Positive Impact of Peer Mentorships in the Project Panther LIFE Program

Abstract (50 words max)

FIU's *Project Panther LIFE* is a program that allows students with Intellectual Disabilities to have a full college experience. *Project Panther LIFE* students receive support from their Academic Mentors and Peer Coaches during the academic year. This study examines the positive impacts of peer relationships between *Panther LIFE* students and their mentor support system.

Program Description

Florida International University (FIU) has partnered with the local public school system and with a parent resource center to design, implement, and sustain a postsecondary transition program for students with ID in the Miami-Dade community. The primary goal of the program is to provide a comprehensive postsecondary program and system of supports (e.g., academic mentors) through partnerships to eligible students through a well-planned, structured, and individualized curriculum and related program and community experiences leading to meaning and relevant paid employment at program completion.

Rationale

Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities are now being included in the conversation regarding equality and accessibility for learning at the postsecondary level (Grigal, Neubert, & Moon, 2001; Paiewonsky et al., 2010). Research has shown that university support systems in transition programs play an essential role in the development of self-determination skills, self-advocacy skills, interpersonal skills, and social skills. In a study to evaluate the effectiveness of a mentorship program involving students with ID, Jones and Goble (2012) reported that both mentors and mentees found that one of the most difficult barriers to overcome were the preconceived notions of their nondisabled peers. Jones and Goble (2012) stressed the importance of opportunities for students with ID to express themselves in order to grow throughout their college experience. This is why peer mentorships are critical in the university setting for additional support outside of the school curriculum. Many researchers agree that more research is needed to understand both the nature of the interactions among traditional students and students with ID, as well as the types of training and supports that may further enhance outcomes for both student populations and reduce the stigma that plagues many students with ID who are often categorized as inferior (May, 2012; O'Connor, Kubiak, Espiner, & O'Brien, 2012).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the positive impacts of the peer mentorships on both the *Panther LIFE* sudents and corresponding mentors.

Methods: Participants

Students in the *Panther LIFE* program have multiple systems of support in place on the FIU campus. One of these support systems includes peer mentors who receive payment to work with the students three (3) times a week for one (1) hour sessions. There are two types of peer mentors in the program: Academic Mentors and Peer Coaches. Academic Mentors lend support to the students by focusing more on theoretical frameworks in the classroom such as preparing for exams, homework and reading. Peer Coaches guide their students through proper social settings in and out of the university, for example attending social events on and off campus and having lunch together in different settings on and off campus. All peer mentors undergo an interview process and if selected, are then matched to a student by program personnel.

The participants in this study will include four (4) *Panther LIFE* students and four (4) peer mentors. All *Panther LIFE* students are non-degree seeking FIU students ages 18-22. Peer mentors are FIU students ages nineteen to forty-two (19- 42) with a variety of majors across both the MMC campus and BBC campus including, but not limited to College of Education, College of Business, and School of Hospitality and Tourism Management.

Methods: Instrumentation

This study will utilize a facilitated focus group consisting of four (4) Mentors and four (4) *Panther LIFE* Students. The focus group will meet a total of four (4) times throughout the Spring 2015 semester during which the mentors will answer seven (7) open-ended questions in round one (1) revolving around benefits, challenges, accomplishments, skills gained, and other program impacts, while the *Panther LIFE* students will answer six (6) open ended questions. The second round would be based on posing the same questions to each group and confirming the accuracy of their responses. During this round, any additional responses will be added. The third and fourth rounds of this study will be based on the mean of the first two (2) rounds using a Likert scale, where one (1) strongly disagree and five (5) strongly agree will be used.

Anticipated Outcomes & Implications

As projected in previous research, this study will aid in assisting FIU's *Project Panther LIFE* students and other postsecondary transition programs in gaining knowledge of the positive impact of mentorship. This research will indicate the key points that facilitate the impact that mentors have on students with ID in a university setting and also lend a guide to future studies of this topic. Conducting research on mentorship of students with ID in a university setting is crucial to programs that exist as well as future programs. The information can be used to increase knowledge on mentorship of this community and for revisions to the already existing programs.

References

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