

How to Be a Peer Mentor To College Students on the Autism Spectrum

TRAINING SUMMARY:

This course is an introduction to the effective Peer Mentoring of students on the autism spectrum who wish to succeed in college and related post-secondary educational settings. Having the support of an age-appropriate and trained peer can make a significant difference in the academic and social success of students on the spectrum, and enhance their personal growth, self-esteem, and self-confidence during these important transition years. Peer Mentors can be useful in decoding the “hidden curriculum” of college life and in supporting students on the autism spectrum to effectively communicate their needs and to navigate the academic, social and administrative complexities of colleges and similar learning environments. In return, Peer Mentors acquire an invaluable experience that hones their interpersonal skills and confidence in embracing human diversity, and that becomes a part of their resume and skill set. This training module introduces college students to the knowledge, responsibility, attitudes, and values they will need to succeed as Peer Mentors.

TRAINING GOAL:

The goal of this training is for students in college and related post-secondary educational settings to become effective, respectful, unobtrusive mentors to their student peers on the autism spectrum, and to support those peers to self-determine and achieve the college experience they desire.

TRAINING OBJECTIVES:

The objectives of the training are for the participants to:

1. Understand **what it means to be a Peer Mentor** and what the role does and does not entail; appreciate the **importance of building community and natural supports** in the lives of people with disabilities; learn the **rules and requirements of your school's Peer Mentor program**
2. Learn about the **autism diagnosis**, the wide **variation across the autism spectrum**, the importance of **getting to know the individual person**, and the goals of the **autism self-advocacy movement**
3. Consider the types of **academic goals and social goals** that a student on the autism spectrum might decide to set, and establish a process for breaking down large, complex, or very generalized goals into a series of **manageable steps** to be accomplished within a **reasonable timeframe**; consider how to support the development of a student's **everyday problem-solving skills**
4. Understand the **rights of college students with disabilities under the ADA and Section 504**, the **appropriate auxiliary aids and services** that might be used by students on the autism spectrum, the issues surrounding **self-disclosure**, and how to help a student being mentored to secure needed services; understand the importance of and challenges to the use of the **accommodations letter**
5. Identify the range of **academic, vocational, social, and health-related supports and opportunities available** on college campuses; consider when and how a student with autism could access them
6. Consider ways to support students with autism in enhancing **daily living skills** that are vital to college success: effective verbal and nonverbal communication strategies,

awareness and care of personal appearance, study skills, time and money management, and personal safety and security

7. Investigate **quality of life issues** that are vital to college success: maintaining mental and physical health, navigating friendships, coping with peer pressure, and taking advantage of opportunities for personal growth; consider how a Peer Mentor can help in maintaining a positive college experience

METHODS TO ACHIEVE OBJECTIVES:

This training can be delivered live in a traditional classroom setting incorporating lecture, video, discussion, and interactive group exercises. A Peer Mentoring Guide is available.