitude to blur the boundaries between formal and informal relationships, they still experienced challenges with maintaining a "genuine" friendship alongside fulfilling the responsibilities of being a mentor. These challenges underscore the importance of providing student leaders with training on maintaining the balance between supportive relationships and healthy boundaries. Training should include guidance on how to navigate these complex interpersonal dynamics and how to manage expectations while promoting independence among mentees.

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Limitations and Future Research

The findings of this study should be considered alongside its methodological limitations. First, although the goal of the study was to understand how peer mentors conceptualize impact for themselves and the mentees, the study's findings are framed only by the peer mentors' self-reported reflections. The omission of direct input from the mentees with IDD limits the extent to which the impact may be fully reciprocated in the same way that the mentors envisioned it to be. Future research should include the dyadic perspectives of mentors and mentees to capture a more balanced understanding of the reciprocal impact.

Second, the study was conducted at a single institution, which reduces the generalizability of the findings. The homogenous sample of mostly white females may not be representative of other institutions or IPSE programs with different peer mentorship models. Institutional culture, training models, program structure, and mentor incentives can all shape the mentor experience. Relatedly, although it is a strength of the study to focus on unpaid mentors, many of whom are more likely to be naturally predisposed toward inclusive values, this could introduce a form of selection bias. That is, mentors with less positive experiences may have opted not to participate in the survey. Future research should explore other ways to assess the impact of peer mentorship that transcend self-report measures, such as social network analysis or observational methods. These tools could help map patterns of inclusion and friendship development in tangible ways that would allow researchers to assess whether the social capital expended to students with IDD by peer mentors ultimately leads to broader campus integration.

Finally, while the multi-year design allowed for broad comparisons across cohorts, the data were collected at two distinct time points with different mentor cohorts. Although a survey was administered to peer mentors in Spring 2021, the data related to the present analysis were limited and unusable due to a substantial amount of missing data. A related limitation to the timing of distribution is that six peer mentors in C2 were eligible for the survey in C1 (i.e., served as a peer mentor since Fall 2019), but it is unclear whether those peer mentors took the survey twice because we did not directly ask this question. Thus, it is difficult to determine how many participants had their perspectives reflected in both time points. This limits our ability to draw longitudinal conclusions, as differences may reflect cohort variation rather than changes over time. Future studies should collect a unique sample identifier to allow for accurate tracking of research participants over time. Additionally, allowing for follow-up with participants would help researchers understand whether these relationships sustain into the mentors' and mentees' professional and personal spheres beyond the college time period.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study highlight important considerations for practice within campus activities professionals, student organization advisors, and IPSE program staff seeking to expand opportunities for inclusive co-curricular experiences. First, the findings highlight the potential of

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registered student organizations as critical contexts for inclusive engagement. For mentors, these relationships contribute to personal growth, greater disability awareness, and a deeper understanding of inclusion, which can extend into their future careers (Astin, 1997). These connections remained stable even during the period of disruption caused by the global pandemic. For campus activities professionals, this suggests that championing the development of mission-driven organizations focused on inclusion and belonging may be an effective strategy to engage students in on-campus and virtual contexts, even when shared physical spaces may not be viable, such as for distance learners.

Second, the findings underscore the importance of intentionally navigating the balance between structure and flexibility in peer mentoring programs. Although staff involvement should be minimal, one important area of interjection is in the initial training period for peer mentors. This training should focus on role expectations and skill development, including boundary-setting and the complexities of interpersonal dynamics. It is important to note that while comprehensive training helps ensure mentors feel equipped and confident in their roles, over-training could inadvertently interfere with the natural development of friendships.

Third, for university and IPSE staff, the findings emphasize the need to create spaces that facilitate reciprocal friendships. This means that IPSE program staff should carefully consider the level of infrastructure and support provided to mentors. Given the unique context of the present study, the findings suggest that using the already established vehicle of a registered student organization may be just as effective and more inclusive than placing peer mentors in paid positions managed by program staff. This is an important consideration for programs seeking to maximize the impact of their peer mentoring initiatives while minimizing costs.

At the policy level, continued funding and support for peer mentoring programs are essential for their sustained success. Supporting the growth of peer mentorship programs at a macro level will ensure that the positive effects of peer mentoring can be sustained and expanded. Given the low cost and high impact of these programs, continued investment at state and federal levels will play a key role in fostering inclusion within communities and workplaces.

Conclusion

The study examined how college student leaders within a registered student organization perceived the impact of their involvement in an inclusive peer mentoring program for students with IDD. This study reframes peer mentorship as a form of student leadership embedded within campus activities, emphasizing the potential and challenges of this model.

Overall, peer mentors perceived their roles with high levels of positive impact across personal and professional domains. The high levels of impact remained stable even amid the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting that structured yet flexible peer support models can promote resilience and belonging during periods of remote access or societal uncertainty. As colleges and

universities continue to expand inclusive postsecondary opportunities for students with IDD, attention to how student-led modalities shape peer relationships will be an essential key to foster meaningful and sustainable inclusion.

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