

Preparing Young Adults with Disabilities for Lifelong Inclusivity through a College Level Mentor Program Using Technology: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract : In their pursuit of postsecondary transitions, individuals with disabilities tend to experience, academic, behavioral, and emotional challenges to a greater extent than their typically developing peers. These challenges result in lower rates of graduation, employment, independent living, and participation in college than their peers without disabilities. The lack of friendships and support systems has had a negative impact on those with a disability transitioning to postsecondary settings to include, employment, independent living, and university settings. Establishing friendships and support systems early on is an indicator of potential success and persistence in postsecondary education, employment, and independent living for typically developing college students. It is evident that a deficit in friendships and supports is a key deficit also for individuals with disabilities. To address the specific needs of this group, a mentor program was developed for a transition program held at the university for youth aged 18-21. Pre-service teachers enrolled in the special education program engaged with youth in the transition program in a variety of activities on campus. The mentorship program had two purposes: to assist young adults with disabilities who were transitioning to a workforce setting to help increase social skills, self-advocacy, supports and friendships, and confidence; and to give their peers without disabilities who were enrolled in a secondary special education course as a pre-service teacher the experience of interacting with and forming friendships with peers who had a disability for the purposes of career development. Additionally, according to researchers mobile technology has created a virtual world of equality and opportunity for a large segment of the population that was once marginalized due to physical and cognitive impairments. All of the participants had access to smart phones; therefore, technology was explored during this study to determine if it could be used as a compensatory tool to allow the young adults with disabilities to do things that otherwise would have been difficult because of their disabilities. Additionally, all participants were asked to incorporate technology such as smart phones to communicate beyond the activities, collaborate using virtual platform games which would support and promote social skills, soft-skills, socialization, and relationships. The findings of this study confirmed that a peer mentorship program that harnessed the power of technology supported outcomes specific to young adults with and without disabilities. Mobile technology and virtual game-based platforms, were identified as a significant contributor to personal, academic, and career growth for both groups. The technology encouraged friendships, provided an avenue for rich social interactions, and increased soft-skills. Results will be shared along with the development of the program and potential implications to the field.

Keywords : career outcomes, mentorship, soft-skills, technology, transition

Conference Title : ICSERT 2019 : International Conference on Special Education Regulations and Technology

Conference Location : Tokyo, Japan

Conference Dates : May 27-28, 2019