Experiences of College Students with Disabilities and the Importance of a Business Mentoring Program

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Abstract

College students with disabilities often lack a clear understanding of what knowledge and skills are required by specific careers on a day-to-day basis. These students often graduate from college without the chance for on-the-job experiences, and have a difficult time selecting a job that matches their preferences and abilities. This article will describe a study conducted with juniors and seniors with disabilities attending Virginia Commonwealth University who participated in a work based mentoring program. The results of a qualitative analysis of the participants' mentoring experiences in four primary areas, specifically career counseling, job shadowing, job placement assistance, and conflict resolution/problem solving are discussed.

I. Introduction

Whether it is college, adult and continuing education, or technical preparation, postsecondary education plays a major role in preparing persons for employment and career opportunities (Briel & Getzel, 2005; Briel & Wehman, 2005; Getzel & Kregel, 1996; Izzo & Lamb, 2002; Stodden & Dowrick, 2000). Individuals with disabilities find postsecondary education a means to enhance their chances of obtaining and maintaining employment, earning a higher annual income, creating a pathway to life-long independence and a greater quality of life (Briel & Getzel, 2005; Fairweather & Shaver, 1991; Wilson, Getzel, & Brown, 2000). In addition, individuals with disabilities who continue their education after high school obtain the higher order thinking and technical skills necessary to take advantage of current job market trends in today's global economy (Stodden, Conway, & Chang, 2003).

One trend gaining popularity in corporate America involves the use of mentors to enhance the success of employees. Businesses and organizations see how both formal and informal mentoring can reduce learning time for new employees, increase career advancement opportunities, and prepare new leaders (Stone, 2004). More specifically, young adults who may lack the career guidance and preparation needed to be successful on the job can also benefit from mentors at a work site. Work-based mentoring programs can help youth by imparting crucial job-specific, social, and personal skills; enriching and expanding the youth's social connections; and positively impacting self esteem and optimism for the future (Rhodes, 2003).

A number of programs have been implemented in postsecondary settings to assist students with disabilities obtain the needed skills to transition into employment (Getzel, Briel, & Kregel, 2000; Hagner, McGahle, & Cloutier, 2001; Michaels & Barr, 2002; Norton & Field, 1998). These programs have used a variety of activities including job clubs; employability workshops; and work experience programs including internships, job shadow opportunities, informational interviews, mentors (both employer and peer), and career counseling. What is significant about the outcomes of these programs is contact or some level of interaction with employers or professionals in their chosen career. These contacts with employers through internships, job shadowing, informational interviews or mentoring all have varying levels of impact on the career development of college students with disabilities, depending on the amount of time and contact with employers (Briel & Getzel, 2001; Hagner, et al., 2001; Norton & Field, 1998). There are a number of studies focusing on the process of mentoring, for example, mentors and students establishing relationships

through face-to-face meetings, by email or telephone contact (Burgstahler & Cronheim, 2001; Knouse, 2001; Powers, Sowers, & Stevens, 1995; Whelley, Radtke, Burgstahler, & Christ, 2003); however, only a few studies have examined the use of employers as mentors for college students with disabilities as they prepare to exit from college (Burgstahler & Cronheim, 2001; Norton & Field, 1998; Whelley, et al., 2003).

College students with disabilities face similar issues as all students exiting college including finding their way into a professional field and into the careers of their choice. However, there are some unique differences in the career development needs of students with disabilities as opposed to their peers without disabilities. Students with disabilities need:

a. direct exposure to the variety of career opportunities potentially available to them;
b. an understanding of their disability and how it may influence career choice and work performance;
c. an awareness of their rights and responsibilities in the workplace;
d. the risks and benefits of disclosing disability status to employers and
e. an understanding of which accommodations improve work performance and how to effectively request them from an employer (Briel & Getzel, 2001; Briel & Wehman, 2005; Gerber & Price, 2003; Getzel, Briel, & Kregel, 2000; Hennessy, Richard, Cook, Unger, & Rumrill, 2006; and Michaels & Barr, 2002).

Assisting college students with disabilities through the career planning and decision making phases of their degree program is crucial to future job satisfaction. College graduates with learning disabilities were surveyed as to their job satisfaction post college. The results were compared to a similar group of peers without disabilities. Graduates with learning disabilities were significantly more dissatisfied in the areas of pay, promotion, and total job satisfaction than graduates without disabilities (Witte, Philips, & Kakela, 1998). One of the significant findings of the study was the importance of the fit between the college graduate with learning disabilities and their employment setting. This is a result of many factors, but can be linked back to the need for students with disabilities needing more exposure to the work environment and career opportunities (Witte, et. al, 1998).

One effective strategy to address the issues above is to connect students to mentors in their field of study. Employers serving as mentors can help students with disabilities develop skills, knowledge and motivation as they transition from college into employment (Briel & Getzel, 2001; Whelley, et. al, 2003). Positive relationships with mentors have shown to enhance career development and the social and emotional aspects in an individual's life (Hagner, 2000). Additionally,

formal mentoring programs connecting college students with disabilities and professionals in the community prove valuable for students to acquire job-seeking skills (Hennessy et al, 2006). Mentors typically have more experience or knowledge and serve as role models. Frequently mentors guide, provide emotional support by listening, act as a sounding board, and give advice. Work based mentors often counsel individuals beyond purely job-specific issues which may include tips on organizational skills or how to set priorities (Foster & MacLeod, 2004; Kram, 1985). In addition, mentors can share resources, provide a new perspective, and ask thought provoking questions (Heckman, Brown, & Roberts, 2007).

In a formal mentoring process, the mentor and the individual receiving mentoring services enter into an agreement to interact in specific ways that address learning goals and skill development (Stone, 2004). Typical mentoring activities are associated with:

a. providing counseling,
b. serving as role models,
c. providing job shadowing opportunities,
d. providing personal, academic and career advice, and
e. providing networking experiences (Burgstahler & Cronheim, 2001; Templin & Doran, 1999; Whelley, et al., 2003).

The ability to network or to meet professionals and develop ongoing relationships that are mutually beneficial has long been considered an effective route to securing employment (Barton, 2001). These activities are important to support individuals in college as they prepare to graduate and enter employment. While the implementation of mentor relationships varies widely across programs, a number of common elements emerge from a review of the literature. These elements include career counseling, internships, job shadowing, networking, and job placement assistance (Briel & Getzel, 2001; Burgstahler & Cronheim, 2001; Hagner, 2000; Kram, 1985; Templin & Doran, 1999; Whelley, et. al, 2003).

II. Virginia Commonwealth University's (VCU) Business Mentoring Model

The VCU-RRTC business mentoring study called Mentoring Matters is a work based mentoring program for college students with disabilities to develop a relationship with a member of the business or professional community. The intent of the program is to enable college students with disabilities to engage in worksite experiences, ask questions and exchange ideas with working professionals, and emerge with a clearer sense of their career choice. The model is based on theories developed through an examination of current literature on mentoring relationships and their role in the career development of indi-

viduals with disabilities. College students with disabilities often lack a clear understanding of what specific careers require on a day-to-day basis. These students are many times less clear about how their disability will impact their performance on the job. Students with disabilities graduate from college without the chance for on-the-job experiences, and have a difficult time selecting a job that matches their preferences and abilities (Briel & Getzel, 2001). Implementation of the study was achieved through collaboration with the VCU Disability Support Services Office and the VCU Career Center, the Business Leadership Network, and the VCU-RRTC Business Roundtable. The collaboration led to the recruitment of student participants, recruitment of mentors representing a variety of businesses and professions, and the establishment of a network to share information and resources with students and mentors.

A developed framework for the model specified students and mentors to meet a minimum of four hours a month for two semesters. The four primary areas that served as the focus for activities in the mentoring relationship included career counseling, job shadowing opportunities, job placement assistance, and conflict resolution /problem solving in a workplace environment (Getzel, Briel, & Kregel, 2000; Timmons, Mack, Sims, Hare, and Wills, 2006; Whelley, et al, 2003). Table 1 below describes the types of activities associated with each of the four areas. The rationale for providing a framework for the model was to enable VCU staff members to gather data on the focus of mentoring activities of students with disabilities participating in the program, and to provide a structure for building and maintaining a mentoring relationship. In addition, this common framework enabled VCU staff members and other collaborators to provide information, resources, and activities to all mentors and students with disabilities involved in the study. This article will provide a qualitative analysis of college student participants' experiences with their mentors in the four primary areas of exploring careers, job shadowing, networking, and problem solving. Analyses of data gathered through online surveys concerning their experiences while attending VCU are described.

Table 1: Primary Focus Areas of Mentoring Activities

1.	**Career Counseling:** activities that include career focused discussions with mentors about their perceptions of the field, creating a realistic understanding of the work environment and expectations, or career related materials that assist students to form a specific goal.
2.	**Job Shadowing:** activities conducted in an employment setting that last from several hours, a full day or up to a week enabling students to observe work tasks, experience work pace, and determine whether the responsibilities of a profession are consistent with their interest, abilities, and career goals.
3.	**Job Placement Assistance:** activities that enable students to enter a professional position with direct assistance from their mentors, either by assisting students with job preparation skills such as developing a resume or preparing for interviews, connecting students to professional organizations or networks that may post job openings, or introducing students to their own contacts in the field and facilitating the development of a professional network that could even assist students to obtain subsequent jobs.
4.	**Conflict Resolution/Problem Solving:** type of support mentors provide to assist students to remain in their job, such as analyzing potential conflicts, determining a course of action, and initiating a response.

III. Methodology

A descriptive research study was used to determine the effect of a business mentoring program and activities on the career decisions of college students with disabilities. The study examined the relationships developed as a result of the model and the effect of the mentoring experience on students with disabilities in each of the primary areas of career counseling, job shadowing, job placement assistance and conflict resolution/problem solving.

The majority of the participants in the study were traditional-age, undergraduate students with disabilities attending Virginia Commonwealth University. Demographic information on the participants including ethnicity, disability category, academic year, and gender is listed in Table 2 below. Information was gathered on 25 VCU juniors and seniors with disabilities each semester beginning March 2006 through May 2008. Juniors and seniors were recruited to enable project staff members to gather data on their career decision making process while in college, and to obtain post graduation data on the impact that business mentoring experiences had on their career choices.

Table 2: Participant Demographic Information N = 25

Participant Characteristics	Variable	Number
Ethnicity	Caucasian African-American Asian Bi-racial Other	15 6 2 1 1
Disability Category	Learning Disability Health Impairment Attention Deficit/Hyper- activity Disorder	8 5 4

Participant Characteristics	Variable	Number
Disability Category (continued)	Psychological Vision Impairment Spinal Cord Injury Cerebral Palsy Traumatic Brain Injury	3 2 1 1 1
Academic Year	Junior Senior	9 16
Gender	Male Female	5 20

The primary source for the recruitment of students was the VCU Disability Support Services (DSS) Office. To ensure students' confidentiality during the recruitment process, the DSS coordinator distributed information about the business men- toring through materials available in the office and through email correspondence. All recruitment materials asked interested students with disabilities to directly contact a project staff member. Students with disabilities voluntarily contact project staff to participate and during this contact additional information was provided about the mentoring study. Potential student participants were invited to attend an orientation meeting to determine their interest in the study. Student participants signed a consent form prior to their participation explaining how data collected through the study would be used and that all data summaries would not contain any personally identifiable information. Student participants provided input into the selection of their mentor, in terms of location and type of business. Some students with disabilities participated in more than one business site. Table 3 below provides information on students' educational majors and the location of their business mentoring experiences.

Table 3: Student Majors and Mentor Location

Major	Mentor	Business
Psychology	Program Administrator; Attorney	State agency, assistive technology; Private law firm
Psychology/Art	Team Leader	Office supply company
Psychology	Human Resources Director	Large health insurance company
International business human resource	Senior Organization HR Consultant	Large health insurance company
Psychology	Guardianship Program Coordinator; Program Specialist	County services agency for seniors; State rehabilitation services
Illustration Communication Arts	Co-owner	Printing company
History	History teacher/Department Chair; Director of Guest Relations	Middle school; Museum
Small Business Entrepreneurship	Owner	Small business
Finance	Lead Auditor	Power company
Psychology	Crime Control Act Coordinator	County juvenile justice department
History	Membership Director and Museum Educator; Director of Museum Operations	Nonprofit museum association; Museum
Mass Communications	Associate Director	University news Services
International Management	Director of Quality Assurance; Owner	Large health insurance company Small café business
History/Teaching Interested in ESL	ESOL Specialist	State Adult Learning Center
Graphic Design	Graphic Designer	University design business
Criminal Justice	Police Officer	Polic training academy
Environmental Studies	Environmental Program Planner	State agency for environment
Substance Abuse	Probation Supervisor; Regional Director	State juvenile justice department; Private counseling business
Art History; Anthropology	Special Events Coordinator	Museum development office

Major	Mentor	Business
Psychology/Sociology	Substance Abuse Counselor	State rehabilitation agency
Psychology	Program Information Specialist	State office of immigration services
English	Editorial Cartoonist; Editorial Illustrator	Local newspaper
Economics	Vice President and Investment Consultant	Nation wide bank
Mass communications - broadcasting track	Program Manager; Sports Director/Broadcaster	Large health insurance company; Local television station
Biomedical engineering	Dentist	Dentist office

IV. Data Collection Process

Online surveys were developed for students with disabilities to complete each semester of their involvement in the program. The survey was designed to gather data on student demographics, the frequency of the student's contact with mentors, the nature of their mentoring activities, and to provide feedback about their mentoring experiences. Specific questions on the survey allowed project staff members to gather data on the four primary areas of the mentoring activities which included career counseling, job shadowing, job placement, and conflict resolution/problem solving. The questions were open-ended to allow students to provide as much detail as possible about their mentoring experiences. Once surveys were received, open-ended responses were coded to identify emergent themes across the mentoring relationships.

V. Results

Career Counseling Experiences

The study defined career counseling as activities that include career focused discussions with mentors about their own experiences working in the field, their perception of essential skills to be successful, potential career paths within a specific area, and evolving trends in the profession. All of the student participants had some level of career counseling as part of their mentoring experience from general discussions with their mentors about the field to actively participating in the work environment to learn more about the specific requirements and demands of a typical workday. Student participants welcomed the opportunity to discuss their career interests, the type of job they are seeking, and to learn about other tracks within a major that could offer a more fulfilling and rewarding career; others with very broad ideas about their career goals found their mentor helpful in narrowing their career focus. As one student stated, "I told him [men-

tor] about myself and my goals up to this point. Mostly we tried to figure out what would be the best course for me...I am at a sort of crossroads." Another student shared "she [mentor] advised me on which minor to choose." One theme that emerged across the mentoring relationships concerned understanding the work environment. This included not only discussing the essential skills and requirements of a particular field but also addressing questions regarding the development and application of these skills in the work environment; for example, one discussion focused on how to put a sports story together in a limited amount of time. Another student discussed how to organize time to complete daily responsibilities. A business major discussed how to handle employees with poor performance records. One student realized how much teamwork was required at a print shop and began to acquire "soft" skills or the ability to communicate and form working relationships with her co-workers. Some mentors used employer surveys to assess employees' strengths and weaknesses and discussed with a student what was expected in the work setting. Two students discussed with their mentors disability rights and responsibilities in the work environment. Other student participants were able to learn first hand about the work environment and their potential career choice through direct participation in day-to-day activities. Student participants were involved in reviewing work materials, such as policies and forms, completing projects, or directly participating in classroom teaching, learning printing machinery, or developing a sports newscast story.

In addition, career counseling often involved sharing career related materials or further training resources that assist students with disabilities to develop specific skills or to form a specific goal. One student interested in learning how to hold productive meetings was loaned a book on working with teams. A student participant interested in advocating for people with disabilities was provided information from her mentor about a local advocacy training program that prepares people with disabilities to be effective advocates, which the student eventually completed. Another student considering the teaching profession was given information on the requirements to become a licensed teacher. A mass communications major benefited from

a folder with samples of press releases as well as professional magazines that provided guidelines for this style of writing.

Student participants expressed the impact that the career counseling activities had on their career decision making. One student stated that her mentor "is very open and honest about her job and has really taught me many important lessons about teaching." Another student commented: "I put my school work in a real life application." Yet another student stated, "I learned about an interesting job that I was unaware existed." Finally, one student with a disability had a mentoring relationship that had an impact on her concerning the work environment and her own disability. She stated: "I value her [mentor] opinion on disclosure of a disability and she has been inspirational in showing that all obstacles can be overcome or accommodated in a good work environment."

Job Shadowing Experiences

Job shadowing opportunities are defined as activities conducted in an employment setting that last from several hours up to a week enabling students to gain a better understanding of typical work tasks, obtain an idea of the work pace, experience workplace culture, and to provide materials to assess their own interest and abilities in completing these tasks. In these experiences, student participants primarily observed the mentor at the work site completing various tasks or join the mentor in specific work site activities. For example, one student was able to watch an illustrator draw a cartoon for the newspaper, another participated in a conference call related to quality assurance, a student participant was able to ride with police officers on duty and listen to dispatch calls coming into the station, and a participant was able to observe cameramen at a television shoot. Other students directly participated in their job shadowing experiences including interacting with students in a classroom and using printing presses and printers. One student commented about his job shadowing experience, "It gives me a chance to see what a real life professional does in the field." Another stated, "I value the exposure I have gotten to the state police and advice on how best to pursue my career interests."

Job Placement Assistance

Job placement assistance was one of the primary areas of most mentoring experiences for student participants. Activities associated with job placement assistance enable students to enter a professional position with direct assistance from their mentors, either through student connections with professional organizations, meeting and developing relationships with other employers or in their own business (networking), including supports mentors provide to assist students to obtain subsequent jobs. There are three areas that most students experienced in their mentoring relationship concerning job placement assistance. They included building a professional network with individuals in the field through initial contacts provided by their mentor, tailoring resumes for the field, and strengthening interview skills. One student expressed what she learned from her mentor, "We talked about the steps I should take to get a full time job and interview skills." Networking with individuals in their field was a benefit expressed by a number of the student participants. Two student participants had mentors that arranged meetings with a different staff person each week to learn about various departments in the company. As one student described her experience, "My mentor set up meetings with different individuals in the department and let me shadow them for a day." Another student was able to meet with human resource professionals as part of her networking experiences.

Assistance with resume writing and job interviewing skills were two areas that mentors played a key role with student participants. One student's mentor assisted her in "overcoming my shyness to participate in an informational interview." Student participants described receiving tips on writing resumes and giving mentors their resumes to provide feedback and ideas of how to tailor it to specific jobs they were seeking. One student was able to discuss interviewing skills with her mentor and practiced a mock interview. Another student with a disability received a resume resource guide that associates in the mentor's company receive. And one student stated, "My mentor introduced me to their company's recruiter who will review my resume and provide me with feedback."

Conflict Resolution / Problem Solving

The final study area is conflict resolution/problem solving which is defined as the type of support mentors provide to assist students with disabilities to identify and handle problems at a work site, enabling them to remain in their job. It was anticipated that most student participants would provide feedback on conflict resolution/problem solving once they graduated and entered the workforce. Data from this phase of the study are not yet available due to student participants' graduation schedule and securing employment. However, after analyzing the data obtained from student participants and their experiences with mentors, information and skills to face current and potential difficulties in the work environment were part of their mentoring relationship while in college. One student participating in a work cooperative program reported "my mentor gave me advice about handling stress and getting my productivity up, and being able to approach people in a professional way." Another student described learning a great deal from her mentor with a disability about accommodations and her rights and responsibilities in the work place. Comments from one student described her mentor as being very honest about the problems she could potentially face as a professional in the field. As one student summed it up, "You find out about problems before you get a job in that field."

Additional Comments From Student Participants

College students participating in the study expressed appreciation for the opportunity to build a relationship with their mentors. They were provided a wealth of information about specific jobs and given opportunities to explore positions in other departments. One student wrote, "He [mentor] is very informative on his area of work and allows me the opportunity to specifically learn about his career." Another student commented, "I value her [mentor] willingness to seek out opportunities for me to discuss my career interests with those in the finance/auditing fields." And one student stated," I appreciate the time that my mentor took out of his busy schedule to sit and talk with me. I believe he genuinely wanted to give me any and all guidance that he could... my course of action is becoming clearer."

When asked how the mentoring relationship could be improved, finding more time to meet with their mentors was the most frequent response. Other students commented that additional opportunities for hands on experiences were needed. In general, student participants were eager to meet more often with their mentors, experience more learning opportunities, and to obtain more advice from their mentors. One student wrote, "I am really enjoying spending time with my mentor." Another commented "I learned a lot through my mentor and found her to be a good role model. She clarified a lot of the things I learned in class and gave me excellent advice." It was suggested by one student that the mentoring program be coordinated with the dean of her school and the university career center for partial credit or as an internship program. Another student expressed, "I have found this experience to be an excellent source to network with others in my field of choice." And for one student it was a real life lesson about choosing and entering a career, "I enjoy the fact that my mentor has succeeded in a field she did not think she would be working in after she graduated. It lets me know that you can find a career in many different ways, and still be very satisfied and happy with the way it all turns out."

Case Study

The development of a mentoring relationship and the impact of this relationship on a college student with a disability can best be illustrated through a case study. The following case study provides an example of how the business mentoring model was implemented.

Jack, a student majoring in history was uncertain about his career options and which direction he should take after graduation. He has always been interested in history, but it was a college history professor that helped him realize it was one of his passions. Initially Jack thought he would like to teach middle school children, while continuing his education in graduate school. Through the VCU Mentoring Matters program, Jack was matched with a mentor with significant experience teaching 7th and 8th grade history in an urban setting. He wanted see first hand what it was like teaching in a classroom. Jack requested assistance from a VCU project staff member to participate in the first meeting with the mentor due to his panic disorder since he has learned he can manage his disorder by receiving support in new situations until he has a clear idea of what to expect in the respective environment. The VCU staff member, Jack, and his mentor met together for introductions and goal setting.

Jack participated four hours a week in mentoring activities. The "hands on" instructional style of the mentor was an advantage for him. The mentor enlisted the help of Jack to participate in many class activities and accommodating the learning style of all students. Jack was able to interact with the students, assist with teaching, and provide support with assignments and lessons. He learned valuable information related to the teaching profession such as "to use specific examples with the kids, use demonstrations to get a point across, and I also got a good idea of the work teachers have everyday, especially when it comes to grading papers."

Jack and his mentor also discussed and reviewed materials concerning the requirements to become a licensed teacher. Being able to initially observe in a classroom in a relaxed manner without any pressure to perform relieved his anxiety, giving him time to understand that he could manage his panic disorder in the teaching profession. However, Jack was concerned with the additional requirements to become a teacher and wanted to still explore other options.

A second mentoring experience was identified for Jack located at a small private museum that conducted a number of educational tours for various schools in the community. Jack was paired with a guest relations director who also had a history degree. He was able to gain a better understanding of museum work by assisting at the front desk, conducting research for marketing, and observing educational tours. Jack was able to meet several history school teachers in addition to the education director at the museum to learn about professional organizations in the state. Although Jack was approached with an opportunity to complete an internship at the museum during the school year, he declined in order to better manage his college work load and still be an active participant in the mentoring program. Jack is preparing to graduate and plans to use the connections through his mentoring experience to secure employment in a museum.

VI. Discussion

The results of this study provide insights into the effect of a business mentoring program on the career decision making process of 25 college students with disabilities. The findings

are a beginning step towards better understanding effective mentoring activities and their impact on college juniors and seniors as they prepare to graduate and enter the workforce. However, some limitations should be noted. Research is needed to further validate the information provided by the students' experiences. The findings described are based on the experiences of 25 college students with disabilities located at an urban university. Ideally, this research should be replicated with a greater number of students with disabilities from various geographical regions and enrolled in varying sizes of two-and-four year colleges and universities. Second, the study was designed to assess the effect of a mentoring program through work based meetings with students and their mentors. Further research is needed to determine the effectiveness of mentoring relationships developed through email contacts or through the use of other technologies. Finally, the study established specific areas for the mentoring relationship based on the current literature (i.e. career counseling, job shadowing, job placement assistance, conflict resolution/problem solving). These four areas became the focus of assisting students and their mentors to establish their relationship and to structure activities at the work site. Other mentoring activities outside of the study's four areas need examining to determine their effect on college students with disabilities' career decision making.

In spite of the limitations, the results provide important information on facilitating mentoring experiences for college students with disabilities. Given a relatively open structure for students and mentors to identify and agree on several learning objectives to center the mentoring experience, the two primary areas of focus for a majority of the student participants involved career counseling and job placement assistance activities. Students expressed the importance of mentors to assist in exploring career options and clarifying their career goals. Being able to meet at the work site, be a part of the workplace culture, or use professional work materials provided a better understanding of the work environment and the skills required in their field of study. Mentors provided students with relevant resources through topic related books, professional handbooks, printed materials and organization websites to assist them in further researching their career interests. Student participants were provided opportunities to discuss the demands of the work environment and their disability in a non-threatening atmosphere. This is particularly critical for students with disabilities who need opportunities to assess work environments and determine steps they can take to accommodate their disability in these environments (Briel & Getzel, 2005; Getzel, et al., 2000; Hennessey, et al., 2006).

The majority of students identified networking activities as a focal point of their mentoring relationships. Many students were able to meet and interview colleagues in the same department, neighboring departments, and human resource directors for the company. These activities fall under the job placement assistance area and provided student participants with critical opportunities to begin building professional networks prior to graduation. College students with disabilities are in need of opportunities to establish contacts in the field to assist in securing employment (Briel & Getzel, 2005; Hennessey, et al., 2006; Michaels & Barr, 2002).

Another aspect of job placement assistance activities involved participants receiving input and feedback on their resumes or resources to assist in their development. Students with disabilities were able to learn how to organize and describe their relevant experiences and to emphasize valued skills and abilities in the field. These students were able to develop professional resumes to assist them when competing for future employment opportunities in their chosen career. The third critical skill area that students with disabilities were able to receive as part of job placement assistance was strengthening their interviewing skills. Mentors participated in mock interview sessions for students, offered interviewing tips, and coordinated opportunities for informational interviews with colleagues.

The two remaining areas of job shadowing and conflict resolution/problem solving were also viewed by students as important aspects of their mentoring relationship, but were not a central part of most students' mentoring experiences. This could be a result of the primary interests of the students at the time of the mentoring experience or the availability of individuals in the work environment to provide job shadowing experiences. For those students who did participate in job shadowing opportunities, their experiences were found to be extremely beneficial. Having access to situations otherwise closed, such as observing in a courtroom or experiencing behind the scenes work required to put together a news story, not only offers the student new knowledge, but can also increase motivation.

It is also worth noting that the final area of the study, conflict resolution/problem solving was primarily intended to be a component of the follow up work by project staff of student participants graduating from VCU and entering the workforce. The data obtained from this phase of the study will analyze whether or not the mentoring relationship continued post graduation or if the information provided during the mentoring experience in college impacted students once they entered the work environment. This data set will hopefully provide insight on the effect of the mentoring relationship assisting students with disabilities in conflict resolution/problem solving in their employment setting. For some students who were participating in part time employment or internships while attending VCU, the mentoring relationships did include activities that addressed conflict resolution/problem solving. Specific areas identified by students included learning stress management techniques, understanding potential issues related to a career, and learning how to request accommodations and face potential barriers in the workplace.

VII. Conclusion

Business or professional mentoring relationships provide vital experiences for college students with disabilities that help to shape their career path, and initial employment experiences. Developing these relationships in a work based setting enables students with disabilities to receive crucial job-specific information, broaden the student's professional network, and discuss issues that go beyond work requirements, such as how to set priorities, how to talk to a supervisor, or what to expect from co-workers. All too often students with disabilities are not provided with professional experiences while in college (Briel & Getzel, 2005; Getzel, et al., 2000; Hennessey, et al., 2006). Mentoring experiences provide a critical link between the academic setting and work environment offering students with disabilities opportunities to explore career areas, apply their knowledge in a work setting, and develop new skills within a supportive atmosphere.

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