"I Learned I Love to Read:" Perspectives from Undergraduates with Intellectual Disability

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Abstract

Students' discussions of their experiences in postsecondary programs for undergraduates with intellectual disability is a largely untapped yet fundamental resource in the examination of inclusive university programs. Through phenomenological interviews of undergraduates enrolled in a program for students with intellectual disability, we explored student descriptions of their experiences in their first semester living on a college campus. Additionally, we assessed the perceptions of others involved in the program, including students' peer mentors, their parents, and their faculty. Students' experiences mirrored those of many college students throughout their first semester, yet there were successes and challenges specific to these students with respect to relationships, belonging, sense of self, and understanding others. Parents reported gains in students' sense of self, confidence, and interpersonal skills, but reported that students may need more focus on developing career-related skills. Peer-mentors and faculty noted both positive effects of the program on the students as well as on themselves. We offer recommendations for research and practice focused on creating truly inclusive environments for undergraduate students with intellectual disability.

Keywords: higher education, undergraduate students, intellectual disability

Postsecondary programs for students with intellectual disability are increasing across the United States. Funding supports as well as nationwide calls for postsecondary programs are accumulating due to expansions of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA, 2014) and legislation such as the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (HEOA, 2008). Providing genuine inclusion in university spaces for students with intellectual disability is imperative for student well-being. There are over 6,000 students with intellectual disability enrolled in postsecondary education (Grigal et al., 2021). Students with intellectual disability have "significant limitations in both intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior that originates before the age of 22" (American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 2022). These students are more than their diagnoses, yet little is known about their unique experiences. In order to facilitate safe and truly inclusive spaces on university campuses, students' perspectives are needed.

Research suggests high variability in student experiences in programs for students with intellectual disability (Grigal et al., 2012). It is critical for programs to continuously examine their practices, not solely based on metrics, such as employment outcomes or job skills, but instead centered on the lived experiences of the people engaging with the program. Hearing the perspectives of students in these programs is essential to creating safe and supportive environments for all students. Additionally, parent perspectives are integral to situating student well-being and success in context. Parents may see growth not captured by academic or employment outcomes, such as strides in confidence or independence (Hughson et al., 2006). University peer-mentors and faculty offer further perspectives of students' development as well as their own growth (Alqazlan et al., 2019; Rogan et al., 2014). The current study presents results from interviews with students enrolled in a postsecondary program for students with intellectual disability. It then examines the perceptions of others involved

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in the program, including peer mentors, parents, and faculty with whom students learned.

Types of Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability

Models for educating postsecondary students with intellectual disability are categorized into several types of programs, based on the level of inclusion of the program. Program structures include separate programs, mixed programs, and individualized services/integrated models. Separate programs for students with intellectual disability do not integrate students into traditional classes and instead provide courses focused on employment and/or job skills training outside of mainstream university coursework. Mixed programs implement a combination of separate classes and inclusive classes wherein students attend traditional courses in addition to courses geared specifically to employment training. Individualized services/integrated models provide students with both inclusive classes and coordinated services that provide mentorship in tandem with their university coursework (Kleinert et al., 2012; Nerney et al., 1997). Individualized or integrated models are the recommended route, as they create more of a community of learners, rather than "othering" students with intellectual disability (Nerney et al., 1997). The current study explores an integrated university program for students with intellectual disability. In this residential program, students live on campus and thus have access to the myriad of clubs, activities, and programs affiliated with the university. In this way, the college experience is not a stand-alone set of separate courses geared to employment, but instead is a more holistic participation in college life.

Benefits of Postsecondary Programs

Benefits of postsecondary programs for students with intellectual disability include academic and personal growth and differ based on the types of supports offered. Research suggests that individuals with intellectual disability who attend postsecondary education are more likely to work in mainstream work environments rather than sheltered environments that are geared specifically toward individuals with disability (Zafft et al., 2004). Employment status, though important to one's independence, is just one mechanism to measure the benefits of postsecondary programs. Students and their parents have reported greater successes in relationships, independence, communication skills, knowledge, and community building after programs that offer high instructor support, learning adaptations, and interactions with other students (Hughson et al., 2006). Students report increased confidence after engaging in postsecondary academic programs (Claytor et al., 2018), and inclusive programs may improve students' feelings of belonging (Björnsdóttir, 2017), underscoring the overarching effects such programs may have on student well-being.

Research suggests programs for students with intellectual disability benefit not just the students themselves, but the community (Kleinert et al., 2012). Peer networks and social support are integral components to a successful college experience for typically developing college students (Friedlander et al., 2007), and offer opportunities for belonging for students with intellectual disability (Björnsdóttir, 2017). Positive effects of postsecondary programs for students with intellectual disability may be bidirectional, as research finds growth in peer mentors of students (Carter et al., 2019). In addition to student and mentor experiences, both parent and faculty perspectives are vital to the success of postsecondary programs for students with intellectual disability. Parents of students with intellectual disability value the college experience for their children (Kelley & Westling, 2019), and faculty are key contributors to student success (Komarraju et al., 2010), though work on parent and faculty expectations for students with intellectual disability is limited.

Thus, it is imperative to understand the experiences of the students within a program through their own voices (Kubiak, 2015). Additionally, peer mentors are an integral part of providing a welcoming and supportive environment for college students with intellectual disability (Carter et al., 2019; Griffin et al., 2016). Students' parents, and the faculty with whom they work, offer perspectives on students' development and learning throughout the program, and can provide information regarding the broader influence of the program on family, faculty, and community growth.

The Current Study

The current study explores one university's learning community in a program for undergraduate students with intellectual disability. This work stems from the utmost respect for the students in this program, and a need for programs to evaluate and improve upon practices using a strength-based model of supporting students' identities (Hadley, 2011). A large body of research has been done on undergraduate students' experiences; however, the voices of undergraduates with intellectual disability are often missing from the conversation given a dearth of programs that serve undergraduates with intellectual disability, yet

research on such programs is accumulating (Carter et al., 2019; Griffin et al., 2016; Vaughn, 2018).

The main purpose of the current study is to explore students' own interpretations of their experiences in an integrated residential postsecondary program for students with intellectual disability. The current study uses a phenomenological lens to explore undergraduate student experiences. Because student experiences do not exist in a vacuum, other individuals may provide additional information on student and community well-being. Thus, the current study also examines the perceptions of others involved in the program, including their peer mentors, their parents, and the faculty with whom they learned. The current study examines this program through centering the idea that programs for students with disabilities must facilitate a community, rather than "othering" people with disabilities (Nerney et al., 1997), to provide true access and agency.

Method

Participants

The current study reports the experiences of 40 individuals (6 students, 19 peer mentors, 9 parents, and 6 faculty) involved in an undergraduate program for students with intellectual disability. The program is housed in a large public university in the Midwest United States. Data were collected at the end of students' first semester of the program. The program is a newly developed two-year (five semester) self-sustaining, residential, integrated postsecondary education program for individuals with intellectual disability. The program currently serves students aged 18-24. As part of their application, students submitted their most recent Individualized Education Program (IEP). Students qualified for services in their secondary setting under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), meaning they exhibited impaired cognitive functioning. The program goals center on students building self-confidence in their abilities, becoming more comfortable with independent living and furthering their academic, social, and job readiness skills (e.g., career planning, hands-on experience) through person-centered planning and existing campus and community resources. Person-centered planning in this model includes collaborative planning of coursework, internship placements, and community experiences aligning with students' individual goals.

Students participate in 12 credit hours of coursework each semester and internship-based experiences. Internships begin the second semester of the program and are both on campus and within the community for students to gain career-related experience. Through academic support sessions, students create person-centered plans focused on communication and interpersonal relationships, reading and writing comprehension, money and time management, community engagement, and transition to employment. Students can choose to audit or take classes for college credit in their area of career interests; originally, all students in this study were auditing courses, but mid-semester students were given the option to take courses for college credit. For context, the university at which this program is housed develops course accommodations for students with learning disabilities (neurological disorders that may affect basic psychological processes such as language or memory; Learning Disabilities Association of America, 2012), which may include longer time limits for exams and access to e-readers. This type of accommodation is compared to *modified* coursework and assessment for students with intellectual disability, which includes fewer course assignments or adapted learning opportunities). Students who selected to take courses for college credit received course accommodations rather than modifications. At this time, students earn a certificate at the end of the program in the area they have been studying.

Students receive social, academic, and health/wellness support from staff, faculty and peer mentors. Peer mentors are one of the most consistent support systems for students in this program. Each student has a group of peers to lean on throughout their program. Every student enrolled in the program has a lead peer mentor who oversees several peer mentors engaging with each student to ensure peer mentors are meeting student needs. Peer mentors are required to receive training prior to being assigned a student. The peer mentor training begins with contextual information on the mission of the program and its guiding pillars (supporting students' independent living, social development, academic skills, and job-readiness). Peer mentor training then focuses on peer mentors' roles, including developing one-on-one relationships with their students and supporting them in engaging with the campus and community, improving independent living skills, and guiding students' academic success. Each of a students' peer mentors focus on at least one of these aspects but may overlap in roles as relationships become more organic. Additionally, during the training, peer mentors are instructed to meet with their mentee at least once a week and to maintain open communication as opportunities come up such as addressing students' needs, campus events, and off-campus outings. The peer mentor training describes common ways to support students' social

skills, academics, and health and wellness. The training utilizes scenarios to discuss how to get students involved on- and off-campus, helping students take ownership of their academic assignments, and modeling healthy eating and physical activities.

Faculty who will have students in their classes receive one-on-one support and have the option to attend faculty training specifically for working with students with intellectual disability. Each faculty member has a one-on-one meeting with the director of the program to discuss the process and have their questions answered. The faculty-specific training focuses on the mission and process of the program and provides definitions of key constructs such as intellectual disability and inclusion. Faculty are reminded to assume competence and individuality in students and are recommended to use Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in their courses. An overview of UDL is included in the faculty training, and additional resources are provided to faculty. As faculty are expected to focus primarily on students' academic success, the training describes differences between course modifications and accommodations and gives guidance on creating an individual learning agreement for their student. Both peer mentors and faculty are in communication with program staff throughout their work with students in order to get questions answered and provide ongoing updates on student well-being. Peer mentors have more formal meetings with program staff and other peer mentors and faculty meetings are as needed. In the current study, researchers engaged with multiple groups of participants, including students in the program, peer mentors, parents, and faculty. Given the in-depth nature of this program, sample sizes for each group are small; thus, the current study reports broad demographic information as to not identify the participants in the study.

Students

Six undergraduate students with intellectual disability participated in qualitative interviews. Eight students total were enrolled in the program, thus the response rate for student participation in the study was 75%. Students were at the end of their first semester in the program. Students self-reported their age, gender identity, and racial identity. Their ages ranged from 18-24 years, and participants were a balanced number of men and women who identify as White, European American.

Peer Mentors, Parents, and Faculty

Nineteen peer mentors participated in the current study (response rate = 45%). Most participants were between the ages of 19 and 22, identified as women and White, European American; with several peer mentors identifying as Black, African American or Native American or Alaskan Native. Nine parents participated in the study (100% response rate). Most parent participants identified as women and White, European American. Six faculty working with students in the program participated in the study (50% response rate). The sample of faculty was made up of a balance of individuals who identified as men or women. Most faculty participants identified as White, European American.

Procedure

Data collection was approved by the director of the program, who provided the researchers with an email list of potential participants in each of the roles (students, peer mentors, parents, and faculty). The first author sent emails to potential participants informing them of the opportunity to participate in the study. Students in the program were instructed to respond to the email with times they were available for an interview with a fellow undergraduate student, and were told they did not have to participate, their responses would not be tied to their names, and they could cancel or leave the interview at any time. The interviews were completed by undergraduate research assistants who had been trained in phenomenological interviewing. Phenomenology was selected as the qualitative methodology because this study aimed to "understand several individuals' common or shared experiences of a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2007, p. 60); the phenomenon in this case was enrollment in the postsecondary program. Informed consent was obtained from participants prior to the interview start. Emails to peer mentors, parents, and faculty included a description of the study and a link to the questionnaire. Informed consent was obtained from the participants prior to beginning the questionnaire; if they did not consent, no data were collected and they were directed to the end of the survey.

Measures

Interviews

Two undergraduate research assistants completed qualitative interviews with students in the program, using a phenomenological lens to explore students' lived experiences in the program. One undergraduate research assistant was a trusted peer, already familiar with the students but not formally involved in the program. The other undergraduate met the students prior to the interview to develop a rapport. We selected undergraduates who were not formally involved

with the program to conduct the interviews in order to reduce perceived power differentials and frame the interview as a peer-to-peer conversation.

Following procedure for phenomenological research (Creswell, 2007), interviews began with a grand tour question: "How has your experience in the program been thus far?" Interviewers then followed up with questions inquiring participants about what "situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences" (Creswell, 2007, p. 61), which included questions such as: "Tell me about what you have done with your peer mentor?" "How has it been living on campus?" "Have you gotten to know fellow students in your classes?" "Have you developed relationships with faculty and staff here?" "Have you gotten involved with the university community or the community as a whole?" "What personal goals do you have post-graduation?" "What are you learning in your experience here?"

Participants guided the interviews, and interviewers used the above prompts to probe for more information. Interviews discussed matters such as experiences with peer mentors, living on campus, other students in their classes, the campus and surrounding community, and their personal goals. Interviews with students lasted, on average, approximately 20 minutes, and were completed in a private room on campus. Interviews were transcribed by the principal investigator and undergraduate research assistants for phenomenological coding.

Questionnaires

Three questionnaires assessed perceptions of peer mentors, parents, and faculty/staff.

Peer Mentors. The questionnaire sent to peer mentors began with an open-ended question: "What are your overall thoughts and perceptions of the program thus far (include anything you think or feel)?" Statements from the answers to this question are reported in the results. Following the open-ended question, the questionnaire asked participants to rate their agreement with statements focused on the following constructs: (1) their reasons for getting involved in the program, (2) the impact of program on students, (3) the impact of program on themselves, (4) the impact of program on campus community, and (5) their expectations for students after the program. Closed-ended questions on the questionnaires were adapted from a measure developed by Carter et al., (2019). All closed-ended questions were on a 1-5 Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Parents. As with the peer-mentor questionnaire, parent questionnaires asked parents to rate their agreement with statements focused on the impact of the program on their students and the expectations they had for the students after the program (using the same 1-5 Likert scales as used with peer mentors). Additionally, parents were asked, on a 1-5 Likert scale how likely they were to recommend the program to others (from *not at all likely* to *definitely will*). Parents were also asked an open-ended question: "What have you noticed about your student's experiences in this program?"

Faculty. Faculty were asked to rate, on a 1-5 Likert scale, their agreement with statements regarding impact of the program on students and on the campus community, their expectations for students after the program (same questions as peer mentors), and the impact of the program on themselves (an abridged version of the peer mentor questionnaire).

Analyses

Data were collected via qualitative interviews with students and online questionnaires with peer mentors, parents, and faculty. A phenomenological lens guided the interviews with students to allow participants to describe the essence of their experiences (Creswell, 2007). Three researchers transcribed student interviews, then each read the interviews several times to gain a breadth of understanding of student experiences. After thorough readings of each interview, researchers engaged in horizontalization by highlighting quotes across all interviews that best described students' experience of the phenomenon. Separately, researchers identified significant statements that described the experience, clustered these statements into common themes or "meaning units," and wrote textural descriptions of each theme developed (Creswell, 2007, p. 159). The researchers then met to triangulate their interpretations of the experience for students in the program by describing the richness of each theme. During the meetings with all researchers, it was clear that the researchers had independently developed similar, overlapping themes and that these themes exemplified the "essence" of participant experiences (Creswell, 2007, p. 159); thus, these themes are used to describe the data. Together, researchers developed a synthesized list of themes and significant statements that exemplified each theme. Student quotes were often short statements. Finally, researchers discussed the themes and significant statements with each of the six participants in order to ensure the themes accurately captured students' experiences. All students in the program reviewed themes developed from their interviews; students said themes were "very accurate." One student noted overall about the interview, "I am glad I was a part of that. I would do it again." Student additions and their further clarification of themes are described in the results.

Descriptive analysis of responses on the peer mentor, parent, and faculty online questionnaires are reported to provide additional understanding of the community's experience of the program, and to allow for comparison of perspectives across roles. Analyses for open-ended survey responses did not follow a phenomenological lens as these were written responses. Responses to open-ended questions are thus not described using phenomenological themes (Creswell, 2007) and are instead included as quotes that exemplify participant responses.

Results

Students' Experiences in the Program

Students described affirming experiences and discussed successes and challenges they navigated during their first semester on campus. After thorough analysis of the interviews with each participant, the authors developed several themes that best describe the experience of being a student in this program including Varied Support in Relationships, Belonging and Involvement On- and Off-Campus, Motivation for Education, Independent Sense of Self, and Understanding and Helping Others. Across results, the gender-neutral pronouns *they/them* are used for confidentiality purposes as to not divulge the gender of the participant.

Varied Support in Relationships

Students described varied levels of support from relationships with others, including with their peer mentors, other students in the program, students outside of the program, roommates, and faculty, primarily based on the role of the person. Peers who were also enrolled in the program provided the highest level of support, illustrated by students' discussions of friendship and gratitude. More distal relationships (other students in classes, faculty) were described as less supportive.

Peers who were enrolled in the program offered friendship, as students explained, "When I got here I was very happy and grateful to have friends here at the program who can support you" and, "I belong here; don't have to think about any negative things about yourself." Peer mentors offered support as well, but possibly in a different way: "Um…we just talk and we like get to know each other and to make sure I'm okay and they are okay." When discussing this theme with students post-analyses, one student noted that, "Friendships are hard in college…people are mean to me sometimes." Others stated that it is important to find "one good friend that is always beside you," and that the program helped them make "so many friends on campus."

Other students in the university were also described, including roommates and students in their classes. Roommate issues were discussed as neutral: "My roommates, been really good with me um…I have not really had any problems," or somewhat trying. One student noted their roommate situation was "not so great uh…it um…may have problems with roommates and suitemates um…it's not going very well," and another noted "drama" in their living situation. Students mentioned connecting with other students in their classes: "The teacher just kind of created an open environment where we could get to know each other," and "we make new friends in classes like we get (inaudible) and we just uh... talk and we get involved and have connections and it is good to talk with new friends."

Students were mixed in their discussions of relationships with faculty. Several students described positive, supportive relationships with faculty: "They help me with support and they help me understand to life, key of life," and "[my teacher] makes my day every day when I see her and when she's teaching." Positive comments frequently centered on faculty supporting students through life skills or described general positive feelings when interacting with faculty. Not all students felt that they developed positive relationships with teachers due to communication issues or a lack of interest in cultivating such relationships. One student noted things were going well but recognized communication as a barrier: "It's going great, my relationship with my teachers is great but sometimes it's hard to communicate with my teachers." Another simply did not feel the need to create relationships with faculty, stating "…of course you don't really create relationships with your teachers very much because you're going to have new teachers next year so there's not really a point creating a huge relationship right there."

Belonging and Involvement On and Off Campus

Students voiced varying levels of involvement on campus and in the surrounding community. Much like students described varied support in interpersonal relationships by proximity, students felt more involved with the campus community compared to the surrounding community.

Students noted feeling belonging on campus. One student said, "I feel belonging, everybody is really nice and everybody is very welcoming to me; sometimes they are very sweet and I'm very welcome with all the activities and stuff," but also craved "more volunteering opportunities… that will better myself and make more friends in the community." Students described involvement on campus: "I've been involved

on campus too… made a lot of new friends so got involved really quick," but noted they "haven't really gotten involved in the community" surrounding the university. In the discussion with students post analyses, students celebrated their ability to get involved in campus organizations.

Motivation for Education

Students' motivations to attend college became an overarching theme as they described their experience in the program. Though motivations were varied, students described various motivators for attending college, most of which were job-focused or parent-focused, but one student described self-motivation to achieve the college experience.

Students recognized the importance of a college education for their careers, noting things such as, "I mean I would say it gives me a good opportunity to get a college education… that's really important for a job of course. A lot of jobs require college educations," and "I feel it's important to go to college so I can gain experience for a career for the future." However, students discussed that much of the push to attend college came from parent suggestion, from general statements such as, "they want me to study more," and "they went to college," and from narratives they have heard from their parents about their parents' hopes for their lives. One student noted the following about their father: "He wants me to be a smooth-talker. He wants me to have money for school and school helps me get stronger, and also happy. He wants me to be happy." Another described their mother's words: "She'd just tell me um… it's important to go to college to um… get through bad things um… making the right decisions." One student described a general motivation, not tied to career goals nor parents' expectations, to engage in the "college experience" after seeing siblings attend college: "So I really wanted to come and get the college experience too because my siblings got that I really wanted to get that." In discussing this theme with students, one summarized that they were "motivated to attend college because I wanted to be able to find a good career path and further my education."

Independent Sense of Self

Resoundingly, all students described the trials and successes of more independent living during their experience in the program, centering around their sense of self. Most students noted that the program helped them gain independence and life skills, noting, "Living on campus has been going really well. Um…I've been able to do all of my stuff on my own." They celebrate the day-to-day aspects of independence such as, "I know how to do the dishes, do my laundry" as well as overarching personal growth such as, "Learning more about myself is just like just an understatement so I can know what I need to learn and what I need to understand about myself." Students further described growth in self-knowledge, and work/play balance: "I learned that I love to read. And uh…um… that I loved to read and how to speak very well." They reflected on previous conversations about their ability to balance school and fun: "My dad used to say 'time for fun and time to work' and it also gave me education; it gives me education, it goes into my brain and that gives me knowledge to understand school."

One student tied their independence to their desire to be viewed as an adult: "[I] don't like when people call me a kid. I'm not a kid anymore. I want them to treat me as a young adult." A student also noted struggles that came along with this new-found independence, saying "Sometimes I have time to eat. Sometimes I go to class without eating."

Understanding and Helping Others

Students described growth in interpersonal skills such as learning how to better understand and help others. Their experiences in the program offered rich experiences to interact with others outside of their families. The program provided a context in which students learned more about others' feelings, which enabled students to feel that they can now help others. Two students made similar points regarding their increased understanding of others' emotions. One said, "I'm learning about my friends and their emotions and their anger issues, so like if they're angry or mad I know that to give them space and I know to give them time to think." Another noted, "I think I will learn that I can understand people better."

A common thread was the desire to help others. One student reflected on their experience in high school: "I don't want to see people hurt or get into fights or bully other people. Because back in high school, I got bullied." Another student said the following:

> Sometimes I go walking to classes and I see some people walking. And I'd see people moving. I know when I have a thing in my head it's called reading emotions. I read emotions to see people are sad, crying, or upset…I like to help people. I don't want them, I don't want them to be hurt.

This student went on to say the following:

> I like to help other people when they get bullied. I'm there to help them to read their thoughts or

emotions. Because I want to...understand body language and emotions language. So I don't want them to be hurt. I want them to be happy.

Peer Mentors Experience with the Program

Peer mentors reported the impact of the program on students, the impact of the program on themselves, the impact of the program on campus community, and their expectations for students after the program. Responses are reported in Table 1 as percentages for ease in comparison across peer mentors, parents, and faculty. Mentors also reported the reasons they got involved in the program, and overall reflections on the experience, described below.

Reasons to Get Involved in the Program

In terms of reasons for becoming peer mentors, 79% of peer mentors agreed or strongly agreed that they became mentors due to personal ties with people with disabilities, and 84% reported their decision was due to alignment with their future career plans. Most mentors agreed or strongly agreed (95%) that they became mentors because they wanted to give back to the community and learn more about disabilities (90%). Ten percent of mentors reported wanting to be in their role because they have disabilities themselves, and 53% of mentors reported having a peer mentor experience in the past. Almost all (95%) of the peer mentors thought the experience would be fun, and all reported that taking on the role of peer mentor aligned with their personal values. One student noted that the mission of the program was important to getting involved, stating, "I felt the need to support what the program was doing because I believe in the concept."

Overall Reflections from Peer Mentors

Peer mentors described positive impacts of the program on themselves and on the students enrolled. One peer mentor said, "My student has taught me how to be brave. I am more on the quiet side when I am meeting new people, but my student jumps right in and makes everyone around feel a part of the conversation." Another noted: "Working with the students has changed me in a way that has allowed me to find my purpose in life. While working with the students, I was able to truly open up and be myself." Moreover, one student said that it changed their perceptions, explaining "I hate to say it, but I used to hold ignorant judgment about people with intellectual disabilities, and working with the students has squashed those completely." Peer mentors mentioned the importance of including students with intellectual disability on campus, stating that the program "has opened doors that were closed to so many… it has allowed the students to turn obstacles into successes and learn that challenges are not always barriers." Another mentor said the program helped "campus as a whole because it helps fulfill our mission of diversity and makes a campus a brighter, more joyful place."

Parents' Experience with the Program

Parents of students enrolled reported on the impact of the program on students, and their expectations for students after the program (see Table 2). Parent responses indicated that the program may need to focus more on career training. Parents also responded to an open-ended question asked about students' experiences, described below.

Overall Reflections from Parents

All parents surveyed reported that they "very likely" or "definitely" would recommend this program. Parents commented on an increase in students' confidence; for example, "It has been very positive. They have grown in self-confidence and in the ability to articulate ideas" and "confidence in their own abilities have grown. They are participating in social activities with greater frequency and [are] building relationships with peers." Parents also said students were "more independent" and that their student "had never really had close friends before because of their disability so watching them blossom with these new friendships has been amazing."

Faculty Experience with the Program

Faculty with these students in their classes reported on the impact of the program on students enrolled in the program, the impact of the program on themselves, the impact of the program on the campus community, and expectations for students after the program (see Table 3). Additionally, an open-ended question asked for faculty's overall reflections.

Overall Reflections from Faculty

Though faculty open-ended responses were limited, all faculty commented on students' motivation and eagerness to be a part of the program. Faculty said simply: "They are motivated" and "eager to learn and genuinely excited to be a part of the campus community." One faculty member responded that they "don't see any difference between" the student enrolled in the program compared to the typical students they have in their classes. Another faculty member commented, "The program made me look closer at my day-to-day teaching. I found that I was relying on a lecture-based model more than I thought I was."

Table 1

Peer Mentor Perspectives

	Strongly Disagree %	Disagree %	Neither %	Agree %	Strongly Agree %
Impact on students enrolled in the program (*N*=18)					
Students accessed strong academic support	0	0	6	44	50
Students were more engaged in class	0	0	11	72	17
Students had access to strong social support	0	0	0	22	78
Students developed social/communication skills	0	0	0	22	78
Students had fewer behavior challenges	0	11	17	55	17
Students developed independence skills	0	6	6	27	61
Students developed self-determination skills	0	0	0	56	44
Students developed career-related skills	0	0	11	61	28
Students developed new friendships	0	0	0	11	89
Students experienced a sense of belonging	0	0	0	22	78
Students felt more part of campus community	0	0	6	27	67
Impact of the program on peer mentors themselves (*N*=18)					
I grew professionally	0	6	0	33	61
I became a better advocate for people with IDD	0	0	0	33	67
I had fun	0	0	0	28	72
I learned more about myself	0	0	22	11	67
I developed friendships with students with IDD	0	0	0	28	72
I became more comfortable with people with IDD	0	0	22	17	61
I'm more informed on barriers for people with IDD	0	0	0	33	67
I gained a greater appreciation for diversity	0	0	6	11	83
I enjoyed my college experience more	0	0	0	33	67
I gained more clarity on my career path	0	17	11	17	55
I developed more positive attitudes toward people with IDD	0	0	11	6	83
Impact of the program on the campus community (*N*=18)					
Students encounter greater diversity	0	6	6	17	71
Students are more knowledgeable about people with IDD	0	0	11	39	50
Students are more accepting of people with IDD	0	0	11	28	61
Faculty who enroll students became better teachers	0	0	11	28	61
Faculty/staff more knowledgeable about people with IDD	0	0	5	28	67
Our campus is more aware of social justice issues facing people with disabilities	0	0	11	28	61

(Table 1, continued)

	Strongly Disagree %	Disagree %	Neither %	Agree %	Strongly Agree %
Expectations for students in the program, post-graduation (*N*=19). Most graduates of the program will:					
Work in a part-time job in the community	0	10	5	32	53
Work in a full-time job in the community	0	0	16	47	37
Live at home with family members	0	26	47	11	16
Live in a group home (with others with disabilities)	0	16	16	58	10
Live in the community (with others without disabilities)	0	0	16	68	16
Live in the community independently (without others)	0	21	26	48	5
Have a strong network of friends	0	0	0	21	79
Get married	0	0	26	48	26
Have children	0	0	52	32	16
Experience a high quality of life	0	0	0	10	90

Table 2

Parent Perspectives

	Strongly Disagree %	Disagree %	Neither %	Agree %	Strongly Agree %
Impact on students enrolled in the program (*N*=8)					
Students accessed strong academic support	12	0	25	25	38
Students were more engaged in class	0	0	12	38	50
Students had access to strong social support	0	0	12	25	63
Students developed social/communication skills	0	0	0	50	50
Students had fewer behavior challenges	0	0	50	12	38
Students developed independence skills	0	0	0	25	75
Students developed self-determination skills	0	0	12	38	50
Students developed career-related skills	0	0	50	12	38
Students developed new friendships	0	0	0	25	75
Students experienced a sense of belonging	0	0	0	12	88
Students felt more part of campus community	0	0	0	14	86
Expectations for students in the program, post-graduation (*N*=8). Most graduates of the program will:					
Work in a part-time job in the community	12	25	0	25	38
Work in a full-time job in the community	11	0	0	33	56
Live at home with family members	0	33	67	0	0
Live in a group home (with others with disabilities)	45	22	33	0	0

(Table 2, continued)

	Strongly Disagree %	Disagree %	Neither %	Agree %	Strongly Agree %
Live in the community (with others without disabilities)	22	45	0	33	0
Live in the community independently (without others)	22	12	33	33	0
Have a strong network of friends	0	11	11	33	45
Get married	0	0	56	33	11
Have children	33	11	45	11	0
Experience a high quality of life	0	0	11	22	67

Discussion

The current study explored the experiences of various individuals involved in a university program for students with intellectual disability. Results of this study describe the celebrations and challenges that students with intellectual disability experience living on a university campus. Additionally, results illustrate the nuances in perceptions of the impact of the program on students, and the expectations various individuals have for students enrolled in this program, when compared across roles.

Student Experience in the Program

To understand students' lived experiences in a university program serving students with intellectual disability, we interviewed six participants enrolled in the program at the end of their first semester. Students in this program voiced experiences similar to traditional students in their first year of college, yet their experiences were unique in several ways. Students discussed navigating relationships with people in different roles on a university campus. They described developing supportive friendships with other students in the program, who they were closest to and interacted with most frequently. Peer mentors offered support but were not as often described as friends. Peer mentoring has been questioned as well-intentioned but a potential barrier to true inclusion, terming these relationships as "arranged friendships" lacking in reciprocity (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2009). Though our study found positive descriptions of peer mentors, it is important to facilitate genuine relationships in order to achieve genuine inclusion. Students' relationships with faculty were the least close type of relationship described; some students greatly appreciated their professors, while others did not see the importance in developing relationships given their perceived short-term nature.

Many students described feelings of "belonging" at the university. Nancy Schlossberg calls this "mattering" (1989) and argues that all students in college must feel that they matter, as opposed to feeling marginalized. Students with intellectual disability may experience marginalization on a university campus, as they often do in high school settings (Rose & Monda-Amaya, 2011). The program in the current study places students in mainstream classes; students are expected to attend classes with typically developing peers. It is imperative that students are not only included, but receive social support, as social support has been touted as the key to "mattering" and a predictor of academic success (Rayle & Chung, 2007). Student mentors may offer support for students with intellectual disability (Björnsdóttir, 2017). On the other hand, it may be their fellow students in the program who offer the most support, as research with college students suggests peer social support is related to students' adjustment (Friedlander et al., 2007).

Several students described being involved on campus, but not as involved with the surrounding community. Students' lack of transportation may have been a barrier to community engagement. Leaders of postsecondary programs for students with intellectual disability note involvement as a key facet of programs (Vaughn, 2018); thus, transportation issues and welcoming from the community should be further examined and supported.

Students' career-focused motivation to receive a postsecondary education mirrored results of a national study of traditional undergraduate students; students rated a university's job-placement of the highest-rat-

Table 3

Faculty Perspectives

	Strongly Disagree %	Disagree %	Neither %	Agree %	Strongly Agree %
Impact on students enrolled in the program (*N*=6)					
Students accessed strong academic support	0	0	0	83	17
Students were more engaged in class	0	0	0	67	33
Students had access to strong social support	0	0	0	67	33
Students developed social/communication skills	0	0	0	83	17
Students had fewer behavior challenges	0	17	33	33	17
Students developed independence skills	0	0	0	67	33
Students developed self-determination skills	0	0	0	67	33
Students developed career-related skills	0	0	0	83	17
Students developed new friendships	0	0	0	50	50
Students experienced a sense of belonging	0	0	0	33	67
Students felt more part of campus community	0	0	0	33	67
Impact of the program on faculty themselves (*N*=6)					
I grew professionally	0	0	17	33	50
I became a better advocate for people with IDD	0	0	17	50	33
I had fun	0	0	0	50	50
I learned more about myself	0	17	0	33	50
I developed friendships with students with IDD	0	0	0	50	50
I became more comfortable with people with IDD	0	0	17	33	50
I'm more informed on barriers for people with IDD	0	0	0	67	33
I gained a greater appreciation for diversity	0	17	0	33	50
I developed more positive attitudes toward people with IDD	0	0	17	33	50
My teaching improved to support students with IDD	0	0	17	33	50
My teaching improved to support students without IDD	0	0	17	33	50
Impact of the program on the campus community (*N*=6)					
Students encounter greater diversity	0	17	0	50	33
Students are more knowledgeable about people with IDD	0	17	0	50	33
Students are more accepting of people with IDD	0	17	17	17	49
Faculty who enroll students became better teachers	0	0	33	33	33
Faculty/staff more knowledgeable about people with IDD	0	0	17	50	33
Our campus is more aware of social justice issues facing people with disabilities	0	17	0	33	50

(Table 3, continued)

	Strongly Disagree %	Disagree %	Neither %	Agree %	Strongly Agree %
Expectations for students in the program, post-graduation (*N*=6). Most graduates of the program will:					
Work in a part-time job in the community	0	0	17	50	33
Work in a full-time job in the community	0	33	17	33	17
Live at home with family members	0	17	0	33	50
Live in a group home (with others with disabilities)	0	17	33	33	17
Live in the community (with others without disabilities)	0	0	66	17	17
Live in the community independently (without others)	0	50	0	33	17
Have a strong network of friends	0	0	0	50	50
Get married	0	0	33	50	17
Have children	0	0	50	33	17
Experience a high quality of life	0	0	0	67	33

ed factors in choosing a university (Stolzenberg et al., 2019). Students in this study also noted their parents' desires as a motivator to attend college. Research has demonstrated that traditional students report that parent expectations do play a role in planning to attend college (Gibbons et al., 2006; Stage & Hossler, 1989). It is possible that the population in the current study may have been even more influenced by their parents, as recent research suggests parental input is less of a motivator for most students than outcome-focused, long-term career benefits of attending college (Stolzenberg et al., 2019). This may be due to an overall higher level of parent involvement for these students prior to coming to college compared to traditional college students. Resoundingly, students described improvements in independence, confidence, and interpersonal skills, which align with results of a study of a similar program (Claytor et al., 2018). College students are most successful when they experience belonging, social support from peers and faculty, and learn how to navigate their heightened independence (Friedlander et al., 2007; Rayle & Chung, 2007), and the experiences of students enrolled in this program mirrored that of a typical college experience.

Perceptions of Peer Mentors, Parents, and Faculty

Peer mentors and faculty reported personal and professional changes in their approaches to working with students with intellectual disability. This echoes recent findings of mentor and faculty reflections on their experience in a mentorship program for students with intellectual disability (Carey, 2019; Carter et al., 2019; Ryan et al., 2017). Peer mentors often had close ties with someone with a disability, a factor in their motivation to get involved. Mentors wanted to "give back" and learn about students with intellectual disability. When students with intellectual disability are enrolled in college courses, other students' levels of acceptance of individuals with intellectual disability may improve (May, 2012).

Faculty also thought students gained a lot, and the program bettered the campus. Faculty reported change in perceptions of students with intellectual disability and described changing their teaching practices for all students. Motivation to adjust teaching practices for all students was also reported by faculty in another, similar program (Stefánsdóttir & Björnsdóttir, 2016). Faculty described students as engaged, which parallels reports of faculty working with students with intellectual disability in their transition courses between high school and employment (Burgin et al., 2017). However, faculty had the lowest expectations for students with intellectual disability in terms of career goals and living independently, compared to peer mentors and parents. Taken with the finding that students reported positive but not close relationships with faculty, it is

possible faculty were too far from students to see such potential, or that they had little experience working with students with intellectual disability.

Parents thought students' experiences were positive, especially with respect to gains in independence, confidence, and interpersonal skills, but noted that students needed more focus on developing career-related skills. Parent responses regarding their expectations for students post-completion of the program were similar to peer mentor responses regarding expectations; parents reported high hopes for their futures related to career and life goals.

Limitations

It is possible there were communication barriers between interviewer and participant, and researchers' interpretations of their language may not accurately represent what students were hoping to articulate. Additionally, though researchers attempted to reduce power differentials during the interview process, it is possible that students wanted to portray the program positively. Results may be biased toward a positive light, as students may have had experiences in the program that they did not want to tell the interviewer. The process of asking students about their college experience may introduce additional limitations. Students may not have had similar experiences with which to compare their college experience, thus may not have noticed that something was outside of their expectations. Interviews took place at the end of the semester, thus students may not have remembered experiences across a semester. Regarding the limited time on campus, the relationships developed in the program, especially with peer mentors, may feel transactional as part of the program, which may limit the inclusivity of the program itself. Most participants were White; thus, this study does not address the intersectional marginalization that racialized students with intellectual disability may experience.

Additionally, because the sample was selected from one university program our findings do not generalize to other programs. The intent of the qualitative interview data was not to describe student experiences in all programs for students with intellectual disability, but instead shed light on the unique experiences of these students. Though the sample of student data was small (six participants), it represented all but two of the students participating in the program. This study is limited in its generalizability with respect to peer mentors', parents', and faculty perspectives as we only captured the experiences of 19 peer mentors, nine parents, and six faculty. Results are somewhat lacking in critique of the program, with exception to parents' reporting a potential lack in career-focused training; thus, it is possible the results are biased in a positive light due to selection effects. Further, the data collected from mentors, parents, and faculty were less in-depth compared to the student data. Interviews were not completed with mentors, parents, nor faculty due to personnel and time constraints. Previous research has found that faculty may have concerns about disruptions to their course if they enroll students with intellectual disability (Gibbons et al., 2015), yet this concern was not found with this group of faculty. This difference may be because of the timing in data collection. Faculty who participated in this study had likely become more comfortable with students with intellectual disability during the semester, more so than they may have been before working with these students and were thus less likely to espouse such concerns. It is possible that surveying faculty, as well as peer mentors, prior to their experiences with students with intellectual disability may have yielded different results.

Implications

Many aspects of campus life as well as student characteristics are vital to creating a positive experience for undergraduate students with intellectual disability, including levels of support from others, students' social skills, and students' social self-determination (Prohn et al., 2019). Students reported a desire for more volunteering opportunities to get involved both on- and off-campus. More engagement in the surrounding community may bolster feelings of belonging and activism, as service-learning opportunities are touted as transition services that can help students bridge to the adult world (Hoover, 2016). Disability service educators in colleges and universities may improve programs by providing planned opportunities for on- and off-campus engagement, thus bridging the gap between the university community and surrounding community and more fully integrating students into broader societal structures.

Programs supporting students with intellectual disability must focus on building students' relationships with peers, mentors, and faculty. Students reported close relationships with their peers in the program but less close relationships with their peer mentors. It is possible that students felt these relationships were "arranged" more than they were genuine. Programs should be mindful of opportunities for "ordinary moment(s) of humanity" that stem into true friendships, rather than prescribed activities (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2009, p. 9). Faculty relationships were the least supportive relationships students described, thus professional development for faculty is needed. Reducing communication barriers with faculty should be

a key component in any faculty training in postsecondary programs. Additionally, increased training on strategies such as Universal Design may be helpful to faculty professional development and subsequent support of all students (Mace et al., 1996). Faculty are influential to students' academic success and adjustment to college (Martin et al., 2011; Komarraju et al., 2010), but instructors report experiencing uncertainty when it comes to supporting students with intellectual disability, even in more short-term transitional programs between high school and employment (Burgin et al., 2017).

Like faculty, peer mentors reported personal and professional growth after working in the program; thus, recruitment of student mentors could focus on the benefits they will experience in addition to the fulfillment of helping others. Many peer mentors chose to get involved with the program due to experiences with people with disability, indicating a positive ripple effect of engaging in genuine relationships with people with disability. This finding suggests programs such as this may extend the positive effects of developing relationships with students with disabilities to areas outside the campus through targeted engagement with the community.

The results of this study indicate students hold in high regard their parents' expectations. Research has found parents of college students with disabilities socialize their children to see the importance of activism (Kimball et al., 2016), which may help students get involved in more community activism. Parent education specific to preparing students for the college environment may help students prepare for the transition to college.

Future Directions and Conclusions

The current study offers various directions for future work exploring the experiences of people involved in undergraduate programs for students with intellectual disability. Longitudinal research, including exploring perspectives of the same students across multiple semesters/years as well as comparing across different students across multiple semesters/years, could offer more information on the outcomes of such a program. More study of specific ways to improve students' relationships with peers and faculty is needed in order to develop concrete steps for creating a truly inclusive environment, including study on what true "inclusion" means to students. Research may examine the level of independent decision-making that students with intellectual disability had prior to entrance to college, and further explore parents' motivation for their children to attend college. Additionally, examining first-generation status may be important in future research, as would the influence of racial identity and experiences of marginalization. Furthermore, study on the transition from secondary to postsecondary may shed light on missed opportunities in both settings.

As more universities develop programs for undergraduates with intellectual disability it is imperative that we evaluate programs holistically. Moreover, programs benefit from sharing what is learned in an effort toward continuous improvement. Undergraduates in this study described the importance of the relationships they cultivated and their personal and professional growth. Peer mentors and faculty reported benefits not only for students involved in the program but described their own self-growth and the bettering of the campus community as a whole. Parents noticed positive changes regarding students' independence, interpersonal skills, and confidence. Programs that support undergraduates with intellectual disability may improve the lives of all roles involved, and may, over time, challenge expectations for students with intellectual disability and provide avenues for personal and professional growth.

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