

Gopen Fellowship Quarterly Report

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Introduction

For the 2015 Barbara Wilensky Gopen Fellowship, I created a six-month mentoring program for adults on the autism spectrum called **Spectrum Skillshare**. The project entails recruiting autistic adults who are experienced with the working world, higher education, navigating bureaucracy and other life skills to serve as mentors for other autistic adults who are less experienced with these skills.

Spectrum Skillshare was created to fill a significant gap in service provision for autistic adults. This applies both to service provision in general, and to mentoring as a specific component. Because autism is a developmental disability, many professionals have the idea that it is specifically a childhood condition, and most programs are targeted to parents who wish to secure early interventions for their younger children. Mentoring and life-coaching programs are not exempt from this focus on the needs of children and teenagers; while there are many specialized mentoring programs for children, teenagers and university students, the situation is different for adults who aren't currently pursuing a college degree. There is the additional problem that most of these programs are run by non-autistic people and involve matching non-autistic people with autistic mentees instead of matching autistic people with other autistic people. I do think that ally-run and -supported programs can be beneficial, but there is something to be said for having a project that matches people with similar experiences with disability with each other.

People with developmental and intellectual disabilities have traditionally encountered barriers to community employment; these barriers are due to a variety of intersecting factors including differential educational attainment, the historical emphasis on sheltered workshops and other non-integrated employment programs for people with disabilities, and the routine steering of disabled people towards educational opportunities that do not afford them the opportunity to develop their skills. This is a particular problem for autistic adults: between 6 and 10% of adults on the spectrum work in competitive employment (Wilczynski, Trammell & Clarke, 2013). I suspect some of the problems surrounding autistic people's difficulty with competitive employment come from the association between autism and childhood, and the reduced level of attention given to the needs of adults who have aged out of the school system. These problems can be compounded further if these people come from working-class or lower-income families, where supplemental resources are much less accessible than they are for middle- or upper-class families.

Spectrum Skillshare aims to fill this gap by being a community-based mentoring program geared towards adults; it combines the personal touch of mentoring with practical connections that will help people to improve their skills in the workplace, gaining access to higher education, navigating government services, and learning or improving other instrumental activities of daily living. The one-on-mentoring sessions will be supplemented additionally by a series of workshops presented by the participants. The mentoring portion will be composed of monthly in-person meetings, weekly online or phone check-ins, a weekly journal to record insights, and a survey distributed to gauge participants' self-reported progress.

Fulfilled or Projected Performance Measures

The Spectrum Skillshare project fulfills, or aims to fulfill, the following Federal Performance Measures: cross-cutting measures, quality assurance, employment and housing. Through being matched with experienced mentors, participants will be able to gain skills that will help them live fulfilling, empowered lives (Quality Assurance). Several members of the general public (roughly 100 people) have been informed about Spectrum Skillshare via internet (Facebook, Twitter and online mailing lists) and offline word of mouth, which fits into the "Cross-Cutting Measures" metric. Additionally, The workshop component will be available to the general public, as will the companion website and resource guide for adults on the autism spectrum, and the project will also be presented to policymakers after more progress has been made with Spectrum Skillshare.

Current Progress

The project started with research into pre-existing mentoring programs of varying types: peer-to-peer mentoring for people with disabilities, ally-run mentoring programs for people on the autism spectrum, college or university-based peer mentoring programs and youth-centric mentor matches. I also researched employment statistics for people on the autism spectrum and adults with disabilities in general. I also conducted interviews with researchers and community advocates (including Partners for Youth with Disabilities, one of the organizations who spearheaded mentoring for young people with disabilities) about the social dynamics of mentoring, employment and disability, and recruitment of mentors and mentees. After the initial research period was over, I started creating recruitment and training materials, including a fully accessible and mobile-compatible website (URL: communityinclusion.org/gopen/skillshare/), online application forms for mentors and mentees, a packet with guidelines for participants, a PowerPoint presentation to show to participants on training day, a Facebook page (URL: facebook.com/spectrumskillshare), handouts, and guidelines for self-care for mentors. In addition to this work, I have also started work on a resource guide that contains information about Massachusetts-based and national resources for people in need of services, articles and websites about life skills geared towards autistic adults and people with similar disabilities, and books about the skills targeted in the mentoring program.

Though most of my projected goals were achieved in the first few months of preparation, there were some challenges, including resistance from a service provider who seemed to prefer a parent-centric model, a larger number of mentees submitting applications than mentors, and several applicants from outside Massachusetts expressing interest in becoming mentors or mentees.

I am currently in the recruitment stage; recruitment currently involves reaching out to various local disability-related advocacy groups and agencies, and people within my personal network who may need mentoring or would like to mentor other adults on the spectrum. This outreach has been a mixture of email, social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, meeting in person and phone calls. I have currently received two applications for mentors and four for mentees. I have recently (as of 10 October 2015) started contacting potential mentors, mentees and references to schedule interviews with them.

Plans for the Following Reporting Period

Once the new reporting period starts, mentors and mentees should have been matched and the one-on-one sessions should be underway. Plans for the skill-sharing workshops, where participants get together to share advice on education, employment or other life skills for the general public, will start a month or two after participants know one another better and have had more meetings.

Timeline

July and August - information-gathering and publicity

August and September - information-gathering and publicity

September and October - recruitment and publicity

October and November - recruitment and orientation

November and December - mentor/mentee meetings;

December and January - mentor/mentee meetings; planning for first workshop

January and February - mentor/mentee meetings; first workshop on

February and March - mentor/mentee meetings; planning for second workshop

March and April - mentor/mentee meetings; second workshop

April and May - mentor/mentee meetings; planning for third and final workshop/presentation

May and June - wrapping up, final workshop and presentation

References

Garringer, M. and MacRae, P. (2008) *Foundations of Successful Youth Mentoring*.

Martin, N., Milton, D. and Sims, T. (2015) *The Research Autism Cygnet Mentoring Pilot Project: Mentor Training Day* - PowerPoint slides.

Partners for Youth with Disabilities (2005). *Best Practices Guide in Mentoring Youth with Disabilities*.

