

# Peer Mentorship Program for Neurodiverse Students

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## Abstract:

Neurodiverse students, including those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), are enrolling in higher education institutions at an increasing rate. While universities offer academic accommodations to support these students, the social aspect of college life is often neglected, leading to feelings of loneliness and isolation. This initiative proposes a pilot peer mentoring program at Rutgers University-Camden to address this issue.

The program aims to pair self-identified neurodiverse students with peer mentors, either undergraduate or graduate students, for a semester-long commitment. Mentors will provide guidance and support in two areas: executive functioning and social skills. The former includes navigating campus resources, registering for classes, and other academic tasks, while the latter focuses on helping students get involved on campus, attending club meetings, and fostering social connections. The program will begin with a kickoff meeting, followed by a mid-semester check-in and a semester-end review. Mentors will undergo a mandatory training session and receive periodic check-ins with an advisor.

## Primary Stakeholders:

- Office of Social Justice and Belonging
- Office of Disability Services
- Chancellor’s Disability Advisory Council
- Paul Robeson Library
- Division of Student Affairs

## Key Steps/Activities:

- Benchmarking: The first step involves researching and benchmarking what other local peer institutions are doing, identifying successful programs and best practices.
- Create a steering committee: A steering committee will be established with stakeholders from various departments on campus. This committee will help shape the program's mission, structure, timeline, marketing, communication, and assessment plan.
- Research funding options: The final step will be to research funding options for the program, which may include grants or partnerships with local organizations.

## Effectiveness Measures:

- Pre- and post-program surveys: Surveys can assess the mentee's knowledge, attitudes, and self-efficacy before and after the program. Surveys can also assess the mentor's confidence and perceived effectiveness in supporting the mentee.
- Program evaluations: Program evaluations can assess the effectiveness of the program in achieving its goals and objectives, identifying areas for improvement, and measuring the program's impact on mentees, mentors, and the overall campus community.
- Focus groups: Focus groups can provide a deeper understanding of the mentee and mentor experiences, including their perspectives on the program's strengths and weaknesses.

## Communication/Engagement:

- Email newsletters: Sending regular email newsletters to students, faculty, and staff can provide updates on the program's progress, share relevant news and events, and encourage participation.
- Information sessions: Hosting information sessions on campus can provide students with the opportunity to learn more about the program, ask questions, and meet potential mentors and mentees.
- Orientation sessions: Incorporating the program into new student orientation can introduce incoming students to the program, its goals, and how to get involved.
- Interdepartmental communication: Maintaining communication with relevant departments, such as Disability Services, Student Affairs, and Academic Departments, can increase support and participation in the program.

## Proposed Timeline:

- Proposed roll out, Fall 2024

## Current Status/Future Directions:

- Benching marking peer institutions on best practices is underway. Development of the steering committee is the next step.