

Student Attitudes and Perceptions About Postsecondary Education for People with Intellectual Disabilities (Practice Brief)

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Abstract

Postsecondary education programs are associated with many positive outcomes for people with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) including increases in social skills, vocational skills, and independence. Although these programs are increasing, there are regions of the United States where few exist. The present study assesses the attitudes and perceptions of 133 undergraduate students at a small liberal arts college about creating a postsecondary education program for young adults with ID. Overwhelmingly positive attitudes and perceptions were reported. Most respondents reported that they would be interested in serving as a mentor and felt that a postsecondary education program would provide opportunities for growth and increase diversity on campus. In addition, concerns about changing dynamics of the classroom and compromising the integrity of the college were noted. Based on student responses, future steps to clarify misperceptions are discussed. Limitations of this study are addressed including the small response rate and self-selection bias.

Keywords: Intellectual disability, postsecondary education, transition, inclusion

In the 1948 passage of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations deemed education to be one of many basic human rights; and at the 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities the United Nations recognized “the social and economic benefits that continuing education” offers persons with disabilities (O’Connor, Kubiak, Espiner, & O’Brien, 2012, p. 247). Many countries have adopted policies to ensure education for children with disabilities. Among other places, policies have been enacted in Australia (e.g. the Disability Discrimination Act of 1992), the UK (e.g. the Equality Act of 2010), the United States (e.g. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 1975), and many countries in Europe (through the European Access network; Corby & Cousins, 2012; O’Connor et al., 2012).

Despite developmental deficits in communication, social skills, and independence, students with intellectual disabilities (ID) have been increasingly and successfully included with their typically developing peers in public school classrooms (American Youth Policy Forum and Center on Education Policy, 2001; Goodman, Hazelkorn, Buchholz, Duffy, & Kit-ta, 2011). In 2009, the United States Department of

Education National Center for Educational Statistics ([NCES], 2012) reported that 26.7% of students with ID attending public schools were served in regular education classes at least 40% of the day.

Educating students with ID in an inclusive environment is not limited to elementary and high school. In 2012, the NCES reported that there are currently 7,398 Title IV postsecondary institutions (institutions that apply for federal financial aid programs) in the United States and “other U.S. jurisdictions.” Of these programs, just over 250 of them currently offer PSE opportunities for individuals with ID (Grigal & Hart, 2010). The emergence of the PSE programs for people with ID in the United States may be partially attributed to the passage of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) in 2008. The HEOA not only allows for the development of PSE programs, but also affords students with ID the ability to apply for federal financial aid (Griffin, Summer, McMillan, Day, & Hodapp, 2012). At the same time federal legislation mandates least restrictive learning opportunities for all students in the United States, large institutions housing people with ID have closed and governmental policy has embraced community-based living and

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work programs. Consequently, there is an increased focus of federal, state, and local policies that support transitioning students with ID from public schools to the community (Lee, 2009). However, unlike in other parts of the world, these policies are not backed up by community services for adults with ID (Parmenter, 2011). Many communities in the United States offer limited opportunities for adults with ID to have shared experiences with their same age peers that are similar to what they had while attending public schools. This lack of opportunity has been correlated with a lack of employment opportunities, decreased self-determination, decreased self-advocacy, and decreased well-being (Biggs & Carter, 2016; Grigal & Hart, 2010).

Although parents of children with ID may anticipate a PSE for their child (Zager & Alpern, 2010), these are not often the expectations held by other members of the community (Grigal & Neubert, 2004). McGrew and Evans (2004) note that people with ID are rarely held to the same high expectations as typically developing students (e.g. furthering their education, getting a job, and becoming successful, productive members of society). Instead, they are often held to a lower standard of expectations based on stereotypes underestimating their abilities and potential for independence and achievement. Grigal and Hart (2010) report that individuals with ID have the fewest employment and education opportunities after secondary school compared with other categories of disability typically developing youth. Only 58.6% of individuals with ID hold a steady job two years after secondary school and only 37% live independently five years after secondary school. Additionally, Grigal and Hart report that individuals with ID experience greater social isolation after secondary school compared to other adults. These outcomes reflect low expectations society has historically held for individuals with ID.

The inclusion movement asserts that people with disabilities have the right to the same life experiences as all people, including intimate relationships, transitioning to adulthood, learning opportunities, and recreational opportunities (Culham & Nind, 2003). Educating students with ID in environments with their typical peers is associated with increases in skills such as socialization, communication, and independence (Kirova, 2001; Salend, 1999; Wood, 2006; Yager, Johnson, & Johnson, 1985), as well as exposure to a wider array of employment experiences, access to a new learning environment, increased self-advoca-

cy, and increased self-esteem (Folk, Yamamoto, & Stodden, 2012; Grigal & Hart, 2010; Simmons-Reed, Cullen, Day, Izzo, & Colebaugh, 2013). Additional benefits may include professors expanding teaching strategies to engage students with diverse learning styles (O'Connor et al., 2012) and increased tolerance of diversity among students (Folk et al., 2012; Jones & Goble, 2012).

Depiction of the Problem

Prior to developing a new PSE program, it is important to understand college students' perceptions (and expectations) about the inclusion of individuals with ID on college campuses. Griffin et al. (2012) surveyed 256 college students at Vanderbilt University and found that they held positive attitudes towards inclusive PSE programs. Additionally, they found that females and individuals who were more comfortable around individuals with ID were more likely to support inclusive PSE programs. Although Griffin et al.'s research found interesting results, the research on student perception about PSE programs for people with ID is scarce. In the literature that does exist it is difficult to find studies focusing solely on individuals with ID (Corby & Cousins, 2012; Grigal & Hart, 2010).

Negative stereotypes and stigmas surrounding individuals with ID may serve as a barrier to accessing PSE. In fact, it became clear that such negative stereotypes and stigma existed among administrators on our campus when a PSE program for students with ID was proposed. Therefore as a first step, it is important to assess and understand whether or not negative attitudes exist within the institution where a PSE program may be implemented. Understanding the perceptions and misinformation provides a clearer picture of the barriers that need to be overcome.

We believe that a PSE program would be a good fit with our historical college mission and student culture. The mission of our educational institution is to educate the "heads, hearts, and hands" of all students while ministering to the needs of others. Likewise, due to student interest the Psychology Department has offered several courses on developmental disability and interventions such as Applied Behavior Analysis that have been well received by our students. Furthermore, volunteer service activities involving people with developmental disabilities (such as a special needs dance hosted by a student group on campus) and academic lectures on related topics (such as Au-

tism, Inclusion, and Applied Behavior Analysis) are well attended.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to gain information about current student attitudes towards an inclusive PSE program at this college as a first step to providing information about the potential feasibility of developing such a program on our campus.

Participant Demographics and Institutional Partners/Resources

Participants included 133 undergraduate college students attending a small private liberal arts college in northwest Georgia. These participants included 114 female, 18 male, and 1 not specified. The college currently enrolls approximately 2,000 students (66.8% female, 33.2% male). The overrepresentation of female students in the study (86% female, 14% male) is likely due to the fact that significantly more female than male students are currently enrolled in the college. In terms of class standing, 21.8% of participants were seniors, 27.8% were sophomores, 18.8% were juniors, and 31.6% were freshmen.

Description of Practice

Students currently enrolled were emailed a 15-item survey developed to assess their perceptions about a PSE program at the college (see Appendix A). The survey, which was sent out twice within one week via campus email defined ID according to the DSM-IV-TR (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) definition to ensure more accurate responses from the participants. The survey contained both yes/no questions and open-ended questions. Items assessed whether or not students have ever been in classes with individuals with ID; if students thought a PSE program should be included at the college; if students would be a mentor for students with ID; and if a student felt that a PSE program would fit the founder's and school's mission of educating the head, heart, and hands. In addition, students were asked to consider potential benefits and drawbacks of having a PSE program at the college. Several yes/no questions included prompts to explain why a participant responded as they did. In order to better analyze the open-ended questions in a quantified manner, responses were grouped into discrete categories whenever possible.

Evaluation of Observed Outcomes

Seventy-nine percent of respondents reported knowing someone with ID, with 18% reporting that they had a family member with ID. Additionally, 61.7% of the respondents reported having an inclusion experience involving individuals with ID in elementary, middle, or high school. Thus, the majority of respondents had learning- or community-based experiences with individuals with ID.

One hundred thirteen of the respondents (87%) reported that the college should offer a PSE program for individuals with ID. A common theme explaining their reasons was that everyone deserves the same opportunities and because it would diversify the campus. Common objections to a PSE program included concerns that students with ID would hold back other students in classes and that having students with ID would negatively impact the college's prestige. Additionally, 87% of respondents reported that they would be comfortable having individuals with ID in their classrooms and 72% said that they would consider being a mentor in at least one setting (classroom or otherwise).

Based on a qualitative analysis of the open-ended questions about benefits of having a PSE program on campus, high frequency responses included increased awareness (37.6%), diversity (28.6%), and combating stereotypes (12%). When asked to report the drawbacks of such a program, high frequency responses included concerns about issues in classes (i.e. disruptions, slowing down the pace of the class; 29.3%), bullying/discrimination (18%), use of too many resources (9.8%), and compromising the integrity of the college (6.8%).

The last two questions of the survey pertained specifically to the college's motto and mission of its founder. The first question was "Would the implementation of this type of program fit with the college's motto of 'not to be ministered unto, but to minister'?" An overwhelming 86.5% of respondents answered with the affirmative. The second question was: "Would the implementation of this type of program comply with the college's mission to engage the students' head, heart, and hands through service and learning?" Again, this was a high response, with 85% answering with the affirmative.

Implications and Portability

Overwhelmingly, participants held strongly positive attitudes about including individuals with ID on the college campus. Those who had reservations about a PSE program expressed concern that including peers with ID would impact their classes and the admission standards of the college. Others were also concerned that the college may not be equipped with the resources to implement such a program. However, the majority of positive responses suggest that the addition of a PSE program would be well received by the student body. Students reporting a previous positive experience involving a person with an ID were more likely to report a positive attitude about including people with ID on campus in the future. Thus, early inclusive experiences during elementary and high school appear to influence later attitudes about including people with ID in the community as adults. Furthermore, the survey results support the original idea that the target college campus is likely a good fit for a PSE program for young adults with ID.

However, despite the positive responses from the survey, it should be noted that the survey data represents a response rate of 6%. The degree to which this data represents the student population is unknown. This data may include self-selection bias in that students who are either more interested in or knowledgeable about ID are more likely to participate in the survey. On the other hand, students who are the least comfortable or hold intensely negative perceptions about people with ID may also self-select and be more likely to respond to the survey. In any case, it should be noted that the majority of students did not choose to participate in this survey. Email is the primary mechanism for communicating information to students at this college. Therefore, many students likely delete emails that do not seem immediately relevant.

The current study did not address faculty perceptions or concerns about PSE programs on their campus. The success of a PSE program depends upon support from both faculty and students. Lombardi (2010) reported that when faculty have a greater knowledge about disabilities, they are more likely to hold positive attitudes about individuals with ID. In a recent study, O'Connor et al. (2012) reported that professors were concerned about finding and keeping steady mentors for their students and the possibility of poor attendance of students with ID. However, de-

spite these concerns, professors who participated in the O'Connor et al. study reported that the presence of students with ID in their classes allowed them to make courses more accessible to all students by moving from an instructor-focused to a student-centered approach.

Even though only a relatively small number of students expressed concerns about the negative impact of a PSE program on their learning, it is important that such concerns be directly addressed. Grigal and Hart (2010) suggest that the concerns about PSE programs are usually a result of negative stereotypes they possess surrounding the term "intellectual disability" rather than actual experience. However, research shows that after the implementation of a PSE program, students (particularly female students) are less hesitant about and have fewer negative stereotypes about the inclusion of students with ID in the classroom (Griffin et al., 2012; May 2012). Thus, more opportunities to engage jointly in activities and projects with people from diverse backgrounds, particularly people with ID, may reduce stereotypes.

Assessing attitudes and perceptions about including people with ID in a PSE program is a useful first step for establishing a climate conducive to developing a successful PSE program. The next step involves raising awareness for college faculty and administrators as to the benefits associated with creating an opportunity for students with an ID to have a PSE experience. This next step may be accomplished by increased opportunities for faculty and students to engage in inclusive experiences with people who have developmental disabilities. For instance, service learning and civic engagement projects partnering with people with developmental disabilities provide students, faculty, and administrators with meaningful experiences within familiar frameworks of teaching and service. Likewise, courses with field experience components in which students engage with people with developmental disabilities in the community may provide a bridge to a more formal inclusive experience on campus.

In addition, the benefits of an inclusive PSE program may be more intentionally highlighted through campus-wide presentations and workshops demonstrating opportunities for college students to mentor and develop skills working with people who have developmental disabilities, for faculty to develop a broader range of teaching and assessment methods to address different learning needs, and for contribut-

ing to a climate of diversity and inclusion on campus. Workshops for faculty introducing them to successful PSE programs serving people with ID in schools similar to our college would be helpful in building momentum. Faculty may be concerned that they lack the skills necessary to reach learners with cognitive and academic skills different than those of traditional students. Thus, professional development opportunities with supported stipends are likely to be useful tools in providing guidance for faculty who are willing to support the development of such programs.

Ultimately, students, faculty, and administrators across the country must consider the bigger picture. PSE programs not only promote normalization and inclusion, they highlight problems involving social injustice in which a group of people, because of their differences, are prohibited from accessing experiences available to others. Framing the issue of PSE programs within context of social justice may serve to clarify concerns grounded in biases and stereotypes.

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Appendix

Survey on Including Peers with Intellectual Disabilities

A person with an Intellectual Disability (ID) is someone who has significant deficits in cognitive, social, and daily living skill. Yet, these individuals are often capable of learning, working, developing relationships, and contributing in a positive way to society. The survey you are about to complete will ask you questions about young adults with Intellectual Disabilities. Additionally, it will also ask you to give your opinions on having peers with Intellectual Disabilities as a part of the campus community. All responses will be kept anonymous. Additionally, by continuing this survey, you give consent for the researchers to use and analyze your responses for the purposes of gaining a better understanding of the current attitude of students towards young adults with Intellectual Disabilities. If you consent to the aforementioned terms, please complete the survey.

What is your gender?

In what month and year do you expect to graduate?
(e.g. May 2013)

Do you know anyone with an Intellectual Disability?

If you answered "YES" to the previous question, what is their relation to you?

Have you ever had a peer with an Intellectual Disability in your classes? (elementary, middle, or high school)

If you answered "YES" to the above question, please describe your experiences going to school with him/her.

Do you think [the college] should include a learning opportunity to your peers with Intellectual Disabilities? Why or why not?

Please answer in the following format: "Yes, because..." OR "No, because..."

If [the college] were to offer an educational experience for your peers with Intellectual Disabilities, would you feel comfortable having them in your classes?

Would you consider being a mentor for a peer with an Intellectual Disability?

If you answered "YES" to the above question, in which of the following settings would you consider being a mentor?

Check all that apply

- A mentor in the classroom
- A mentor as part of the student work program
- A mentor for social events (clubs, KCAB events, volunteer work, CE credits, etc.)
- A mentor for athletics or intramurals
- A mentor in another setting

What, if any, would be the benefits to [the college's] community of having individuals with Intellectual Disabilities on campus?

What, if any, would be the drawbacks of having individuals with Intellectual Disabilities on campus?

Do you think including peers with Intellectual Disabilities in [the college's] community would fit in with [the founder's] vision for the college? (Think "not to be ministered unto, but to minister"). Why or why not?
Please answer in the following format: "Yes, because..." OR "No, because..."

Do you think having a post-secondary education experience at [the college] for students with Intellectual Disabilities fits with our motto of head, heart, and hands? Why or why not?
Please answer in the following format: "Yes, because..." or "No, because..."

Please feel free to share other remarks concerning the inclusion of individuals with Intellectual Disabilities at [the college].