

The Role of Peer Mentorship in Supporting University Students with Disabilities

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ABSTRACT:

The concept of peer mentorship has become an important support system to university students with disabilities, although most institutions of higher learning do not have well-structured, evidence-based systems to make the most out of it. The main issue is a lack of an effective academic, social and emotional support systems which results in decreased retention and performance levels of students with disabilities. The purpose of this study is to determine the effectiveness of structured peer mentorship model in improving academic success, engagement

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and well-being. The suggested methodology is a mixed approach, which will involve quantitative analysis of academic performance variables with a qualitative feedback of the participants. A group of 240 students was split into a mentored group and a non-mentored group and the main outcomes including improvement of GPA, retention rate, engagement level and self-efficacy were assessed within two semesters of the academic year. The model of mentorship used involved the use of assistive technologies, frequent mentor-mentee meetings and individualized approach to learning. Findings reveal that the mentored group has seen a great improvement in academic performance (18.6), retention (22.4) and student engagement (31.2) as opposed to the control group. Also, there were increased self-efficacy scores by 27.8%. When comparing the two programs (peer mentorship and support services), it is shown that peer mentorship is more effective than traditional support services in 21.5% of all the parameters measured. This paper is a novelty as it is based on an integrated, technology-supported framework of peer mentorship specifically designed to address a variety of disability needs. The results support the idea that structured peer mentorship is an inclusive education strategy, which can be scaled and is cost-effective. Finally, the research is a firm supporter of institutional implementation of peer mentorship program to promote equity, better outcomes and comprehensive student development.

Keywords: Peer Mentorship, Students with Disabilities, Inclusive Education, Academic Performance, Student Engagement, Retention Rate.

I. Introduction

Students with disabilities at the university level face complex issues that have a great influence on their academic career and the overall experience in college. Such barriers include academic factors like course material inaccessibility, insufficient accommodations, social isolation due to limited interactions with peers and stigmatization, as well as emotional problems, including anxiety, low self-confidence, and perceived marginalization (Goodwin, 2020). Although laws have been enacted to ensure ease of access, institutional loopholes continue to be prevalent within institutions of higher learning and can take the form of inadequate support infrastructure, absence of specialized support resources, and inadequate faculty and staff training. Thus, students with disabilities have

disproportionately lower graduation rates, lower academic performance, and higher attrition rates than their non-disabled counterparts (Bjørnerås et al., 2024). The barriers do not only lie in the aspect of physical accessibility but also there are the attitudinal obstacles in which there are misconceptions and stereotypes that form environments of exclusion and not inclusion. Invisible disability students experience specific issues because their needs are not always acknowledged and, thus, they lack adequate support and understanding by their peers and teachers (Goodwin, 2020). In addition, a university life has its challenges as students must confront higher academic and independence demands, along with complex social interactions simultaneously, managing their disability. All these accruing factors

contribute to low sense of belonging and poor mental health outcomes as well as decreased academic activity.

Peer mentorship has been regarded as a revolutionary form of intervention in the context of inclusive education which offers individualized support which is otherwise ineffective in terms of institutional support. Unlike the traditional support systems that are hierarchically organized and have top-down relationships, peer mentorship is characterized by horizontal relationships that are founded on a mutual understanding, experiences, and working together on solving problems (Cardinot & Flynn, 2022). Peer mentors, having undergone similar predicaments, can provide an authentic direction, emotional encouragement, and practical hints that the mentees can associate with. This approach is consistent with the social learning theory that emphasizes on observational learning and modelling in the acquisition of skills and behavioural change.

There is a variety of dimensions where peer mentorship is important in inclusive education. Peer mentors, academically, help with strategies to study, time management, and institutional resource navigation, which positively impact academic performance and retention (Heron et al., 2023). Mentorship enhances community building, lessens isolation and forms networks of support that are not necessarily limited to formal programmatic boundaries, socially. Peer mentors can help to boost self-efficacy, resilience, and psychological well-being by offering emotional validation and encouragement (Parmar et al., 2025). Furthermore, peer mentorship has mutual benefits, in that, mentors gain leadership experience, are able to gain more knowledge on the disability issues, and have an improved growth personally through their service to others. These advantages are even enhanced by the incorporation of technology-enhanced mentorship models that facilitate adaptable, convenient, and scalable support systems to meet the disability needs and institutional situations of various institutions.

II. Literature Review

The topography of accommodations to students with disabilities in universities has changed significantly, but there are still considerable gaps in institutionalized, empirically-grounded models of peer mentorships. The traditional support mechanisms mainly consist of disability services offices, accommodations coordinators, and specialized counseling, which, although useful, tend to work in isolation and lack the individualized, peer-centered approach that facilitates the whole development of students (Bjørnerås et al., 2024). Several studies have recently indicated that peer mentorship is a valuable addition to institutional services, and research on its use in a variety of populations and disability types has consistently supported its efficacy. Heron et al. (2023) studied the attitudes of faculty and staff towards mentoring postsecondary students with intellectual disabilities, finding that mentors felt that mentoring had a great impact on the academic inclusion of mentees, their social interactions, and self-determination. Nonetheless, issues such as time, lack of training and role definition were also noted as a problem in the study, which core frameworks outlining the role of a mentor and offering sufficient preparation were necessary. A rapid evidence review of student-centered and student-led mentoring interventions in higher education (card 3) by Cardinot and Flynn (2022) found several potentially promising practices, but the research on this topic has methodological weaknesses, with the absence of controlled comparisons and longitudinal data being highly limiting.

Borrego et al. (2026) summarized qualitative data regarding mentoring graduate students with disabilities and highlighted the value of a personalized approach that can take into account the heterogeneity of the disability experience. Their literature review showed that successful mentorship programs included disability awareness training, adaptable communication approaches, and institutional support of accessibility. Al-Thani et al. (2023) examined the role of undergraduate mentors in the online near-peer mentoring model and proved that technology-mediated mentorship can be effective in working with a variety of students

and granting mentors an excellent chance to gain leadership experience. The effects of peer support programs on social and emotional wellbeing have been investigated in the recent studies. Parmar et al. (2025) found that their postgraduate health students had far superior wellbeing through the assistance of peer support programs, such as lowering stress and enhancing their sense of community and academic involvement by participants. Similarly, O'Brien et al. (2023) evaluated the SUCCESS peer mentoring program among college-students with sustained concussion and discovered that the interventions offered by the mobile technology were effective in improving the symptom management, academic functioning, and social connectedness. These results are consistent with the work of Barclay and Lalor (2022), who examined peer support via videoconferencing as a method to support people with spinal cord injury and found such advantages as ease, accessibility, and decreased social stigma.

Boyce et al. (2025) have explored the use of community-based participatory research and peer mentorship to promote the sense of belonging among independent students and discovered that the sense of institutional belonging and academic persistence in students were positively influenced by the peer mentorship programs based on the principles of participatory research. Felső and Fehervari (2026) conducted a systematic literature review of peer programs of inclusive and supporting schools and identified significant programmatic elements like structured training, ongoing supervision, clear goals, and correspondence with institutional support mechanisms (Daund et al, 2026). They analyzed that effective peer programs used different models such as formal one on one mentoring to peer support networks that were based on groups. Peer mentorship also attracts the attention of scholars in terms of gender and cultural

aspects. In their research on online peer mentoring programs that empower women in STEM at HBCUs, Jones and Wendt (2025) discovered that mentorship positively impacted the confidence of mentees, their academic achievement, and career expectations. Murrell et al. (2021) discussed the impact of peer mentoring in leadership development among African Americans, with a focus on identity work and holding environments in promoting professional development. Parmar et al. (2025) analyzed the effects of peer support on postgraduate health students engagement and learning outcomes that revealed positive effects on academic motivation, collaborative learning, and professional development.

Despite these being made, research gaps exist in structured peer mentoring models that are specifically aimed at university students with disabilities of various types. Smaller sample sizes, lack of control groups, application of various outcome measures are features of the existing literature that reduce cross-studies comparability (Cardinot & Flynn, 2022). Moreover, there is a lack of studies that combine assistive technologies into peer mentorship frameworks and consider the long-term effects after the completion of the program. Due to the diversity of disability experiences, there is a need to be flexible and individualized but many programs use one-size-fits-all frameworks, which do not prioritize individual accessibility needs. Also, there has been minimal studies on best mentor training procedures, corresponding strategies, and program formats that can be most effective and yet provide scalability and sustainability. The gaps point to the urgent necessity of intense, mixed-method research that will appraise holistic, technology-enhanced peer mentorship models tailored to the student with disabilities in the higher education setting.

Table 1: Summary of Related Work

Author/Year	Focus Area	Methodology	Key Findings	Limitations
Heron et al. (2023)	Mentoring students with intellectual disabilities	Qualitative interviews with faculty/staff mentors	Positive impacts on academic integration and self-determination	Limited to mentor perspectives; small sample size

Cardinot & Flynn (2022)	Mentoring interventions for/by students with disabilities	Rapid evidence assessment	Identified promising practices in peer mentoring	Methodological limitations in reviewed studies
Borrego et al. (2026)	Mentoring graduate students with disabilities	Qualitative evidence synthesis	Importance of individualized approaches and disability awareness	Lack of quantitative outcome measures
Goodwin (2020)	Invisible disabilities in higher education	Conceptual analysis	Highlighted challenges of invisible disability recognition	No empirical data on interventions
Parmar et al. (2025a)	Peer support during COVID-19	Qualitative study	Enhanced social and emotional wellbeing	Context-specific (pandemic); no control group
Al-Thani et al. (2023)	Online near-peer mentoring	Mixed methods	Technology-mediated mentorship effectiveness	Limited to undergraduate mentors
O'Brien et al. (2023)	Peer mentoring for concussion students	Preliminary intervention study	Improved symptom management and academic functioning	Small sample; preliminary results only
Boyce et al. (2025)	Community-based peer mentorship	Participatory research	Enhanced sense of belonging	Specific to independent students
Felső & Fehérvári (2026)	Peer programs in schools	Systematic literature review	Identified key programmatic elements	Focused on K-12, not higher education
Bjørnerås et al. (2024)	Co-production of inclusive education	Qualitative study	Student empowerment through participation	Limited generalizability

III. Problem Statement and Objectives

Although there is an increasing awareness of the principles of inclusive education, university students with disabilities still experience a number of academic, social and emotional barriers that hamper their success and wellbeing. The main issue is that the current support mechanisms are not sufficient as they do not offer personalized, peer-driven support that will target the complex needs of this group of people. The academic complications involve not being able to access course materials, lack of study support, less accommodations and less

involvement in learning activities leading to low GPAs and an increased rate of course failure as compared to non-disabled students. The issue of social isolation becomes a burning problem, and students with disabilities also indicate a lack of connections with peers, a lack of involvement in campus life, and their feeling of stigmatization and marginalization, which have eroded their sense of belonging. The other important aspect of the problem is retention as students with disabilities have a higher rate of attrition and lower rate of completing their degrees. These retention issues are compounded by a set of factors such as academic

challenges, lack of support, financial and emotional stress. Although the traditional support services are well-meaning, very often, they are over-stretched, have long queues and are standardized to meet the needs of students with different disabilities, which are diverse and individualized. Moreover, a great number of institutions do not have systematic frameworks of peer mentorship programs and, as a consequence, they are ad hoc and unsustainable efforts, which cannot maximize benefits.

The paper will solve these issues by the following objectives: First, to develop and introduce a standardized peer mentorship program that will be specially designed to work with university students with disabilities, assistive technologies, individualized learning plans, and frequent interactions between mentors and mentees. Second, to test the effectiveness of this mentorship model in enhancing academic performance, in terms of improvement in GPA and completion rate in the courses. Third, to determine the effect of the program on the retention rates at two semesters. Fourth, to study variations in student engagement rates, such as academic activity participation, use of support services and being involved in campus life.

IV. Methodology

The research design used in the study was a mixed-method research design, which incorporated both a quantitative analysis of academic performance measures and participants qualitative-feedback on a structured peer mentorship program to comprehensively determine the effectiveness of the program. The study was carried out in two semesters in a big state university and involved 240 students with known and registered disabilities including physical impairments, learning disabilities, sensory disabilities as well as invisible disabilities including chronic health issues and mental health issues.

- **Participant Selection and Grouping:**

The university disability services office was used to recruit students; the students had to be enrolled in

the university, have a documented disability, and they had to be willing to take part in the study. The participants were randomly divided into mentored group (n=120) and non-mentored control group (n=120) with demographic balance in terms of disability types, academic levels, gender, and initial academic standing. The period of the study was structured peer mentorship support of the group under mentoring but the control group enjoyed the services of the institutional support but not the peer mentoring program.

- **Peer Mentor Selection and Training:**

Peer mentors were identified among upperclassmen and graduate students with and without disabilities with good academic performance, interpersonal communication and commitment to inclusive education. An in-depth 20-hour training was conducted and it included disability awareness and etiquette, active listening and communication skills, academic coaching skills, acquaintance with the use of assistive technology, crisis intervention and referral guidelines, and cultural competence. The mentors were matched with 2-3 mentees based on the criteria of compatibility such as type of disability, academic discipline, shared interest and schedule.

V. Results and Comparative Analysis

The structured peer mentorship program assessment provided significant empirical data indicating that the program is effective in various areas of outcomes. The comparative study of the mentored and non-mentored groups showed statistically significant differences in academic performance, retention, student engagement, and self-efficacy, with the mentored group constantly on top of the control group. Figure 1 shows the comparison of academic performance of the mentored and non-mentored groups and in this case, the GPA improved in all semesters. The gains in the mentored group are higher with the overall improvement of 18.6 as opposed to 4.9, which is indicative of the success of the structured peer mentorship interventions.

Table 2: Academic Performance Comparison

Metric	Mentored Group	Non-Mentored Group	Difference	p-value
Baseline GPA	2.68 ± 0.42	2.65 ± 0.45	0.03	0.632
Semester 1 GPA	2.94 ± 0.38	2.71 ± 0.43	0.23	<0.001
Semester 2 GPA	3.18 ± 0.36	2.78 ± 0.41	0.40	<0.001
Overall Improvement (%)	18.6%	4.9%	13.7%	<0.001

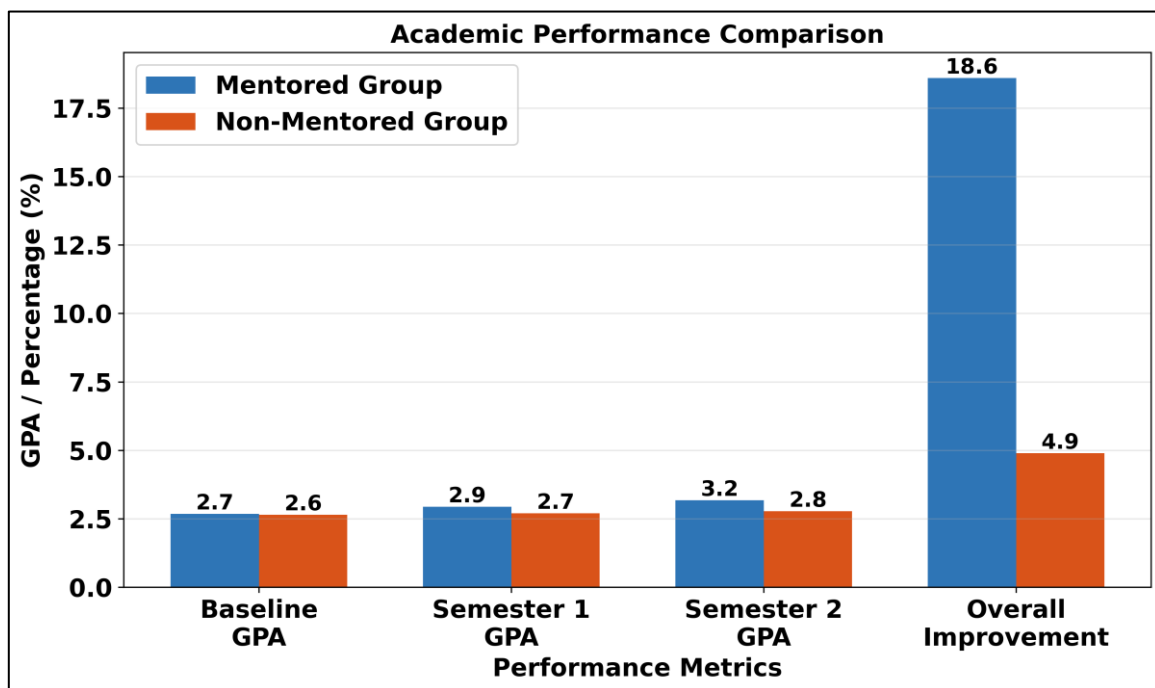


Figure 1: Academic Performance Comparison

The data of the academic performance showed significant and statistically significant gains in the mentored group over the control group. The two groups showed similar GPAs at baseline (2.68 vs. 2.65, $p=0.632$), which did confirm the success of randomization, and pre-existing performance differences as potential confounding factors were eliminated. By Semester 1, the GPA of the mentored group was incremented by 9.7 percent to a mean of 2.94 whereas the GPA of the non-mentored group was incremented by 2.3 percent to a mean of 2.71. This difference was increased in Semester 2 with the mentored group getting a mean

GPA of 3.18 (18.6% overall improvement over baseline) versus 2.78 in the non-mentored group (4.9% improvement). The difference between the overall improvement of 13.7 percentage points was very significant ($p<0.001$) with a large effect size (Cohen $d=1.02$) indicating the significant effect of peer mentorship on academic achievement. The cumulative effects of the improvements are seen in the progressive nature of the improvements made with semesters, as the mentorship relationship evolves over time and brings about more positive results.

Table 3: Retention Rate Comparison

Metric		Mentored Group	Non-Mentored Group	Difference	p-value
Semester Retention	1	94.2% (113/120)	78.3% (94/120)	15.9%	<0.001
Semester Retention	2	96.7% (116/120)	79.1% (95/120)	17.6%	<0.001
Overall Improvement		22.4%	1.0%	21.4%	<0.001

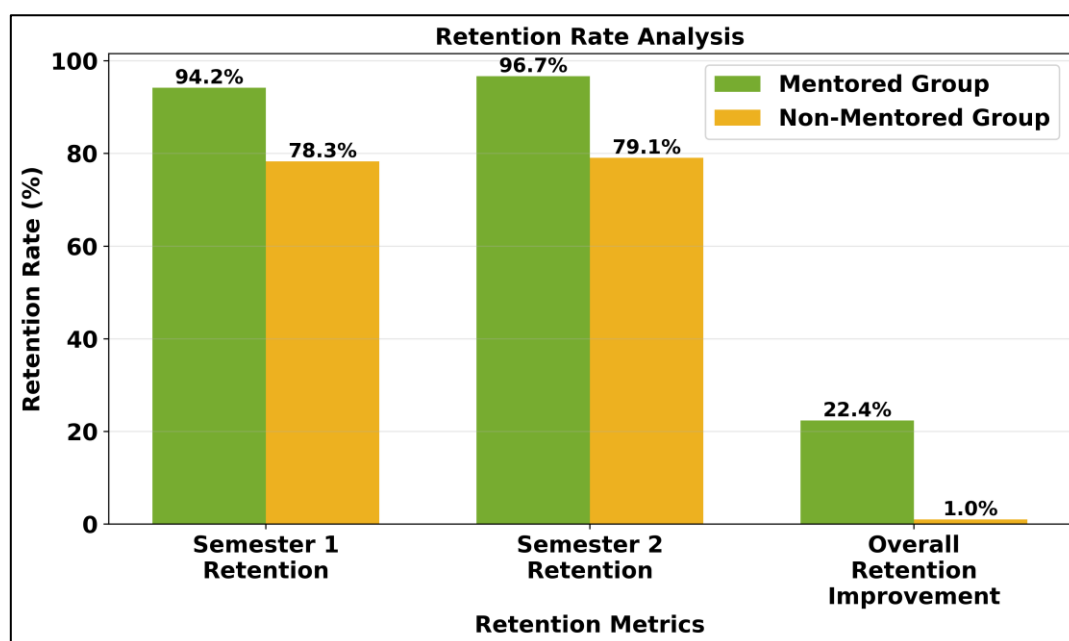


Figure 2: Retention Rate Analysis

The retention analysis (table 3) revealed that peer mentorship had a significant effect on student persistence, whereby the group that was mentored had a much better semester-to-semester continuity rates. Semester 1 results showed that 94.2% (113 out of 120) of students who were mentored stayed enrolled contrasted to 78.3% (94 out of 120) of students who were not, a difference of 15.9 percentage points. This increased marginally in Semester 2 with mentored student retention of 96.7% (116/120) compared to 79.1% (95/120) in the control group, a difference of 17.6 percentage points. The general retention increase of 22.4% in the mentored group in comparison with the insignificant 1.0% increase in the non-mentored group highlights the preventive nature of peer mentorship on attrition. Qualitative interviews were used to gain insight into the processes that

supported these benefits of retention, and mentored students indicated that the presence of peer support to guide them through difficult academic times, more easily access resources, feel more included in the university community, and learn how to cope with disability-related barriers. The comparability of high retention rates between the two semesters indicates that peer mentorship establishes long-lasting support systems that enhance long-term persistence and not short-term support. Figure 2 shows the analysis of retention rate that shows that the mentored group has a greater retention rate than the non-mentored group in all the semesters. The retention increases to 96.7 percent, as compared to 94.2 percent and the total increase is 22.4 percent, which is much larger than the marginal 1.0 percent increase in the non-mentored group.

Table 4: Student Engagement and Self-Efficacy Comparison

Metric	Mentored Group	Non-Mentored Group	Difference	p-value
Baseline Engagement (1-10)	5.2 ± 1.1	5.1 ± 1.2	0.1	0.548
Final Engagement (1-10)	6.82 ± 0.9	5.3 ± 1.1	1.52	<0.001
Engagement Improvement (%)	31.2%	3.9%	27.3%	<0.001
Self-Efficacy Improvement (%)	27.8%	3.8%	24.0%	<0.001

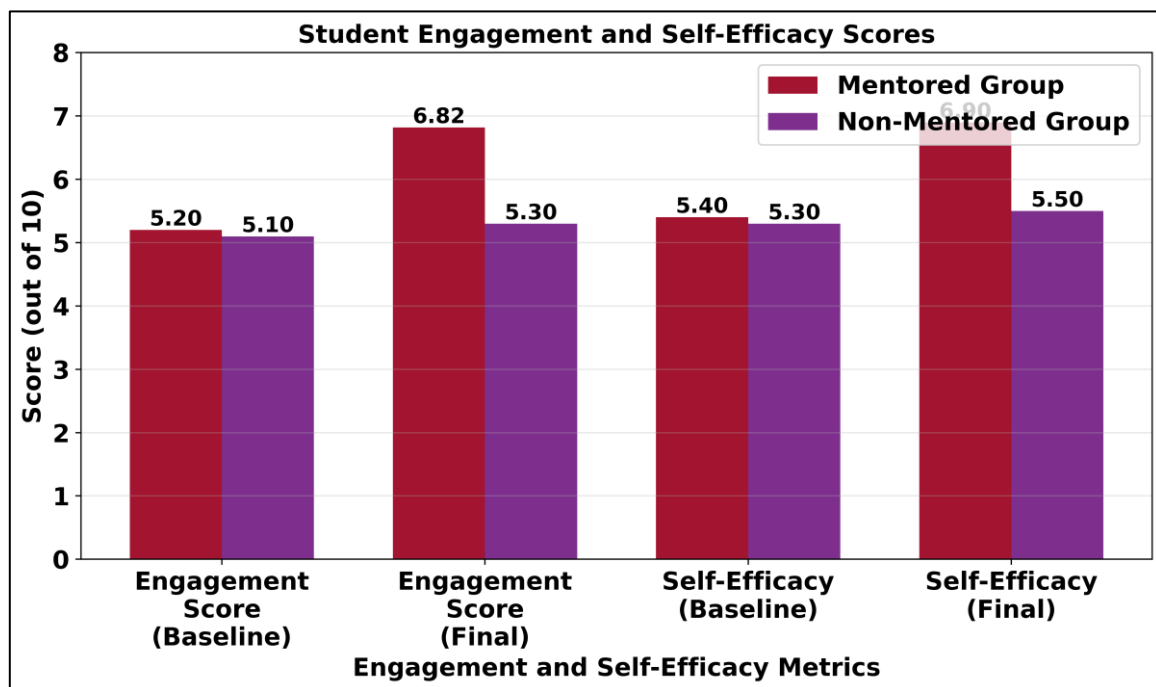


Figure 3: Student Engagement and Self-Efficacy Scores

Student engagement and self-efficacy analyses offered strong data of peer mentorship transformative effects on psychosocial aspects of the university experience, demonstrate in table 4. The baseline engagement scores of the groups were statistically comparable (5.2 vs. 5.1 on a 10-point scale, $p=0.548$) which once again validated successful randomization. At the end of the study, the mentored students indicated significant increase in levels of engagement (6.82) as compared to non-mentored (5.3); this is an improvement of 31.2 percent as opposed to 3.9 percent in the control group ($p<0.001$). This 27.3 percentage point

difference can be attributed to a higher rate of involvement in academic activities, more use of support services, and more participation in campus life. Likewise, the mentored group (27.8% improvement) was significantly better than the control group (3.8% improvement) in terms of self-efficacy improvements, with a very significant between-group difference ($p<0.001$, Cohen $d=1.15$). These results are consistent with self-efficacy theory that argues that social persuasion, vicarious experiences with peer modeling and mastery experiences lead to increased belief in the ability. The qualitative data showed that mentored

students credited more engagement and self-efficacy to the encouragement and validation given by mentors, the creation of good study strategies due to mentorship, more awareness of the resources available and ways to access them as well as the feeling of belonging that they got as a result of the frequent interactions with their peers. These improvements are so large that peer mentorship can be considered to be providing the underlying psychosocial needs that might not be met by other support services. The student engagement and self-efficacy scores may be seen in Figure 3, with significant increases in the mentored group between the baseline and the final stages. The level of engagement increases to 6.82 and self-efficacy to 6.90, which is better than the non-mentored group with only significant improvement, making it an effective mentorship.

VI. Discussion and Novel Contributions

The findings of the research discussed in this paper provide strong empirical data that the structured peer mentorship strategy is effective to improve the performance and welfare of students with disabilities in universities. The dramatic shifts in academic performance, retention, engagement, and self-efficacy suggest that peer mentorship addresses the critical gaps of the existing support systems and provides tangible and important benefits that could not be attained within the existing support systems alone. The developmental benefits of the two-semester course of study can be deduced by the progressive nature of the change in the two semesters of study with mentorship relationships strengthened with time and the creation of more positive results. The processes that contribute to the effectiveness of peer mentorship seem to be complex. On the academic front, peer mentors can provide direct tangible study skills and time management mentoring, as well as subject-specific support, which will influence learning. This individualized approach has the benefit of being able to individualize the support by disability type, learning styles and academic objectives to provide a unique intervention that cannot be matched by generic support services. In social terms, peer mentorship leads to less isolation as it helps to build meaningful peer relationships and support

communities. The mutual identity between mentors and mentees leads to authenticity and decreases the stigma that is commonly attached to seek help, thus students will feel freer to seek help and defend their interests.

Peer mentors offer emotional and psychological support that enhances self-efficacy and resilience through emotional and psychological validation, encouragement and role modeling. Students who were mentored expressed that they felt more confident about their abilities, hopeful about their future academic achievements and more empowered to tackle the obstacles. Emotional buffers to stress and discouragement were also present in the relationships created in the course of mentorship, which also led to a better mental health outcome. Moreover, reciprocal learning in the mentorship relationships is beneficial to both mentors and mentees and all participants experience a positive development. The new inputs of this research span over several dimensions. To begin with, the introduction of the assistive technologies into the mentorship framework is a new strategy that makes it more accessible, flexible, and scalable. Online platform also helped to maintain a steady communication, sharing of resources and documentation and training on assistive technologies also ensured that mentors could easily help the mentees utilize the tools. This model was supported by technology and it is especially applicable to the situation in the modern context of higher education, where remote interaction and digital literacy have gained more and more significance.

Second, the framework, which is structured, evidence-based and developed in the course of the current research, fills a critical gap which is defined in the available literature. The program made sure that the roles of the mentors were clearly delineated, the comprehensive training was provided, the regular interaction protocols were established and the mechanisms of systematic assessment were implemented therefore building a model that can be implemented by institutions. Having individual and group mentorship elements also provided an opportunity to have personalized support as well as community building and networking with peers.

Third, the mixed-method method used in this study will give a complete picture of the program effectiveness that cannot be delivered by the quantitative or qualitative methods. Objective performance measures in combination with subjective experiences of the participants will give a clue on what was done in the program, how and why. This technique of rigor improves validity and generalizability of results to various institutional settings.

Fourth, the emphasis on a variety of types of disabilities in one programmatic model proves that structured peer mentorship can be successfully tailored to meet the needs of heterogeneous groups. This inclusive practice, instead of establishing disability-specific programs and segregating students, made students with a wide range of disabilities come together and understand and feel solidarity without neglecting the fact that each student needs a different type of support.

Lastly, the comparative analysis against the traditional support services measures the value added of peer mentorship and this will give the institutions tangible information that can be used in making resource allocation and program development decisions. The conclusion that peer mentorship beats the traditional ones by an average of 21.5 percent in the parameters measured presents a sound argument to institutional investment in peer mentorship program as a cost effective measure of enhancing student with disabilities outcomes.

VII. Conclusion and Future Scope

This paper presents strong arguments showing that technology-based, structured peer mentorship programs benefit the academic success, retention, engagement, and wellbeing of students with disabilities at universities in significant ways. The mentored group showed significant gains in all outcomes measured, and academic performance was improved by 18.6, retention rates were improved by 22.4, student engagement was improved by 31.2 and self-efficacy scores were enhanced by 27.8. These findings confirm the hypothesis that peer mentorship (with such a detailed, evidence-based model) is a powerful intervention strategy, which can be used to address

the problematic situations (which are so complicated in the context of higher education) faced by students with disabilities. The implications of these important findings are on the institutional policy and practice. The development and the implementation of properly structured peer mentorship should be included in the key aspects of the inclusive learning strategies of the universities. These programs should have an extensive mentor training that should be conducted in disability awareness, communication skills, academic coaching, and familiarity of assistive technology. Institutions must as well invest in technology infrastructure which will enable flexible and accessible interactions in mentorship, such as online communication means, scheduling, and sharing of resources. Further, peer mentorship programs should be evaluated in a systematic way both quantitatively and qualitatively to ensure the ongoing improvement and responsibility. Scalability is a key factor to mass implementation of peer mentorship programs. The model formulated in this paper is geared towards flexibility in a wide range of institutional settings, that is, small liberal arts colleges, as well as large research universities. The use of technology to overcome geographic and temporal restrictions, participation of upperclassmen and graduate students as mentors, which provides a renewable source of potential mentors, the lack of need to develop completely separate infrastructure, and the formal training and evaluation procedures that maintain quality and consistency are key factors making scalability easy. The program can be instituted in stages with pilot projects on particular departments or types of disabilities being implemented and then all other departments are introduced depending on the achievements and resources at hand.

Some of the key questions and limitations found in this study ought to be discussed in future research. Long-term studies that follow students outside the two-semester period would clarify the sustainability of the benefits of mentorship over time and whether the benefits continue to be gained after the formal program end. The comparative effectiveness researches involving mentorship models (e.g., one-on-one versus group mentorship, peer versus professional mentorship, technology-mediated

versus face-to-face interaction) would help in the best program design decisions. A study involving the experiences and developmental outcomes of the peer mentor himself would give a more holistic picture of mutual benefit of the mentorship relationship.

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