

Article

# Mentoring Postsecondary Students with Intellectual Disabilities: Faculty and Staff Mentor Perspectives

Laura M. Heron <sup>1,\*</sup> , Rumi Agarwal <sup>1</sup>  and Shanna L. Burke <sup>2</sup> <sup>1</sup> FIU Embrace, Florida International University, 11200 S.W. 8th Street, Miami, FL 33199, USA<sup>2</sup> School of Social Work, Robert Stempel College of Public Health and Social Work, Florida International University, 11200 S.W. 8th Street, Miami, FL 33199, USA

\* Correspondence: lauramheron4@gmail.com

**Abstract:** As the number of inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs in the United States increases, a greater number of young adults with an intellectual disability (ID) are attending college. To ensure students with IDs have the same opportunity to succeed in the postsecondary education environment as their peers without disabilities, it is critical that research is conducted to explore the support mechanisms that contribute to successful outcomes for this population. To address existing gaps in the literature, the present study involved a qualitative investigation of the experiences of faculty and staff mentors who formally mentored students with ID over the course of one academic year. Four themes provided unique insights into (1) the activities that were undertaken by faculty and staff mentors to help students meet their academic, employment, independent living, and personal development goals; (2) common challenge areas related to the mentoring program and dyad partnerships; (3) areas of student growth; and, finally, (4) how impactful the mentoring experience was for faculty and staff mentors. By providing a timely and novel contribution to the mentoring literature, the findings from this study can inform the development of mentoring programs within IPSE settings that will promote positive postsecondary outcomes for students with IDs.

**Keywords:** intellectual disability; mentoring; postsecondary education; inclusive programs



**Citation:** Heron, L.M.; Agarwal, R.; Burke, S.L. Mentoring Postsecondary Students with Intellectual Disabilities: Faculty and Staff Mentor Perspectives. *Educ. Sci.* **2023**, *13*, 213. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13020213>

Academic Editor: Debra Costley

Received: 27 December 2022

Revised: 17 January 2023

Accepted: 10 February 2023

Published: 17 February 2023



**Copyright:** © 2023 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

As a result of changing public policy [1] and the revision of the Higher Education Opportunity Act [2], an increasing number of young adults with intellectual disabilities (IDs) are accessing higher education through inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs. IPSE programs serve students with IDs by providing them with support and services geared towards improving academic, independent living, and employment skills, while affording them the chance to experience college life like their neurotypical peers. Many studies over the past decade have demonstrated that graduating from an IPSE program can have positive impacts on several life outcomes for individuals with IDs, including health and well-being, community and social integration, and employment [3,4].

As the number of IPSE programs in the United States increases [5] and more young adults with IDs are given the opportunity to attend college, there is a need to explore the types of support that contribute to successful student outcomes within the postsecondary environment for students with IDs. The types of support provided to children and adolescents with disabilities in the K-12 system are often not available or preferred in a postsecondary context, given the increased need for young adults with IDs to feel more independent once they transition into higher education [6]. As such, IPSE programs must leverage more natural types of support that balance the need for students to progress in the academic, independent living, and employment domains with reductions in the use of other, more hands-on types of support that can be stigmatizing [7].

One specific type of support often given to young adults with disabilities in a variety of different contexts is mentoring [8–12]. For example, mentoring is often used as a tool to

help young adults with IDs prepare for the transition into postsecondary environments [13] and to promote academic and career success for students with disabilities in general once they are in college [14]. However, there is currently a lack of research examining mentoring for students with IDs specifically within IPSE program settings. Further, an in-depth understanding of the experiences of faculty and staff mentors is currently lacking.

To address significant gaps in both research and practice, the present study involved a qualitative investigation of the experiences of mentors (representing faculty and staff members of a university in the southwestern United States) who participated in a pilot mentoring program developed by an IPSE program serving students with IDs. By increasing our understanding of this mentoring partnership, the findings from this study can be used to inform the development of more supportive practices and programs for students with IDs in the postsecondary education environment.

### *Mentoring in a Postsecondary Education Setting*

Much of the literature on mentoring for students with IDs in a postsecondary context focuses on the benefits of peer mentoring and the experiences of peer mentors [6,9,11,12,15]. Peer mentors fulfill an important role by providing a wide range of support and advice in areas such as academics, socialization, and campus inclusion [6]. One study, for example, found that peer mentors of students with IDs had three consistent responsibilities, which included setting boundaries (i.e., helping mentees understand the rules around physical touch and personal space when maintaining a professional relationship), facilitating friendships (i.e., ensuring the mentee understands the relationship between a mentor and mentee and when it is appropriate to act as friends versus in a professional manner), and tutoring (i.e., helping students with academic work) [16].

Another type of mentorship often available to students on campus is provided by faculty members. Having a faculty mentor offers a unique layer of support centered on skill-building and general guidance to help students reach their academic and career-related goals [17]. This type of close interaction between students and faculty is a key factor in student learning and success at the collegiate level [18]. Successful mentors often have more experience than their mentees, providing them with the knowledge to offer guidance and support leading to positive growth outcomes. Another important factor in successful mentoring partnerships involves trust, which is created by establishing an emotional bond over time [19]. It is clear from prior research that faculty mentorship is a popular support mechanism within many postsecondary education institutes for undergraduate students [20], doctoral students [17], and, occasionally, underrepresented groups [21]. However, while there are recent studies examining the effectiveness of mentor workshops with staff and faculty mentors for mentees with IDs [22] and the perspectives of university faculty on instructing students with IDs within a postsecondary education setting [23], there is still a lack of research demonstrating the use of faculty mentors to support students with disabilities in a postsecondary education setting.

To date, only three studies—all based on one faculty mentoring intervention, the Faculty Mentorship Program (FMP) [24–26] provide evidence of the effectiveness of faculty mentoring for students with disabilities. The FMP was provided by the postsecondary education institutes' disability service office and was available to all students who chose to disclose their disability, with the primary goal of supporting students with disabilities as they transition into the college environment. While the mentoring program was largely unstructured, with the frequency of meetings left to the discretion of each dyad, students were paired with faculty mentors who best represented their chosen area of interest.

Findings from the first study demonstrated that those who received faculty mentoring maintained a higher grade-point average and used more campus resources and services [24] than students who did not participate. In the second study, qualitative analysis of data from 12 students (with either a physical or cognitive disability) revealed that faculty mentorship eased their transition into college [26]. Specifically, students reported receiving advice across a range of topics, including academics, self-advocacy, and independent living, and

(similar to the findings from the first study) were more aware of and more likely to use various campus resources. Finally, the third study examined the impact of the FMP on academic outcomes across all students (with and without disabilities) over eight years. Overall, there was a significant difference between the graduation rates of participating students (67.81%) compared to students who did not participate in the FMP (60.29%) [25].

While these findings indicate how mentorship within postsecondary education settings can positively impact outcomes for students with disabilities, little is known about what exactly happens in these mentoring partnerships. For example, do mentors and mentees set and work towards goals? What are the activities that are undertaken throughout a mentoring program? What are the experiences of the mentor? Research is needed to further define the scope of the mentoring relationship between mentors and students with disabilities, particularly those with IDs in an IPSE program. The present study set out to better understand this mentoring partnership by investigating the experiences of mentors as they mentored students with IDs over one academic year.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Participants

Faculty and staff ( $n = 31$ ) from a large public university in the southeastern United States were recruited to participate in a pilot mentoring program as mentors to students with IDs (18 to 24 years old) enrolled in an IPSE program. In this study, “faculty” refers to individuals who were employed at the university in a teaching capacity, and “staff” refers to individuals who were employed in administrative or other non-teaching capacities. Despite occupying different roles at the university, both faculty and staff participants were treated as one mentor group. As such, faculty and staff will be referred to collectively as mentors, and students with IDs will be referred to as mentees from now on.

The majority of mentors were female (74%) and occupied staff or administrative positions (77%), and several departments across the campus were represented. All mentors committed to one academic year (2018–2019), were offered a USD 400 stipend for each semester of mentorship, signed an informed consent form, and agreed to a level II background check. Mentors were paired with a mentee by the IPSE program staff based on schedule availability and career interest.

### 2.2. Procedure

As part of the mentoring program, mentors were required to (1) attend workshops designed to help them acquire skills and knowledge to enhance the mentoring relationship and (2) meet with their mentee for one hour each week. Specifically, mentors attended four workshops over the academic year that provided them with important information related to how the mentoring program was structured, disability awareness (such as disability definitions, using appropriate terminology, and interaction etiquette), essential mentor skills (including topics such as active listening, building trust, goal-setting, and providing feedback), and communication (which involved engaging in a discussion around what methods of communication have worked for them, where communication barriers exist, and how to overcome them). These workshops aimed to prepare mentors for mentoring students with IDs (see [22] for more information on the program workshops).

During the weekly mentoring meetings, mentors were asked to focus on their mentees’ academic and career-related goals based on a plan each mentee participated in creating at the beginning of the academic year through a process called the *Students Transitioning to Adult Roles Person-Centered Plan* (STAR PCP) [27]. Mentors and mentees had substantial flexibility in determining the structure of their meetings and the activities and tasks they chose to make progress toward their goals. To evaluate the progress of the mentoring meetings and program, mentors completed two questionnaires via an online link on a secure HIPAA-compliant platform: the weekly log and the end-of-semester questionnaire (described below). All procedures and materials for the mentoring program were approved by the University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB-18-0246).

### 2.3. Measures

The *Weekly Log*, as the name implies, was completed by the mentor every week after their dyad meeting to document areas of support the mentor addressed and included joint activities, individual tasks completed, student progress, and any areas of concern (such as mentee behavior and professionalism). Specifically, questions in the weekly log included: "If you did not meet with your mentee this week, please state the reason", "What are the STAR PCP goals of your mentee (or other agreed upon measurable goals)?", "List the actions steps (aligned with their goals) that the mentee should complete prior to next week's meeting", "Please add any other narrative/notes based on your meeting", and "Please explain any other academic support activity that your mentee is attending".

The *End-of-Semester* survey aimed to gather the mentor's perspectives on the program workshops (evaluated in [22]), their mentees' growth and continued challenges, and their experience as a mentor. Specifically, the questions from the end-of-semester survey that were examined in this study included: "Describe any accomplishments/outcomes/areas of most growth for your mentee, this semester", "Describe any challenges/concerns/areas of least growth that occurred this semester, and if applicable, steps taken to address these challenges", "Briefly describe a typical mentoring session with your mentee", "What was your most memorable experience as a mentor this semester?", and "What was your least memorable experience as a mentor?"

### 2.4. Data Analysis

Records from the weekly logs ( $n = 622$ ) and end-of-semester surveys ( $n = 52$ ) were collected over one academic year. Data were de-identified and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), a qualitative method suitable for examining experiences and perceptions. Two authors used a semantic and inductive approach embedded within the RTA for analysis, as code and theme generation were guided by the explicit content of the data [28]. Specifically, a six-phase process was conducted following the RTA steps developed by Braun and Clarke [28]. In step one, both authors read through the data to become familiarized with them. In step two, the data were split into two and each author took one portion to identify initial codes, collate codes, and organize appropriate data extracts. In steps three and four, one author generated themes from the initial codes and the other reviewed the themes. In steps five and six, both authors worked together to discuss and reach an agreement on themes and write up findings.

## 3. Results

Four themes were identified from the RTA, including mentoring goals and activities, program- and dyad-level challenges, areas of mentee growth as a result of the mentorship process, and, finally, how mentors were positively impacted by the mentoring experience. The four themes are presented below, supported by excerpts from the data.

### 3.1. Theme 1: Mentoring Goals and Activities

In the mentoring goals and activities theme, mentors reported what happened during the weekly mentoring sessions, including the topics discussed, goals set, and the wide range of activities undertaken to achieve the mentee's goals. This theme had three subthemes, providing insight into what occurred during a typical mentoring session, the kinds of mentoring goals that each dyad worked towards, and the types of mentoring activities undertaken over the academic year.

#### 3.1.1. A Typical Mentoring Session

Generally, mentors began their sessions reviewing the last meeting and then discussed various topics, including extracurriculars the mentee participated in, mentee interests, social life or family, and any challenges that may have come up since their last meeting. Mentors also reviewed the objectives from the prior week, reflected or worked on STAR PCP goals, and set specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART)

goals for the following week. Meeting logistics were also discussed, including mentee punctuality, meeting location (i.e., some met in their office, others preferred to walk around campus), and the scheduling of their next session. The following quotes provide detailed examples of typical mentoring sessions from the perspective of three different mentors:

The [mentee] and I were scheduled to meet every [weekday] from [for an hour]. At the conclusion of each prior week's meeting, I'd send [mentee] an email reminder of the weekly SMART objectives we discussed and set out to achieve [in] the coming week. Therefore, we typically began by reviewing the past week's email and reflecting upon whether or not the objectives were met. If they were not met, we rolled them over to the next week. If they were met, we'd discuss how we could move to another section of the STAR PCP in order to brainstorm new objectives together. Using this method, we were able to reflect upon all of the STAR PCP areas at least once but usually two or three times during the semester. I also assisted the [mentee] with tasks such as updating [their] resume (we did this together) and reviewing some of [mentee's] assignments from [their internship].

Our meetings typically begin with the [mentee] describing how his week went. Then we review whatever was covered during the last session and discuss whether or not the action steps were completed. Then we create a goal for the new session and then list some action steps on how we can reach those goals. [Mentee] is provided with resources and information based on the topic discussed in the session. Then the [mentee] and mentor debrief and schedule the next session.

Typically, we go over the following topics: Academic, Social and Career. Weekly, I inquire on his academic progress, discuss any challenges and solutions he has faced related to his schoolwork. Then we discuss his social progress, he has shown a tremendous improvement on his social skills, at first, he was hesitant to participate in any [university] sponsored activity at [location on campus], now he frequents [location on campus] with his friends. Finally, we discuss his career options.

### 3.1.2. Mentoring Goals

Setting goals for mentees based on their STAR PCP plan was a key component of the mentoring program. Mentors reported setting a variety of different goals with their mentees, ranging from maintaining good grades in class to attending on-campus events.

Goal 1: Complete his academic assignments/courses successfully, he strives for maximum participation. [Mentee] input [action steps]: at his First-Year class, [mentee] was able to understand the information and he completed his quizzes successfully. He was very proud of this week's accomplishment. Goal 2: Participate in [University] clubs, so he can engage and participate socially with other [University] students. [Mentee] input [action steps]: He will reach out to club organization and inquire on how to register and participate in [University] clubs.

(1) Career Development and Engagement: Goal—create and personalize Handshake account by mid-October. (2) Campus and Community Engagement: Goal—attend on-campus event by mid-October. (3) Academic Enrichment: Goal—excel on final Theatre appreciation paper (will work on this throughout entire semester as soon as [the] topic is given by professor).

### 3.1.3. Mentoring Activities

Mentors engaged in numerous activities to help their mentees accomplish their STAR PCP goals (see Tables 1–4 for an extensive list of mentoring activities related to academic, employment, independent living, and personal development goals). Specifically, Table 1 shows all the academic-related activities undertaken by mentors in their mentoring sessions. The left column lists the overarching academic goals that guided the mentoring activities, including maintaining good grades; identifying courses related to the mentee's interests;

and improving academic skills by developing strong study habits, improving math skills, improving reading comprehension and writing skills, and learning new technology or software. Specific activities undertaken to help mentees maintain good grades (given in the middle column of Table 1) were helping the mentee to navigate the academic platform used at the university, reaching out to professors for guidance, reviewing the course syllabus, and checking homework and assignments. Activities to help mentees identify courses included working with the mentee to list courses of interest and search the university catalog. Finally, activities undertaken to help the mentee improve academic skills included reviewing notes before a quiz; creating a study plan; repeating information out loud to help with retention; creating flashcards; practicing math questions and completing math worksheets; using Google Translate to help understand unfamiliar words; reading a book; making notes on assignments; completing a writing sample and a basic punctuation worksheet; writing a short story, poem, or report; discussing plagiarism; working in Excel, PowerPoint, and Word; saving documents in different formats; and learning to use the Google search engine. Quotes describing these activities are listed in the right column of Table 1.

Table 2 provides all the reported activities related to employment. As shown in the left column, employment goals included making a career plan (which involved researching career interests and attending career fairs), learning how to apply for jobs (which involved developing a strong resume), and improving employment skills (including practicing how to write professional emails. Mentoring activities related to researching career interests included looking up certifications, internships, summer programs, and part-time jobs; searching for volunteer activities; identifying industries that matched mentee interests; taking a career quiz; and discussing qualities that made the mentee employable. Activities related to attending career fairs included making at least two contacts with organizations and creating a strategy for navigating the career fair. Activities related to applying for jobs included creating LinkedIn profiles, finding resume templates, drafting a resume, creating different resumes for different interests, and writing a cover letter. Finally, activities related to improving employment skills included practicing interview questions, practicing writing emails, and practicing professional conduct by using handshakes instead of hugs and emailing instead of texting. Quotes from mentors describing these activities are shown in the right column of Table 2.

Table 3 lists all the activities related to independent living. Goals shown in the left column included learning to manage time (such as using a calendar), improving navigation and transportation skills (including using transportation and getting a driver's license), improving house-management skills (such as cooking and learning to manage money), and engaging in civil rights activities. Specific activities for learning to manage time listed in the middle column included learning how to add items to a calendar and set reminders and practicing telling time on an analog watch. Activities related to improving navigation and transportation skills included navigating campus, discussing transportation costs, planning for transportation, creating a study schedule, and obtaining a study manual for driving tests. Activities related to improving house-management skills included observing a parent cooking and writing down the steps, looking up simple recipes, watching cooking videos on YouTube, and discussing the cost of living. Activities related to learning to manage money included tracking spending for a given time period and saving a specific amount of money by a certain date. Finally, activities related to engaging in civil rights activities included researching the ballot in advance. Quotes from mentors describing these activities are shown in the right column of Table 3.

**Table 1.** Academic-related goals, activities, and example quotes.

Academic Goals	Mentoring Activities	Example Quotes	
Maintain good grades	Navigate Canvas (academic platform)	"I asked [mentee] to log on to his Canvas account to see if he knows how to see when his assignments are due. I also showed him how to keep track of his grade on Canvas"	
	Reach out to professor for guidance	"I helped him with emailing his professor for meeting appointment"	
	Review course syllabus	"[Mentee] and mentor review the course syllabus for the two courses he is taking this semester"	
	Check homework or assignments	"Today we went over the homework instruction[s] together"	
Identify courses related to mentee interests	List courses of interest	"Student will list at least three courses he is interested in taking"	
	Search university course catalog	"Search [university] course catalog for courses related to art/drawing for the Spring [year] semester"	
Develop strong study habits	Review notes before a quiz	"I helped [mentee] study for his marketing quiz. We reviewed concepts [and] examples that he had difficulty understanding"	
	Create a study plan	"We created a plan for him to begin studying for his test"	
	Repeat information out loud to help with retention	"He studied the guide, but this time around he read the questions out loud. This was more helpful for him since he was able to grasp the content"	
	Create flashcards	"I gave a different study method, flash cards. He said he would try it"	
Improve math skills	Practice math questions	"We work on math problems, especially multiplication"	
	Complete math worksheets	"[Mentee] and I will work on math worksheets to assess [Mentee's] math skills"	
Improve academic skills	Improve reading comprehension	Practice using Google Translate to help understand unfamiliar words	"[Mentee] during reading will sound out and define via google translator unfamiliar words for pronunciation and meaning"
		Read a book	"Find a book to read (topic basketball) to work on reading comprehension"
		Make notes on reading assignments	"Make notes on three pages of reading assignments"
Improve writing skills		Complete a writing sample to assess grammar and punctuation	"[Mentee] completed a writing sample, which we reviewed together for grammar and punctuation. He did a good job at this and received feedback very well"
		Complete a basic punctuation worksheet	"We reviewed his journal entries for grammar and punctuation. We will continue this exercise weekly. [Mentee] was also given a punctuation worksheet to complete before our next meeting"
		Write a short story or poem	"I had given him a Langston Hughes poem to read and explain to me. He nailed the comprehension and likes poetry so I'm assigning him poetry writing task next"
		Write a report after attending an event or watching a video	"Find a persuasive Ted Talk that interests himself; Write a 1–2-page report and send it to me"
		Discuss plagiarism	"He was just copying the information. I corrected him and explained to him that he should summarize what he read; copying is not good"

**Table 1.** *Cont.*

Academic Goals		Mentoring Activities	Example Quotes
Improve academic skills	Learn technology/software	Work in Excel, PowerPoint, and Word	"We worked on excel exercises so he can better understand it"
		Save documents in different formats	"The formats that were accepted were jpegs, pngs and other picture format. I [showed] him that in most Microsoft programs, you are able to save your work in different formats"
		Learn to use the Google search engine and save pictures	"I taught him how to add pictures to power points and how to save pictures he finds on google"

**Table 2.** Employment-related goals, activities, and example quotes.

Employment Goals		Mentoring Activities	Example Quotes
Make a career plan	Research career interests	Research certifications, internships, summer programs, part-time jobs	"Since he wants to be a [fitness professional], we discussed researching different programs that offer certifications . . . So, the goal is to look for programs that are based in [State] and check what their requirements to be enrolled in the program are"
		Search for volunteer activities	"I discussed with [mentee] about the next steps we will take in finding volunteer information"
		Research industries that match interests and define requirements for jobs	"We discussed three career options he is interested in and then we googled them to see what type of training or job requirement are needed for those jobs"
		Take a career quiz to identify interests	"We also did a Career quiz to find other jobs he would excel in"
		Discuss five qualities that make the student employable	"In yesterday's meeting, we discussed 5 positive qualities [the mentee] has that make him likable and employable"
Attend career fairs		Make at least two contacts with organizations	"[Mentee] will have contact with at least 2 agencies at the Career Fair"
		Create a strategy for navigating the career fair	"During the job fair [mentee] was to approach all table[s] he thought were interesting and find out which job would align with what he wants to do with his career"
Prepare for applying for jobs	Develop a strong resume	Create LinkedIn or Handshake accounts	"[Mentee] and I worked on activating his Handshake account. I explained to him the purpose of having this account and how important of a tool this is in terms of helping him find internship/career opportunities"
		Find a resume template	"I provided him with a template for his resume and we began to work on an outline"
		Draft a resume	"Worked on draft of resume, emailed him the revisions that we discussed so that they could be finalized for our next meeting"
		Create different resumes geared toward different student interests	"[Mentee] is tasked with updating the two resumes we worked on this week. He is going to have a general/retail resume and an acting/actors resume"
		Write a cover letter	"The best type of internship opportunity for him would be something in the field of customer service. We will work on a cover letter to fit this need"

**Table 2.** *Cont.*

Employment Goals		Mentoring Activities	Example Quotes
Improve employment skills	Practice professional emails	Practice interview questions	"I conducted a mock interview with him and provided him feedback as to areas of improvement"
		Practice writing general emails	"We reviewed the protocol and formatting when writing a professional email"
		Practice writing "thank you" emails for after an interview	"[We worked] on a Thank you email after an interview and a mock interview"
		Practice professional conduct (using handshakes instead of hugs, emailing instead of texting, etc.)	"We've been working on his job interview skills: shake hands, offered a copy of your resume, take notes on items they might ask him, so [mentee] can respond to those questions via email, take business cards of the people he would like use as a reference"

**Table 3.** Independent living-related goals, activities, and example quotes.

Independent Living Goals		Mentoring Activities	Example Quotes
Learn to manage time	Using a calendar	Learn how to add items to a calendar	"We discussed how to add items to his calendar"
		Learn how to set reminders in a calendar	"He used his calendar reminders that we programmed in his phone to help him stay on track and do the activities he needs to do during their required times"
		Practice telling time from an analog watch	"I provided him with a worksheet on analog time. He completed it and got all answers correct"
Improve navigation and transportation skills	Using transportation	Navigate campus	"[Mentee] and I looked at a map of [University Campus]. She was able to identify several key buildings. She seems to have learned how to get around campus and reported that she feels much more comfortable doing so. [Mentee] no longer seems afraid of getting lost on campus"
		Discuss transportation costs	"[Mentee] seems to understand the financial aspect of handling his money, he can distinguish what is the least expensive way of requesting transportation from one point to another"
		Plan for transportation	"[Mentee] is able to select what means of transportation is best for him. He planned out how he will get to this weekend convention"

Table 3. Cont.

Independent Living Goals		Mentoring Activities	Example Quotes
Improve navigation and transportation skills	Getting a driving license	Create a study schedule	“One [of] his goals is to take the driver’s written exam, so . . . we developed a study plan. He has a guide that has 6 pages of information. The guide was divided into 3 sections, each section has 2 pages (back and front) in which he is going to study at different times. [Mentee] will study each section for 2 weeks . . . I will give him a short quiz on the questions to test his knowledge on the material”
		Study manual	“I usually spend about 30–45 min with the student practicing . . . his written driver license practice tests online”
Improve house-management skills	Cooking	Observe parent cooking and write down steps	“Observe mom cooking dinner at least twice in the coming week. Write down steps she takes to better replicate the process”
		Look up simple recipes	“[Mentee] was tasked to look up recipes that would be easy to make”
		Watch cooking videos on YouTube	“[Mentee] will be looking at cooking videos on YouTube”
Learn to manage money		Discuss the cost of living	“Meet next week to discuss cost of living and housing prices”
		Track spending for a given time period	“I asked [student] to start to learn how to manage his money and how much he is spending for lunch each week”
		Save a specific amount of money by a certain date	“Set up a plan to save at least \$200 per every 2 weeks”
		Engage in civil rights activities	Research ballot in advance

Table 4. Personal development-related goals, activities, and example quotes.

Personal Development Goals		Mentoring Activities	Example Quotes
Improve communication and socialization	General communication	Practice communicating	“We used cards that prompt questions in a variety of topics: heroes, hobbies, family, school, and overall point of views. [Mentee] was very engaged and responded his answers with full sentences. It was a great way to practice his communication skills and also get to know him better”
		Learn non-verbal cues	“We discussed . . . how to communicate more effectively by discerning non-verbal communication cues”
		Practice responding to emails	“We are still working on the Communication part on how he should write back and correspond to emails more efficiently”

Table 4. Cont.

Personal Development Goals		Mentoring Activities	Example Quotes
Improve communication and socialization	Public speaking	Deliver a live presentation	"[Mentee] will begin brainstorming how to structure his PowerPoint presentation for his peers and [Program] Staff/Mentor"
		Practice making eye contact	"I assign him public speaking homework to improve eye contact"
	Making introductions	Practice proper greetings	"[Mentee] was to practice proper greetings by introducing himself to different people. Work on strong handshake and looking people in the eyes"
		Receive feedback from family and friends	"[Mentee] is to practice proper greetings with friends, families, and strangers, and receive feedback from them. He will bring that back to me and we will work on the advice given to him"
		Meet new people	"To ask 5 different people in school/out of school 4 questions: name, music, hobby and what subject do they like or movie"
Increase campus engagement	Get involved in intramurals	"[Mentee] inquired and attended a soccer meeting for intramural sports at [University]"	
	Attend an on-campus event	"[Mentee] and myself attended and participated in the friendship event at [location at university] grounds sponsored by [University] students"	
	Join a student organization	"We also discussed [mentee] joining a student organization"	
Maintain a healthy lifestyle	General health	Walk during mentoring meetings	"[Mentee] and I completed a 20-min walk around campus as we are incorporating physical activity in our sessions"
		Attend health screening	"[Mentee] completed a form for a free health screening consultation with a personal trainer . . . [Mentee] was told to contact his mentor once he has scheduled an appointment for the screening"
		Practice exercises at the gym	"[Mentee] will practice the exercised learned at the gym"
		Make an exercise plan	"[Mentee] will try to participate in 10–15 min of exercise at home twice a week"
		Start a 30-day abs challenge	"[Mentee] will start his 30-day Abs Challenge"
		Keep a food log	"Complete a food log"

Table 4. Cont.

Personal Development Goals		Mentoring Activities	Example Quotes
Maintain a healthy lifestyle	Stress management	Listen to music when anxious	"Every time that I would notice the student was anxious or frustrated, we would play a song of the [mentee's] choice, while the music was playing, I noticed he would get calmer and was able to discuss his problem with less anxiety"
		Keep a journal to track anxiety or other challenges	"[Mentee] made journal entries on challenging experiences he encountered over the past week"
		Make a plan to manage stress	"Mentor help student come up with a plan to manage his stress"
		Journal times when mentee feels anger or frustration	"[Mentee] documented 3 instances where he felt that he may have lost his temper. We spoke about them and we identified methods to deal with the situations and how to possibly handle these situations differently"

Table 4 provides all of the reported activities related to personal development. Personal development goals shown in the left column included improving communication and socialization (such as general communication, public speaking, and making introductions), increasing campus engagement, and maintaining a healthy lifestyle (including general health and stress management). As shown in the middle column, activities related to improving communication and socialization included practicing communicating and responding to emails, learning non-verbal cues, delivering live presentations, practicing making eye contact and proper greetings, receiving feedback from family and friends on greetings, and meeting new people. Activities related to increasing campus engagement included getting involved in intramural sports, attending on-campus events, and joining a student organization. Finally, activities related to maintaining a healthy lifestyle included walking during mentoring meetings, attending health screenings, practicing exercises at the gym, making an exercise plan, starting a 30-day abs challenge, keeping a food log, listening to music when anxious, keeping a journal to track anxiety or other challenges, making a plan to manage stress, and journaling when the mentee felt anger or frustration.

#### 3.1.4. Theme 1 Summary

In summary, the mentoring goals and activities theme provides a detailed account of the structure of mentoring sessions, goals that mentors worked towards with their mentees, and activities which are undertaken to meet those goals. Mentors typically began a mentoring session by reviewing the objectives that were set the prior week and asking their mentees how their week was going. It is clear from the mentor quotes that the main focus of every mentoring session was guided by the mentees' STAR PCP goals set at the beginning of the year. These goals were often focused on academic enrichment, social participation, and career development. A vast number of mentor activities were recorded over the academic year, demonstrating the wide variety of activities undertaken by mentors to help their mentees reach their goals.

### 3.2. Theme 2: Program- and Dyad-Level Challenges

The program- and dyad-level challenges theme demonstrated some of the challenges that mentors experienced while fulfilling their role as a mentor. This theme had two subthemes: program-level and dyad-level challenges.

#### 3.2.1. Program-Level Challenges

Mentors shared that they faced some difficulties as a result of the mentoring program's expectations. In the pilot year, mentors were asked to work within established parameters, such as not socializing with their mentees outside of the campus and using email to communicate rather than text. This was intended to model and mirror the professional boundaries expected in the work environment. Mentors, however, found that it was easier to communicate with their mentees via text (rather than email) and reported that rules related to socializing were too rigid.

A few times, the [mentee] got confused regarding the time of our meeting. She confirmed receipt of my meeting invites (these were scheduled [for] the same time every week) but I believe this may have been confusing confirming everything over email as we are encouraged to do in the program. I believe texting her is a better option and I don't mind doing that if it is approved by the program.

[It was a challenge] not being able to spend more time with [my mentee] attending events and activities. I think [if] more activities are planned early in the semester, it gives us an opportunity to get to know our mentees better.

#### 3.2.2. Dyad-Level Challenges

At the dyad level, one persistent concern involved logistical issues related to the scheduling of weekly mentor-mentee meetings. In some instances, mentors had to cancel

their scheduled meetings due to conflicting personal or professional commitments, but more often than not, issues with meeting logistics were driven by poor mentee time management and communication skills. For example, some mentees were late to their meetings, did not show up to meetings at all, or did not communicate scheduling issues in advance to keep the mentor informed. Moreover, rescheduling meetings was challenging given the lack of mutually convenient alternatives. Many mentees had over-committed schedules as a result of either participation in too many campus and community activities or a heavy academic course load. As a result, some mentors expressed that there was insufficient time or that there were not enough sessions over the semester to comprehensively address goals:

[Mentee] seems slightly over-committed with regards to her schedule. I will continue to discuss with her the importance of setting reasonable goals for engagement in activities on and off campus.

It was difficult to meet with [mentee] regularly for an hour due to his schedule. I feel that I had very limited time to work on his goals. [Mentee] was not good about communicating his time conflicts so there were many moments of wondering if he was going to attend. He needs to improve his time management.

Mentors also shared that building trust with the mentee took time, which made initial meetings difficult and led to delays in working towards goals:

In the beginning [t]he [mentee] did not seem very comfortable or interested [in meeting]. It was very challenging to engage [t]he [mentee] in different conversations. He liked to stick to certain subjects like [course name]. The [mentee] also in 2 occurrences was a no show and did not advise me before that he was not going to meet me. On the first time, I did explain to him the consequences of this in a job scenario. He seemed to understand but the second time he just did not tell me until hours later. So communication is a factor he needs to still work on.

Communication was a persistent challenge, with some mentors expressing that mentees were not communicating effectively either verbally or non-verbally:

Something that we still need to work on is really for him to think for himself in difficult situations. Sometimes I ask a question and I have to answer it myself because he gets stuck I [and] does not know what to say. He mostly just repeats what I say most [of] the times.

I was unable to assist [mentee] with her writing assignment this week because she has forgotten to send it to me. We are working on improving our email communication.

Additionally, some mentors noted the lack of professional behavior and boundaries maintained by their mentees. For example, mentees came to meetings in varying moods (e.g., tired, upset, disengaged) and often wanted to talk about topics not appropriate for a professional mentoring meeting, such as their romantic relationships. They were also often distracted and spent more time on their phone rather than actively participating in the meeting. Moreover, many mentees did not complete or follow through with assigned tasks and sometimes would not bring the necessary materials (such as textbooks and laptops) to meetings to work on agreed-upon activities (such as class assignments, as noted in the above quote, and resumes). Mentors noted that this lack of professionalism and focus could have been a reflection of poor time-management skills and/or mentees' need for more support in working towards goals. In some instances, this challenge appeared to be driven by mentees believing that their goals had been accomplished, when in fact they had not:

[My mentee] is extremely frustrated with his STAR PCP goal and feels that he already accomplished all his goals since it has been the same since his previous years. I understand [mentee's] frustration, but I don't agree that he accomplished his goals. I believe his goals are set too high for him and we need to work toward his goals slowly. Our main focus right now from [the] STAR PCP is Academic

Enrichment and Independent Living. I have noticed he missed a couple of his classes and he hasn't opened his textbook once. I have also noticed he is not aware of how much money he is spending on food.

Today's session was interesting. [Mentee] said he wanted to focus on reviewing the websites for the [industry] certification. [I] went over the websites with him, even though I had recommended in the past that he should [have] done this on his own. When I explained to him, he would need to take some courses before taking the exam, he was in a bit of disbelief. I think he thought he could just take the test and just get certified. I told him for a career like this you would need certified from a credited program. I suggested that he research which one would be a best fit for him because there are several. Some of [them are] even online, which is the one [he] would prefer. He started losing interest in the conversation a bit because he kept looking at his phone and texting a bit. He also kept looking at his watch. I asked him if there was anything he wanted to go over, he said he wanted to continue with the websites. I tasked him with researching a program that best fits him.

### 3.2.3. Theme 2 Summary

In summary, the program- and dyad-level challenges theme demonstrates some of the key challenges mentors face when participating in a mentoring program for mentees with IDs. It is clear from the thematic analysis that the key program-level challenges were related to the rigidity of the rules enforced by the IPSE program and mainly focused on not being allowed to communicate with their mentee via text or socialize with their mentee off-campus. Other dyad-level challenges centered around difficulties with scheduling time for mentoring sessions due to busy mentee schedules, the slow start to the mentor-mentee relationship due to a lack of initial trust on behalf of the mentee at the beginning of the program, issues with communication that made making progress towards goals more difficult, and poor professional conduct on behalf of the mentees (meaning that mentees sometimes did not complete their objectives or bring the correct items to the meeting for the pair to work on together, lost interest in conversations and got distracted easily, and generally displayed poor time-management skills).

### 3.3. Theme 3: Areas of Mentee Growth

The third theme, areas of mentee growth, reflected the many accomplishments of the mentees and the progress they made over the academic year as observed by the mentors. This theme had four subthemes: academics, employment, independent living, and personal development.

#### 3.3.1. Academics

Mentors observed significant growth in relation to the mentees' academic coursework. It was evident that mentees were committed to their academic responsibilities, taking a greater interest in finishing their assignments and displaying an eagerness to learn.

[My mentee] displayed a positive attitude while discussing academic goals and assignment[s]. [My mentee] was eager to learn new math skills.

We reviewed the short story assigned last week and corrected the mistakes together. [Mentee] did a good job with this. His story was about the [story subject]. During our meeting, I provided him with a worksheet on analog time. He completed it and got all answers correct. He was also given a worksheet on commas. He tried on his own and then we worked on it together. There is room for improvement in this area, but [mentee] is eager to learn and improve his skills.

Mentors also noted that mentees made the connection between academic achievement and future employment outcomes and began to show interest in planning for future coursework.

[Mentee] is focused on obtaining a part-time job next semester, so he completes his academic work on time so he can dedicate time on job shadowing [ . . . ]. He feels strongly on working hard on his academics, which will reflect on future job offerings.

[My mentee] showed interest in his Spring schedule and wants to choose courses that will help him fulfill his career goals. [Mentee] also wants to take fitness classes to promote his health and wellbeing.

Mentees also became more confident in reaching out to professors for guidance and were motivated to attend classes and to achieve good grades.

The [mentee] got comfortable with reaching out to his professor on his own via email and in class to ask for clarity with his assignments.

The [mentee] has been very enthusiastic about completing his schoolwork and getting good grades. He relies on his academic mentor to help him with his schoolwork/assignments. My role has been to express the importance of getting and maintaining good grades.

### 3.3.2. Employment

Mentees displayed great motivation and desire toward beginning job shadowing and internships and attaining paid employment. Some mentees were very clear on the industry or organizations they wanted to enter and worked with their mentors on learning more about them. The desire to be employed led to positive cascading effects the form of increased efforts to apply for jobs, which meant that more mentees began to attend interviews.

The [mentee] has expressed a very strong desire to be employed. This was the topic of several conversations. We updated her resume. She has work experience and skills that qualify her for a variety of jobs. I hope that the [IPSE program] can help her reach this goal.

[Mentee has made] excellent progress academically and [in] career pursuits. He continues to focus on his main goal: get a job [in security]. In the past, [mentee] had researched on different jobs with [organization] or [organization], but he is aware that he will not be able to carry those jobs, but he is looking into jobs with the cyber security.

[Mentee] was happy to report that he applied to 3 jobs during spring break. I love the fact that he was able to keep up with the goal that he set for himself at the beginning of the semester. During our session he was applying for a job at [retailing company].

[Mentee] had an interview after our meeting for his new internship, he was really excited. He said he was already prepared because I offered to go over interview questions with him. [Mentee] is very eager to find employment and I really see him maturing. He knows exactly what he wants and responds well when I ask him questions that might be too difficult for him. He is becoming more open and knows that even though he may not know how to drive he can use public transportation.

Mentees were excited when they began their new positions and learned skills, which were transferrable to other parts of their lives. In addition, they began to demonstrate greater professionalism at their job site.

Through his internship he has learned the skills of Photoshop which he is very interested in continuing to learn it and use it with own pictures. He is hoping that the conference will be a learning experience for him.

Overall, I believe the student made an improvement at his job and making sure he communicates clearly with his supervisor and coworkers.

### 3.3.3. Independent Living

Mentors observed growth in core independent living skills over the academic year. For example, mentees demonstrated more confidence with regard to navigation, logistics, and making choices concerning transportation independently.

[Mentee] walked to my office on her own from a new part of campus, and I no longer walk her part way back to the [name] building. This shows she is getting more comfortable with navigating around campus independently.

At today's meeting we discussed means of transportation. [Mentee] is able to make decisions on transportation modes, either take [mode of transportation] or Uber rides. [mode of transportation] will charge him \$3.50 flat fee rate for a ride to [university] and Uber can charge him up to \$10 rate for a ride to [university]. So he knows that taking a [mode of transportation] ride is a better choice financially.

Many mentees were highly motivated to apply for their driver's licenses, live independently once they graduated, learn to cook, and manage their own money.

The [mentee] was already very outgoing and well-adjusted to the [university] environment when I met her. She seems to be very focused on becoming independent (using transportation, job hunting, cooking, etc.) and I believe she made great strides in moving towards independent living.

The [mentee] was able to create a saving[s] account and started saving. He identified ways to improve his reading skills. The [mentee] is better prepared for the written part of the driver license than before.

[Mentee] is eager to take the driving test, which shows determination [in terms of] accomplishing things that [are] set [as] goals. In addition, he is also very excited on being tested for [martial arts belt color], which shows his commitment to a sport that has taught him discipline. He is looking forward in getting the shadowing job at [university] police department.

### 3.3.4. Personal Development

Relationships within dyads strengthened as the mentees began to trust their mentors more. As a result, mentees became more goal-oriented, took a greater initiative to learn, followed directions, and completed tasks assigned by the mentor. Many mentors expressed sentiments supporting this.

The [mentee] was a bit shy and didn't want to talk at first. It took him a couple of sessions to open up to me. At first, he would give short yes and no answers. Now, he goes into detail about his classes and daily life.

I believe that my mentee gained experience in goal planning and setting. The [mentee] learned how to find resources in his areas of interest and make feasible steps to attaining those goals.

Mentors noticed marked improvements in their mentees' communication skills, including in the ability to listen, maintain eye contact, keep others informed of schedule changes, answer questions clearly and with more independence, an increase in problem-solving or conflict-resolution capabilities, and the ability to provide and accept feedback.

The most growth of the [mentee] was talking less and listening more. He gave me an opportunity to speak and he listened. This I found was huge for him.

[Mentee] prefers texting. However, after the mentor training [workshop], I asked him if we can switch our communication method to email. Since then, he is working on writing professional emails.

Finally, mentors also reported that mentees were more willing to engage in conversations beyond their topic of interest, were willing to ask for help, and displayed greater confidence, self-advocacy, and self-determination.

Compared to the beginning of the semester, the [mentee] has drastically overcome his fixation with [animal]. Today, the [mentee] and I are able to talk about a wide array of subjects. He is always willing to listen to me and share his thoughts and opinions with me. Although it is hard for him to focus, he is now able to admit when he needs help or when he is confused about something.

### 3.3.5. Theme 3 Summary

In summary, the areas of mentee growth theme demonstrated the many ways in which mentees with IDs benefit from being mentored in a postsecondary education setting. It is clear from the mentor reports that mentees improved in several academic areas (including writing and grammar, math, and learning analog time), employment areas (including showing interest in the types of courses needed for their career options, practicing job interviews, and applying for jobs), independent living areas (including navigation, logistics, transportation, and their intent to drive), and personal development areas (including opening up in conversations, goal setting and planning, communication, and their ability to listen).

### 3.4. Theme 4: Impactful Experiences

The impactful experiences theme provides insight into what some of the most memorable experiences were for mentors. For example, many mentors reported that simply building a relationship and helping a student with a disability were the highlights of their overall experience in working with their mentees.

[The most memorable thing for me (mentor) was] the progress our friendship made. We went from complete strangers not very confident [with] the other, to friends. By the end we came to understand each other better.

Getting to know the [mentee] better and seeing her become more independent and less shy over the course of several weeks.

Being able to teach guidance and assist in teaching someone how to live and work, and advocate for themselves in an environment that is surrounded by people viewing them as different.

Some mentors also shared that the most impactful aspect was how they became a more effective mentor as a result of working with their mentee.

Learning to help and make a difference in my mentee's life. Also learning myself the responsibility to be a good mentor. I truly enjoy my time with my mentee.

Being able to mentor a student with a disability. This has been a great eye opener and has been extremely informative. It has increased my active listening skills as well.

Other memorable moments included observing the mentee accomplish their goals and apply the skills the mentor taught them and seeing their mentee open up, develop trust over time, and, generally, begin to feel more comfortable in the mentoring relationship.

My memorable experience was when the [mentee] was able to complete the goals, we set at the beginning of the spring semester.

When he shared with me [that] he landed his internship with [hospital] and he applied some of the interviewing skills we talked about.

The most memorable moment was when he started to open up with me. He was very reserved at first. But now he feels more comfortable around me.

Some mentors also reported that having good conversations with their mentee or just seeing the passion their mentee had for a topic were highlights of their time as a mentor.

When the [mentee] began to open [up] to me and joined in the meetings. It was around food, but I was the same way when young. She put her cell phone down and we discovered areas in common like cartoons and movies. We began to have

conversations about several other things like life in the dorm and concerts and music. From then on [it] has been a pleasure getting together with her. I so hope she stays with her passion for movies and maybe even keeps on writing.

I really enjoyed hearing the [mentee] talk about comic books and his creative writing ideas. You can tell that he is really passionate about those subjects. His eyes truly light up and it's a wonderful to see his commitment to pursuing that professionally.

Finally, many mentors listed various activities that were positive experiences, including eating lunch with their mentee, celebrating a mentee's birthday, and taking a trip to an on-campus museum.

The [mentee] and I [are] getting closer and talking about our interest while having lunch. It created a stronger bond in our relationship.

Taking the [mentee] to [location on campus] to have lunch for his birthday. He mentioned he had not visited that side of campus. It really made me realize he probably has not explored much of [University name] and with time we can explore the different resources at [University name].

When the student and I went to the [museum on campus] to see the art. He was very excited, and I would make him try to describe or explain what he sees in the art.

#### Theme 4 Summary

In summary, the impactful experiences theme demonstrates how impactful participating in a mentoring program for mentees with IDs is to mentors. Specifically, mentors reported many highlights from being involved with the program, including building a friendship with their mentee, seeing their mentee grow and become more independent over time, having a positive impact on a young adult with a disability, attending various events on campus, and celebrating important milestones with their mentee.

#### 4. Discussion

This study provides a novel contribution to postsecondary education research through a detailed and comprehensive qualitative analysis of the mentoring relationship between mentors (who were faculty and staff employed at the university) and mentees (who were students with IDs enrolled in an IPSE program). The four themes identified from the data increase our understanding of the types of goals mentors set for mentees, the range of activities dyads engaged in to achieve these goals, mentoring challenges at both the program and the dyad partnership levels, mentee areas of growth, and, finally, the impact of mentoring mentees with IDs on mentors. Given that prior research specific to mentoring in a post-secondary context has primarily focused on faculty mentoring for traditional degree-seeking students [20] or peer mentoring for students with disabilities [6,15], the present study extends the mentoring literature by increasing our understanding of how mentoring can benefit students with IDs within an IPSE program. In doing so, this qualitative analysis can be used to inform the development of valuable supportive practices in the postsecondary environment that can help students with IDs succeed.

Specifically, the mentoring goals and activities theme gives insight into a typical mentoring session between mentors and mentees, providing useful information for IPSE programs either looking to start a mentoring program or offering more guidance to mentors. For example, the findings demonstrate commonalities in how mentors approach their mentoring sessions; in particular, regarding following a certain structure. Mentors typically began a session by reviewing their last meeting and discussing any challenges that came about over the past week and then worked on objectives and set goals for the following week. Introducing this type of structure may be key to building a successful mentoring partnership, given how individuals with IDs benefit from consistency and routine [29].

Another interesting finding was that mentors often relied on the mentees' STAR PCP plan to set realistic and attainable goals. Using the STAR PCP plan helped mentors set both short-term goals, such as attending an event on campus the following week and long-term

goals, such as excelling in a final class project. Prior research indicates how important it is for mentors to be prepared and have topics to discuss with their mentees [30]. Having access to a pre-developed career plan may be an even more valuable resource for faculty and staff who are new to the experience of mentoring students with IDs, as they can use it to help them think about what to discuss with their mentee in the first few sessions.

Beyond giving examples of the types of goals mentors set for their mentees, the first theme also provides numerous activities that can help mentees accomplish their goals across the following critical areas: academics, employment, independent living, and personal development. Findings of this nature significantly contribute to the mentoring literature by providing a clear picture of the many types of activities that are undertaken by mentors to help mentees with IDs reach target goals in a postsecondary education setting. The list of activities generated by the present study can be used to inform other mentoring relationships and training for new mentors.

Given that findings from this study are based on pilot data from the first iteration of the mentoring program, a few areas in need of improvement were evident. For example, many mentors reported struggling with some of the program rules and expectations, including using emails to communicate with students as opposed to texting. This rule was in place to reinforce professional boundaries between mentors and mentees in the pilot program, which would help to prepare mentees with IDs for professional environments once they graduated. While this finding may highlight the need to revise program expectations, it could also call for the need to better prepare student mentees for both collegiate and professional work environments.

At the dyad level, mentors reported consistent difficulty with mentees keeping their scheduled sessions, indicating that time management, scheduling, and communication were key areas for mentee improvement. Mentors also mentioned that some mentees fixated on certain topics that were not necessarily relevant to the mentoring session. Though a limited scope of interests and fixation on specific topics may be common among individuals with IDs [31], it was also clear that the mentors saw growth in mentees staying on topic and broadening their repertoire of interests. This may be another area to touch on during training to better prepare mentors in how to navigate around these topics, introduce mentees to new areas, and leverage mentee interests and strengths to help them progress towards their goals.

The findings also demonstrate several areas of mentee growth that are aligned with the goals of an IPSE program and those of the broader college environment. Specifically, mentors reported that mentees were engaged in their academic work, displayed the motivation to become employed, and worked with their mentors to achieve their employment goals (i.e., mentees actively began applying for jobs). These findings mirror prior research examining the benefits of mentoring in a postsecondary environment for neurotypical students [20]. Mentees were also more confident and independent in using transportation and navigating the campus, and many began to work towards applying for their driver's license—findings that are of particular importance for IPSE programs given their emphasis on promoting independent living outcomes for students with IDs [32]. Mentors also reported that their relationship with their mentees strengthened over time as mentees developed trust and opened up to them. The growth of trusting relationships appeared to help mentees communicate and listen more effectively over the academic year. Findings of this nature provide evidence of the many benefits of receiving mentorship from faculty and staff members for students with IDs in an IPSE program.

In line with prior research on mentoring relationships [33], the final theme demonstrated the many benefits mentors received as a result of participating in a mentoring program. In general, supporting, listening to, and learning from mentees with disabilities was impactful for mentors, and many were proud to see their mentee accomplish their goals, apply the skills they learned during their sessions, and grow in their level of comfort and confidence throughout the mentoring relationship. Mentors valued the meaningful conversation shared and relationships built with their mentees in sessions, during meals,

and when attending events together on campus. The mutual benefits that can be gained from mentoring programs are important to highlight, as findings of this nature can help IPSE programs gain support for the use of mentoring to not only benefit their students but also faculty and staff across the campus community.

Ultimately, given the wealth of research demonstrating the importance of creating well-designed mentoring programs [34] and of providing thorough training and guidance to mentors [35], gaining an understanding of the mentoring relationship between faculty and staff and students with IDs is critical to ensuring the success of such mentoring partnerships. The in-depth qualitative data gathered from this study can be used by institutes of higher education and IPSE programs to create more structured mentoring programs for mentees with IDs and provide more tailored guidance and support to mentors.

#### *Limitations and Future Directions*

A few study limitations should be noted and addressed in future research. First, given the exploratory nature of this pilot study, data were only collected over two academic semesters and the findings reflected the experiences and perceptions of only 31 faculty and staff mentors (most of whom were staff). Future research should look to build on this study using larger sample sizes and over time examine how findings may change. Second, mentors were recruited using flyers, so a self-selection bias may be inherent in the findings. For example, since data on the prior mentoring experience of faculty and staff members were not recorded, some mentors may have had existing skills and knowledge that helped to facilitate more positive outcomes for their mentees and their partnerships overall. Future studies should look to collect more demographic data on mentors to assess how prior experiences shaped their mentoring practices. Finally, the findings are specific to one IPSE program located in the southeastern United States and, therefore, may not be generalizable to other contexts. As such, research should continue to explore the use of faculty and staff supports in other postsecondary settings across the country.

#### **5. Conclusions**

With the increasing number of students with IDs enrolling in IPSE programs, they must be provided with the support needed to ensure successful student outcomes. Mentoring is one support mechanism that gives students with IDs the opportunity to receive guidance from faculty and staff mentors, like their neurotypical peers. The findings from this qualitative pilot study provide unique insight into the activities undertaken by mentors to help mentees with IDs meet their academic, employment, independent living, and personal development goals; common challenge areas related to the program and mentoring partnerships; areas of student growth; and, finally, how the experience of mentoring positively impacted mentors. Such findings can be used to inform the development of mentoring programs within IPSE programs and are particularly useful in guiding mentors to identify activities that will support goal attainment for mentees with IDs.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, L.M.H., R.A. and S.L.B.; methodology, L.M.H. and R.A.; software, L.M.H., R.A., L.M.H., and R.A.; formal analysis, L.M.H. and R.A.; investigation, L.M.H. and R.A.; resources, L.M.H. and R.A.; data curation, L.M.H., R.A. and S.L.B.; writing—original draft preparation, L.M.H. and R.A.; writing—review and editing, L.M.H., R.A., and S.L.B.; visualization, L.M.H. and R.A.; supervision, S.L.B.; project administration, S.L.B.; funding acquisition, S.L.B. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** The study described in this manuscript was funded by the University of Central Florida through a grant from the Office of Postsecondary Education, United States Department of Education (CFDA 84,407A, P407A150068-20). However, the contents of this manuscript do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. The graduate research assistants also received support from FIU Embrace for these study efforts.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of Florida International University (protocol code IRB-18-0246).

**Informed Consent Statement:** All faculty and staff mentors in the mentoring program consented to participate in the data collection efforts involved in this study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are not available because they contain information from a small cohort and, while deidentified, may include specific details that identify participants through context.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

- Bethune-Dix, L.; Carter, E.W.; Hall, C.; McMillan, E.; Cayton, J.; Day, T.; Vranicar, M.; Bouchard, C.; Krech, L.; Gustafson, J.; et al. Inclusive higher education for college students with intellectual disability. In *Strategies for Supporting Inclusion and Diversity in the Academy: Higher Education, Aspiration and Inequality*; Crimmins, G., Ed.; Springer International Publishing: Berlin, Germany, 2020; pp. 309–328. [CrossRef]
- HEOA. Higher Education Opportunity Act. Available online: <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/highered/leg/hea08/index.html> (accessed on 30 November 2021).
- Butler, L.N.; Sheppard-Jones, K.; Whaley, B.; Harrison, B.; Osnes, M. Does participation in higher education make a difference in life outcomes for students with intellectual disability? *J. Vocat. Rehabil.* **2016**, *44*, 295–298. [CrossRef]
- Miller, K.D.; DiSandro, R.; Harrington, L.; Johnson, J.S. Inclusive Higher Education is Reaping Benefits for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities: One Program’s Story. Available online: [https://thinkcollege.net/sites/default/files/files/resources/Insight\\_29\\_F\\_0.pdf](https://thinkcollege.net/sites/default/files/files/resources/Insight_29_F_0.pdf) (accessed on 27 October 2021).
- Think College. Higher Education Access for Students with Intellectual Disability in the United States. *Think College Snapshot*. Available online: [https://thinkcollege.net/sites/default/files/files/resources/Snapshot\\_June2019.pdf](https://thinkcollege.net/sites/default/files/files/resources/Snapshot_June2019.pdf) (accessed on 12 January 2022).
- Carter, E.W.; Gustafson, J.R.; Mackay, M.M.; Martin, K.P.; Parsley, M.V.; Graves, J.; Day, T.L.; McCabe, L.E.; Lazarz, H.; McMillan, E.D.; et al. Motivations and expectations of peer mentors within inclusive higher education programs for students with intellectual disability. *Career Dev. Transit. Except. Individ.* **2019**, *42*, 168–178. [CrossRef]
- Carter, E.W. The promise and practice of peer support arrangements for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. In *International Review of Research in Developmental Disabilities*; Elsevier: Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 2017; Volume 52, pp. 141–174.
- Aldosiry, N.; Alharbi, A.A.; Alrusaiyes, R. Practices to prepare students with disabilities for the transition to new educational settings. *Child. Youth Serv. Rev.* **2020**, *120*, 105657. [CrossRef]
- Lansley, K.R.; Antia, S.D.; MacFarland, S.Z.; Umbreit, J. Training and coaching: Impact on peer mentor fidelity and behavior of postsecondary students with autism and intellectual disability. *Educ. Train. Autism Dev. Disabil.* **2021**, *56*, 328–340.
- Lindsay, S.; Munson, M.R. *Mentoring for Youth with Disabilities*; National Mentoring Resource Center: Boston, MA, USA, 2018.
- Rillotta, F.; Gobec, C.; Gibson-Pope, C. Experiences of mentoring university students with an intellectual disability as part of a practicum placement. *Mentor. Tutoring Partnersh. Learn.* **2022**, *30*, 333–354. [CrossRef]
- Spencer, P.; Van Haneghan, J.P.; Baxter, A.; Chanto-Wetter, A.; Perry, L. It’s ok, mom. I got it!: Exploring the experiences of young adults with intellectual disabilities in a postsecondary program affected by the COVID-19 pandemic from their perspective and their families’ perspective. *J. Intellect. Disabil.* **2021**, *25*, 405–414. [CrossRef]
- Lindsay, S.; Hartman, L.R.; Fellin, M. A systematic review of mentorship programs to facilitate transition to post-secondary education and employment for youth and young adults with disabilities. *Disabil. Rehabil.* **2016**, *38*, 1329–1349. [CrossRef]
- Burgstahler, S.; Crawford, L. Managing an e-mentoring community to support students with disabilities: A case study. *AACE Rev.* **2007**, *15*, 97–114.
- Athamanah, L.S.; Fisher, M.H.; Sung, C.; Han, J.E. The experiences and perceptions of college peer mentors interacting with students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. *Res. Pract. Pers. Sev. Disabil.* **2020**, *45*, 271–287. [CrossRef]
- Ryan, S.M.; Nauheimer, J.M.; George, C.L.; Dague, E.B. The most defining experience: Undergraduate university students’ experiences mentoring students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. *J. Postsecond. Educ. Disabil.* **2017**, *30*, 283–298.
- Webb, A.K.; Wangmo, T.; Ewen, H.H.; Teaster, P.B.; Hatch, L.R. Peer and faculty mentoring for students pursuing a PHD in gerontology. *Educ. Gerontol.* **2009**, *35*, 1089–1106. [CrossRef]
- McKinsey, E. Faculty mentoring undergraduates: The nature, development, and benefits of mentoring relationships. *Teach. Learn. Inq.* **2016**, *4*, 25–39. [CrossRef]
- DuBois, D.L.; Karcher, M.J. *Handbook of Youth Mentoring*; SAGE Publications: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2005; Volume 52, pp. 141–174.
- Haeger, H.; Fresquez, C. Mentoring for inclusion: The impact of mentoring on undergraduate researchers in the sciences. *CBE—Life Sci. Educ.* **2016**, *15*, ar36. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

21. Chelberg, K.L.; Bosman, L.B. The role of faculty mentoring in improving retention and completion rates for historically underrepresented STEM Students. *Int. J. High. Educ.* **2019**, *8*, 39–48. [[CrossRef](#)]
22. Agarwal, R.; Heron, L.; Naseh, M.; Burke, S.L. Mentoring students with intellectual and developmental disabilities: Evaluation of role-specific workshops for mentors and mentees. *J. Autism Dev. Disord.* **2021**, *51*, 1281–1289. [[CrossRef](#)]
23. Taylor, A.; Domin, D.; Papay, C.; Grigal, M. More dynamic, more engaged: Faculty perspectives on instructing students with intellectual disability in inclusive courses. *J. Incl. Postsecond. Educ.* **2021**, *3*, 1–24. [[CrossRef](#)]
24. Harris, J.; Ho, T.; Markle, L.; Wessel, R. Ball state university's faculty mentorship program: Enhancing the first-year experience for students with disabilities. *About Campus* **2011**, *16*, 27–29. [[CrossRef](#)]
25. Markle, L.; Wessel, R.D.; Desmond, J. Faculty mentorship program for students with disabilities: Academic success outcomes (Practice Brief). *J. Postsecond. Educ. Disabil.* **2017**, *30*, 385–392.
26. Patrick, S.; Wessel, R.D. Faculty mentorship and transition experiences of students with disabilities. *J. Postsecond. Educ. Disabil.* **2013**, *26*, 105–118.
27. Hayes, M.; Muldoon, M. STAR (Students Transitioning to Adult Roles) Person Centered Planning Process. Available online: [http://project10.info/files/topical\\_brief\\_september\\_2014\\_star\\_pcp.pdf](http://project10.info/files/topical_brief_september_2014_star_pcp.pdf) (accessed on 21 November 2021).
28. Braun, V.; Clarke, V. Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qual. Res. Sport Exerc. Health* **2019**, *11*, 589–597. [[CrossRef](#)]
29. Snell, M.E.; Luckasson, R.; Bradley, V.; Buntinx, W.H.; Coulter, D.L.; Craig, E.P.M.; Gomez, S.C.; Lachapelle, Y.; Reeve, A.; Schalock, R.L. Characteristics and needs of people with intellectual disability who have higher IQs. *Intellect. Dev. Disabil.* **2009**, *47*, 220–233. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
30. Stumbo, N.J.; Martin, J.K.; Nordstrom, D.; Rolfe, T.; Burgstahler, S.; Whitney, J.; Miguez, E. Evidence-based practices in mentoring students with disabilities: Four case studies. *J. Sci. Educ. Stud. Disabil.* **2011**, *14*, 33–54.
31. Smerbeck, A. The survey of favorite interests and activities: Assessing and understanding restricted interests in children with autism spectrum disorder. *Autism* **2019**, *23*, 247–259. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
32. Becht, K.; Roberts-Dahm, L.D.; Meyer, A.; Giarrusso, D.; Still Richardson, E. Inclusive postsecondary education programs of study for students with intellectual disability. *J. Postsecond. Educ. Disabil.* **2020**, *33*, 63–279.
33. Hillier, A.; Goldstein, J.; Tornatore, L.; Byrne, E.; Ryan, J.; Johnson, H. Mentoring college students with disabilities: Experiences of the mentors. *Int. J. Mentor. Coach. Educ.* **2018**, *7*, 202–218. [[CrossRef](#)]
34. Stumbo, N.J.; Lindahl-Lewis, P.; Blegen, A.R. Two mentorship case studies of high school and university students with disabilities: Milestones and lessons. *J. Rehabil.* **2008**, *74*, 45–51.
35. Rhodes, J.E.; Grossman, J.B.; Roffman, J. The rhetoric and reality of youth mentoring. *New Dir. Youth Dev.* **2002**, *93*, 9–20. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.