

ABLE Mercer Project Report
Johna Wright, Mercer University

I. Project Summary

ABLE Mercer is a peer-mentoring program that helps first-year college students with physical, intellectual, or psychological disabilities in their transition to a residential college campus, through interactive instruction in areas such as self-advocacy, assistive technology, and campus involvement.

Target Community

The target community for this project is any first-year undergraduate student at Mercer University who self-identifies as having a disability. For the purposes of this project, disability is defined as: any pervasive illness or impairment that has been documented and would be eligible for ACCESS and Accommodation services at Mercer University. However, the student does NOT need to be receiving or planning to receive those services in order to be eligible to participate in ABLE Mercer.

In addition to these students, ABLE Mercer also indirectly targets faculty, staff, and administrators at Mercer University, as the program also contains a voluntary faculty training component. This component was added in order to bring awareness to disability issues and how students at four-year colleges are affected by the presence of a disability. Any Mercer University faculty member is eligible to participate in this module and does not need any prior experience or knowledge about disability.

For this project, I collaborated with Katie Johnson, the director of Mercer University's office of ACCESS and Accommodation, which is a campus office that aims to provide reasonable classroom and testing accommodations (i.e. extended time, low-distraction environments, preferential classroom seating, etc.) to all students at Mercer University who self-identify as having a disability and can produce documentation that demonstrates the ways in which the disability affects their academics. Mrs. Johnson will serve in multiple capacities, such as acting as a liaison between ABLE Mercer and university administrators, providing feedback on all training materials, and assisting in the development of pre and post-program surveys in order to measure the effectiveness of ABLE Mercer.

In addition, my academic and research advisor, Dr. Sara Appleby of the Mercer Psychology Department, served as a resource when developing surveys and other materials that will measure program effectiveness, as she has expertise in assessing the reliability and validity of these measures. Also, Dr. Dorothy (Doe) Buchli of the Mercer Psychology Department oversaw and assisted with some event planning as well as training modules, as she is well-versed in disability issues as well as the field of disability studies.

Project Relevance and Rationale

With approximately 11% of undergraduate students self-reporting as having a disability (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016), this project identifies and attempts to abate a need in both the Mercer community and throughout the nation. At this time, no other university has established a program such as ABLE Mercer, with the only existing and comparable program being based at the University of South Florida and only serving students with Autism Spectrum

Disorder (University of South Florida, 2017). Therefore, there are a large number of students who have profound disabilities not being served, and thus not being given the opportunity to truly assimilate to their college environment. Without this equal opportunity to education, the nationwide retention rate of students with disabilities continues to drop significantly. For instance, the United States Department of Labor reported that while similar proportions of people with disabilities and people without disabilities begin college (25.5% and 26.8% respectively), only 16.4% of students with disabilities complete a bachelor's degree or higher, while 34.6% of able-bodied students complete the same degree program. (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Thus, without ABLE Mercer, this pattern of low retention will continue to take place on Mercer University's campus, and the university will continue to miss out on the unique and innovative perspectives of some of the brightest young minds in the country.

Furthermore, Clouder *et al.* assert in their literature review of effective programs for disabled students in post-secondary institutions that both mentoring programs as well as awareness campaigns that increase faculty awareness are the most effective at significantly increasing retention rates (Clouder *et al.*, 2018). This is, in effect, why the format of ABLE Mercer is more effective than simply utilizing the ACCESS and Accommodation services, since peer-mentoring is a focal component of the program. In addition, the faculty training modules aim to bridge the gap between professors and their disabled students by equipping them with the knowledge and tools necessary to serve these students in their classrooms.

Project Objectives

The primary objective of ABLE Mercer is to provide students with disabilities with equal opportunities for success at Mercer University, so that they will be included with their able-bodied peers and have an 87.6% retention rate at the university (Mercer University, 2015), which is equal to that Mercer's general population, in the long term. The current retention rate for students with disabilities at Mercer University is not recorded, which further illustrates the need for a program such as ABLE Mercer. Secondary objectives include:

- Raise awareness of different types of disabilities, disability issues, and other factors that affect those in the disability community by 80% on Mercer's campus. This will be done through surveys of current Mercer students, which will ask them to note if/what they have previously heard about ABLE Mercer.
- Create a measure through which the success of this program can be monitored, so that it can be carried on by future students at Mercer and can be streamlined in order to reach at least three (3) more universities and/or other organizations before the 2020-2021 academic year.
- Develop and disseminate an interest survey to at least one-hundred (100) high school students with disabilities in Macon during the spring of 2019, in order to gauge interest in ABLE Mercer.
- Increase participation in ABLE Mercer program by 20% every year (i.e. increasing from six (6) students during the 2018-2019 year to approximately 7.2 students during the 2019-2020 year).
- Identify at least three (3) new partners and increase community involvement in ABLE Mercer by 20% each year. This will be accomplished by drafting emails and making visits to the offices of potential partners, such as Disability Connections.
- Present this project as a talk or poster at the DREAM (Disability Rights, Education Activism and Mentoring) Conference during the 2019-2020 academic year.

Implementation

I researched similar programs and reached out to them for any materials or guidance for this project. In addition, I designed and implemented a training manual for mentors, so that they are more aware of different types of disabilities and how they can affect individual students. Also, I created training materials, along with specific and measurable goals for the mentees that can be modified in order to fit their individual needs. This was done with the intention of delivering these materials to the ACCESS and Accommodation Office so that someone else can take over this project once I graduate from Mercer. In addition to the training manuals, I devised a schedule that spans the whole semester, so that programming for mentor/mentee mixers, as well as an increased number of educational events, such as “Finding Myself: Identity Issues Faced by the Disability Community” can be included each year. I also included suggested committees, such as a marketing committee and event planning committee, which could be taken on by students who have previously completed the ABLÉ Mercer program, so that the project will be more sustainable and will run more smoothly in the future. Katie Johnson was willing to continue this project with the assistance of a future Service Scholar, but I chose a new mentor and students who are able to carry out the program. I presented them with deliverables including marketing materials, interview questions, sample event flyers, access to ABLÉ Mercer social media accounts and email, and training modules to help future mentors understand disability issues.

Evaluation and Dissemination

In order to measure the impact of ABLÉ Mercer, anonymous surveys were distributed at the beginning and after the completion of the program. To be more specific, the pre-program survey was distributed on the opening day of the ABLÉ Mercer program, which takes place the Wednesday before opening weekend. Then, the post-program survey was distributed the week immediately before finals week of the fall 2019 semester. Furthermore, the success of the project can be measured in the long-term by obtaining retention rates of the students who participated in the program. This will be done over the next five years through Mercer’s University administration. The anonymous surveys meet all anonymity requirements outlined by FERPA, but do not require IRB approval due to the nature of the project and lack of manipulations/conditions involved.

In order to disseminate the information and results I gather from ABLÉ Mercer, I planned to submit all findings to be presented at BEAR Day 2020, which aims to highlight undergraduate research at Mercer University. However, due to my study abroad program, I was not able to present at BEAR Day. In addition, I submitted my findings to DREAM and presented a talk at their recent virtual symposium on April 4. Lastly, I have already been asked to present this program to both the National Association of Blind Teachers as well as the National Organization of Parents of Blind Children (NOPBC) at the National Federation of the Blind Convention to be held virtually in July of 2020.

II. Project Analysis, Evaluation, and Recommendations

Outcomes

Overall, the project was successful, and the goals were met, with the exception of disseminating interest surveys to Macon-area high school students. Myself and the new ABLÉ Mercer Co-

Presidents who will take over once I graduate decided that the program, while still retaining the mentoring aspect, should also focus on advocacy efforts with current Mercer students. Therefore, there was not adequate time to devote to the surveys. However, this remains a goal for future years. Each of the other goals mentioned in the previous section were met, as a measure to gauge success of the program was developed and preliminary results (excluding all open-ended question data that has not been analyzed as of May 3, 2020) were statistically significant. Thus, ABLÉ Mercer is inferred to have been successful; The team is still working to make adjustments to the curriculum to account for student needs. Also, the participation rate increased by 38 percent, surpassing the goal of 20 percent. We also identified three partners who each contributed to the program in some way: Georgia Lions Club, Disability Rights, Education Activism and Mentoring (DREAM) Foundation, and Francar's Buffalo Wings. Lastly, I was able to present an overview of ABLÉ Mercer in a PowerPoint presentation at a virtual Disability Rights, Education Activism and Mentoring (DREAM) event, which was originally scheduled to be held in Washington, D.C. during the first week of April. A copy of the PowerPoint will be uploaded to Canvas.

Challenges

While there were myriad factors, such as hard work and coordination from the leadership team and faculty advisor, careful planning and budgeting, and assistance with logistics from community and national partners, which ultimately led to the success of ABLÉ Mercer, there was also some challenges faced along the way. For instance, in-person planning and marketing for the 2020-2021 ABLÉ Mercer cohort was halted due to the novel Coronavirus pandemic. Also, there are still many uncertainties regarding summer orientation, as we are currently unsure if they will be held in person or virtually. This is where most of our marketing efforts are focused, so we do expect participation rates to drop in the next cohort, considering we are able to run the program in person at all. This has also affected response times between team members, as we are communicating mostly through email and occasionally conference call or Zoom. In addition to COVID-19, I participated in an exchange program at the University of Essex in Colchester, United Kingdom for the spring 2020 term, which created additional challenges for the program. As there was a five-hour time difference, there was often a delay in communication and difficulties with transferring over materials to the new Co-Presidents of ABLÉ Mercer. I could have rectified this by anticipating these challenges a bit more and being better prepared with materials prior to commencing my exchange term. Additionally, we experienced a lack of effective communication from the ACCESS and Accommodation Office at Mercer during the spring and summer 2019 terms, which caused me to have to rethink the marketing strategy and recruiting process at the last minute. To abate these issues in the future, I identified a new faculty mentor and advisor for ABLÉ Mercer, Dr. Dorothy (Doe) Buchli from the Mercer Psychology Department, who has been an enormous help and valuable resource when completing my project. She provided training to student volunteers on disability issues and also allowed me to practice presenting my program during her disability studies course. She was able to give me useful feedback that made me much more prepared to present to a more professional audience in April.

Where to Improve

As mentioned above, I could have been more diligent about having concrete plans for transferring materials and communicating with my team prior to leaving for my exchange term. This would have made our efforts over the past few months much more effective and would have

eliminated any communication delays. Also, I could have written out and sent an agenda of things to accomplish so that everyone is aware of the expectations I have for them. Furthermore, I could have had a contingency plan from the beginning of the project to account for the lack of communication from the ACCESS and Accommodation Office, so that there would have been no gaps in progress. Lastly, we could have worked to become a DREAM affiliate sooner than we did (the end of fall 2019 term), which would have given us access to more resources and scientific data. This would have made it much easier to develop and pilot test the surveys to measure the effectiveness of ABLE Mercer.

Takeaways

I have learned and gained so much from developing and implementing ABLE Mercer, both in a professional and personal sense. As an example, I gained valuable knowledge about working with community partners and being assertive yet polite. Before this, I have always been too anxious and shy to go into a business or call them and ask for things, but I have learned some great persuasive strategies and ways to seem more professional in my communication with a wide array of people. Also, I now know how to write a project proposal and create budgets and timelines to keep myself organized, and I also know how to be a leader and guide other people who are helping me with a project by delegating. Additionally, I am now better equipped to handle disagreements professionally and not be too afraid of confrontation with partners and team members. I have also learned presentation skills through presenting my proposal, disseminating my results, and facilitating ABLE Mercer events (see Appendix A) that will help me in the future with graduate school and my career, as well as with my advocacy efforts. On a more personal level, ABLE Mercer has been a major contributor to me realizing my true passion for a career in the disability advocacy field and in politics internationally. Therefore, I finally gained the confidence to switch my graduate school plans from a psychology and law program to a human rights and social policy program that allows me to follow my dreams of helping others with disabilities. I have noticed myself coming out of my shell more and engaging in more grassroots advocacy efforts outside of the blindness field and also becoming more involved with the National Federation of the Blind's legislative advocacy team. I also have gotten the courage to apply for a Fulbright grant to help me with my plans and took the initiative to reach out to international partners, which has led to a great professional connection. Lastly, I was able to objectively see that one of my biggest weaknesses was not being confident in myself, which made me seem unsure and incapable in some cases. Now, however, I am more confident with speaking to others and "coming out" as a disabled person directly at the beginning of a professional relationship. Thus, I have the opportunity to quell people's fears about my capabilities as a blind person and I can address questions and misunderstandings before they cause a disagreement. I have never been ashamed of my disability, but I have been afraid to tell someone simply because of how they may react, but doing research and organizing advocacy events through ABLE Mercer has shown me how to own my disability and be confident in my own abilities before I expect anyone else to be confident in me.

Ethical Issues

As each of our measures were confidential and every team member signed a FERPA form before being allowed to work with students or student data, there were no obvious ethical violations. However, due to each student having a unique disability, some of the surveys were not anonymous, since I could match the disabilities mentioned on open-ended questions to the

student in some cases. However, I had help from people who had not had any direct contact with the students and did not know the nature of their disabilities, aside from what was written on surveys if the student self-disclosed, so this should mitigate any unconscious bias on my part. Additionally, data was stored in a lab room in the psychology department that had Bear Card access, but approximately three other students also used this room for research, so data could have potentially been seen by another student if they opened the file cabinet and the folders where the paper data was stored. In the future, I have suggested that one of the ABLE Mercer Co-Presidents take the file folder home and store it in a secure place where no one else has access or find a more secure spot on campus.

III. Dissemination Plan

I have distributed mentor interview questions (see Appendix B) marketing materials (see Appendix C) and access to ABLE Mercer social media and email account to Sarah Carter and Ashley Pettway, who are the new Co-Presidents of the program and campus organization. Also, I have given these students access to the original project proposal in order to reference the goals outlined and amend them as they see fit. Lastly, I have disseminated my preliminary data to attendees at the DREAM event that I attended virtually in April. A copy of the PowerPoint presentation I used as an outline for my talk will be uploaded to Canvas as a separate file for accessibility and convenience.

References

- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2016). *Digest of Education Statistics*, 2015 (2016-014), Chapter 3.
- Overview and Program Materials. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://flfcic.fmhi.usf.edu/program-areas/autism.html>
- Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, *The Economics Daily*, People with a disability less likely to have completed a bachelor's degree on the Internet at <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2015/people-with-a-disability-less-likely-to-have-completed-a-bachelors-degree.htm> (visited November 04, 2018).
- Retention and Graduation Rates. (n.d.). Retrieved November 19, 2018, from <http://disclosure.mercer.edu/institutional/rates/>.
- Lynn Clouder, Jacqueline Cawston, Katherine Wimpenny, Ahmed Khalifa Aly Mehanna, Youcef Hdouch, Iman Raissouni, Karima Selmaoui. (2018) The role of assistive technology in renegotiating the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education in North Africa. *Studies in Higher Education* 0:0, pages 1-14.

Appendix A
Sample Event Flyer

ABLE Mercer and the Office of
ACCESS and Accommodations
Presents:

**FINDING
MYSELF**

Identity Issues Faced by the Disability
Community

5:00PM | OCTOBER 18TH
KNIGHT 307

There will be free snacks and drinks!
Questions? Contact Johna.Abigail.Wright@live.mercer.edu

Appendix B
Mentor Interview Questions

ABLE Mercer Interviews

Name: _____

Date: _____

General:

1. Tell us a little about yourself:
2. Why do you want to be a mentor for ABLE Mercer?
3. What skills/qualities/traits can you bring to the program?

Scenarios:

1. A student with a visual impairment is having some trouble navigating campus. They find it difficult to find the buildings where their classes are and to find on-campus dining options. What would you do/say in order to help this student?
2. A student with a chronic illness is having a tough time explaining their limitations to their roommate, which has caused some major disagreements between them. What is the best way to approach this situation?
3. Your mentee seems very unhappy and expresses that they are having a difficult time making friends on campus. Explain how you would attempt to rectify the situation.

Additional Questions:

1. Is there anything else you would like to share that would help us make a decision?
2. Do you have any questions for us?

ABLE Mercer

The ABLE Mercer Program:

- Provides incoming students who have disabilities with a unique opportunity to acclimate to Mercer's campus before all other students move in.
- Allows participants to network with other students who face similar difficulties, so that they may develop friendships.
- Pairs students with a mentor on a one-to-one basis, so that every student can get all their questions answered and feel comfortable throughout their first semester at Mercer.
- Introduces participants to ACCESS and Accommodations services, ways to get involved on campus, and coping skills for a variety of situations.

Questions? Email Johna Wright, Program Coordinator:

Johna.Abigail.Wright@live.mercer.edu



ABLE Mercer

The following questionnaire is OPTIONAL. The purpose of the questionnaire is to assist us in the mentor/mentee pairing process, so that each student is paired with an appropriate mentor. If you choose to decline to complete this questionnaire, it will not affect your ability to participate in the program. All information will be kept confidential.

1. What is your intended major? If you are unsure, please write “undecided” in the space provided.

2. What disability/disabilities are you currently diagnosed with? If you feel uncomfortable answering this question, leave it blank.

3. What are your hobbies/interests?

4. What would you LIKE in a mentor? If you are unsure or do not have a preference, skip this question.

5. What would you DISLIKE in a mentor?

Student Signature: _____

