

# **Relentless Optimism: Inclusive Postsecondary Opportunities for Students with Significant Disabilities**

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## **Abstract**

Some universities and colleges across the country are creating opportunities for young adults with significant disabilities to meaningfully participate in postsecondary education. Students with significant disabilities are now attending college classes with peers without disabilities either during or after high school. In this qualitative study we investigate two programs housed in Central New York that support students labeled with significant disabilities (i.e., cognitive disabilities, intellectual disabilities, traumatic brain injury, and autism) so they can attend college classes in inclusive settings. For this study we interviewed major stakeholders in these programs and asked research questions focused on the benefits and obstacles to implementation. Our findings suggest that these programs benefit students with disabilities, college classmates, and professors. The obstacles to these programs were institutional, logistical, and attitudinal in nature. We conclude by presenting the implications of these findings and raise questions for future research.

*Michael was institutionalized his whole life and when the local institution closed that's when he came out. I can't even imagine what it would be like for him because he was not seen to have any communication. He was seen to have behavioral problems. He was not seen in a positive way. And then when he got out of the institution he actually figured out what kind of communication device would work for him. He researched it; he got Medicaid to buy it. This is not an unintelligent man. He never had any education; he had nothing there. He came to me saying that college for him would be a dream come true. He got into the college and he surprised everyone. No one ever thought he was intelligent before this time. He did a presentation to his religion class at the University at the end of the semester. It was amazing. He had gained such a deep understanding of the content! So when you give somebody the opportunity to do something, I mean so many people thought he couldn't communicate and now he's reading, he's writing, he's presenting, he's doing all these things. I would like the people from the institution to see him today (Theresa, Program Coordinator)*

Traditionally, young adults who have been labeled as having significant disabilities such as autism, cognitive impairments, intellectual disabilities, and traumatic brain injury have not been given the option of participating in and benefiting from a postsecondary education. In the above anecdote Michael, who has a significant disability, has been given that opportunity. The term significant disability can be defined as:

An individual who requires extensive ongoing support in more than one major life activity to participate in integrated community settings and to enjoy a quality of life that is available to citizens with fewer or no disability. Support may be required for life activities such as mobility, communication, self-care, and learning as necessary for independent living, employment, and self-sufficiency (TASH, 2000).

## The State of Postsecondary Education for Students with Significant Disabilities

Most students with significant disabilities remain in high school until age 21, while most of their peers without disabilities move on to college. This is common practice across the nation. Over the past decade, some universities and colleges across the country have developed opportunities for these individuals to meaningfully participate in postsecondary education.

As more students with significant disabilities are graduating high school, college is being considered an option. Postsecondary education has become an increasingly important prerequisite to independent adult living (Zafft, Hart & Zimbrich, 2004). Intellectual stimulation, emotional growth, academic gains, an expanded social network, increased self-confidence, and independence are just some of the aspects that many college students enjoy. Completion of nearly any type of postsecondary education significantly improves an individual’s chances of securing meaningful employment after college.

The recent interest in postsecondary education, specifically for this population, is largely due to the practice of inclusion of students with disabilities at the elementary and secondary levels over the last two decades (Hart, Grigal, Sax, Martinez, & Will, 2006). Fueled by students who have goals to attend college, there is an increased expectation on the part of families (Hart, et al., 2006) to help these young adults continue to develop skills in inclusive postsecondary settings with same-age peers. In other words, as students with significant disabilities are included in K-12 education in increasing numbers, the natural extension is to plan for inclusion in postsecondary settings. Each year, an estimated 2,000-3,000 students with significant disabilities who are eligible for postsecondary schooling transition from high school (Hart, et al, 2006). As increasing numbers of students with significant disabilities continue to be included in K-12 education, it is likely the number of programs or support services will continue to grow. These programs are becoming increasingly prevalent nationally. There are over 100 programs currently in existence that support the participation of students with disabilities in higher education (<http://thinkcollege.net/programs/index.php>, 2009). However, few of these programs focus on the education of students with more significant disabilities. Schmidt (2005) estimates that there are at least 50 identified college programs that support students with significant disabilities.

Several research studies exist describing these programs and the experiences, challenges, and benefits of higher education programs through the lens of the student and major stakeholders (Casale-Giannola & Wilson Kamens, 2006; Hamill, 2003; Mosoff, Greenholts, Hurtado & Jo, 2007; Neubert, Moon, & Grigal, 2004; Schmidt, 2005; Weir, 2004). Of the programs that have been described in the literature, Hart, et al. (2006) has defined three models: mixed/hybrid model, substantially separate model, and inclusive or individual support model. See Table 1 for a description of each.

Table 1  
*Program Types and Descriptions*

Program Type	Program Description
Substantially separate program	Life skills or transition programs in community based settings  No sustained interaction with general student body  No option to take standard college courses with peers
Mixed program	Transition programs housed on college campuses

	<p>Some interaction with nondisabled students (cafeteria, sporting events)</p> <p>Option of taking college classes, but most curriculum is focused on life-skills</p>
<p>Inclusive, individual support model</p>	<p>Students provided with individualized services &amp; supports</p> <p>Take college classes based on student choices and preferences</p>

### Inclusive Higher Education Support Models

This study seeks to examine the inclusive/individual support model programs at a mid-sized private University in the North East because these kinds of services allow for the most autonomy on the part of the student and maximize opportunities for typical interaction with college peers. The primary distinction between these services and the other program models lies in the “individual nature of the supports.” We consider these models “inclusive” by following the guidelines outlined in Hart et al. (2006). Hart et al. suggest that in “inclusive programs” students with significant disabilities select and enroll in college classes alongside peers without disabilities. The supports start with the needs or the desires of the student, as opposed to programs that are designed for the needs of a group (Neubert & Moon, 2006). Each of the students attending college with support discuss their personal goals for attending college, and then explore the course catalogue to determine which courses suit their interests and goals. After they register, they are supported individually within the self-selected class so that appropriate accommodations and modifications are made in order for each student to access the content and instruction. Hart et al. (2006) suggest “programmatic support models” in which groups of students with disabilities take classes that are deemed to be suitable for students with disabilities. Inclusive programs tend to be relatively new and to serve fewer individuals than other service models (Hart, Mele-McCarthy, Pasternack, Zimbrich, & Parker, 2004). These types of inclusive services tend to be more in line with best practices in K-12 settings with the goal being participation in regular classes and in typical activities with flexible supports, and are, therefore, at the center of this research.

While we have characterized these programs as mainly falling under the inclusive model, we do recognize elements of the mixed or hybrid models are present in that there is a program director specifically serving the needs of these students. Additionally there are times during the day when these students with disabilities meet together.

In keeping with other forms of critical qualitative research, this study is grounded on the assumption that all students, regardless of perceived abilities or disabilities, should be entitled to higher education with peers without disabilities. We did not set out to determine the feasibility of inclusive higher education or to evaluate the success or failure of particular programs. Rather, starting from the position that access to inclusive higher education is both entirely possible and the right of all, this study seeks to study two existing programs - through the perspectives of key stakeholders - that target this underserved and often marginalized population.

In this study we investigate two existing postsecondary programs at the same University in Central New York that offer services for students with significant disabilities. We seek to gain multiple perspectives from a variety of stakeholders in these programs: founders, directors, teachers, professors, and parents to get multiple perspectives on these services. The specific research questions are:

What are the benefits and major accomplishments of these programs?

What obstacles exist to implementing these programs?

## Research Methods

### *Data Sources*

In order to explore the research questions stated above, we developed a qualitative study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) employing in-depth interviewing of the major stakeholders. Using purposeful sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003), we selected interviewees who represented the different groups involved (parents of program participants, program staff, program developers, and University faculty). In the tradition of purposeful sampling, we did not select the participants in a random manner. Rather, we selected those that we deemed most able to speak to the complexities of each of the programs. We initially asked potential participants over e-mail if they were willing to be involved in this study, and secured those interested by setting-up interviews at which point the participants signed an agreement consistent with IRB protocol. When looking at the pool of potential participants we gave preference to those who are currently involved with the two inclusive programs as well as any individuals who were part of the initial program design. In that way, we hoped to reflect the development of the programs as well as the current situation. These eight participants are listed in the Table 2. Each participant was interviewed at least once. Interviews lasted from 45 minutes to two hours. All names have been replaced by pseudonyms for confidentiality. In keeping with the nature of qualitative research, the interviews were in-depth and open-ended. While we developed a list of general interview questions (see Table 3), each interview varied in response to the direction of the person being interviewed (Fontana & Frey, 2000). All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed later.

One group of potential participants that was not included in this initial study was students with significant disabilities. We wanted this initial study to focus on the full exploration of the context of these programs and the programmatic development. We recognize the absence of student voice and in the continuation of this research we are focusing solely on the perspectives of the students enrolled in these programs.

Table 2

### *Participants*

Participants	Role	Background of the Participant	Program	Currently affiliated
Danielle	Program Coordinator	Certified special education teacher hired by city school district to support students on the campus	Program 1	Yes
Kate	Parent & Co-founder	Parent of a child in program 1 and Program 2. Board member of Program 1 and 2	Program 1 Program 2	No Yes
Colleen	University Program Coordinator	Certified special education teacher. Doctoral candidate at University when affiliated	Program 1	No

Thomas	University Program Coordinator	Certified special education teacher.  Doctoral candidate at University when affiliated	Program 1	No
Sarah	Program Teacher	Certified special education teacher.  Doctoral candidate at University	Program 2	Yes
Theresa	Program Coordinator	Director of adult services agency	Program 2	Yes
Meg	University Faculty Member	Certified science educator and college professor	Program 2	Yes
Sunny	University Faculty Member	Certified special education Teacher and college professor	Program 1	Yes

Table 3

*Sample Interview Questions*

Sample Interview Questions
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Describe your involvement with the program.</li> <li>2. How long have you been involved with this program?</li> <li>3. What are the strengths of the program?</li> <li>4. What barriers to implementation currently exist here? What areas of need have emerged?</li> <li>5. Describe any key interactions with university staff and professors.</li> <li>6. How have you worked through difficulties?</li> <li>7. How have these programs grown and changed over the years?</li> <li>8. How long has the program been in existence?</li> <li>9. Why did this program begin?</li> </ol>

10. Tell us a story that encapsulates why this program is important.
11. What questions about K-12 education emerge as a result of these programs?
12. How have your ideas about inclusive higher education changed as a result of your involvement with this program?
13. Tell us about the student's participation in your class.

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis began by deductively coding the interviews according to the stated research questions. Then, proceeding inductively we sought connections between categories and subcategories to further refine our analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Each researcher independently coded two interviews to determine a tentative list of codes. These codes were then shared with all researchers, collapsed, and refined to arrive at the final list of codes each researcher applied to the remaining interview transcripts. Then we reviewed all coded data to determine commonly recurring codes and overarching themes, presented as findings below. After data was collected and themes were established, we conducted member checks by sharing an initial draft of the paper to all participants. We received written clarification and feedback and incorporated it into the final manuscript. We begin, however, by providing a brief overview of the two inclusive higher education programs to put the findings in context.

### Description of the Programs

#### *Program One*

Frustrated with limited postsecondary options, two parents organized and sought support to “dream of something different” for their child as she prepared to graduate high school. The “dream” transpired into Program One in 1999, a collaboration between a four-year, private University and an urban city school district. Program One supports six students who are generally not considered traditional college students. They are students with significant intellectual disabilities, most of whom received their secondary educations in self-contained or community-based settings prior to college. A number of the students do not use verbal speech, but instead type to communicate.

All students with significant disabilities are eligible to receive special educational services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) until age 21. For most students, this means they remain in high school until age 21 or they attend segregated day programs exclusively for young adults with disabilities. Program One students, however, work on academic goals from their Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) within the context of academic courses taught on the University campus. Students choose from academic courses across University disciplines, departments, and schools. Program One students also spend several hours per week doing recreational activities with matriculated University students from the School of Education.

The local school district provides a certified special education teacher who coordinates the program while providing curricular modifications for students and supporting a staff of six paraprofessionals. The paraprofessionals often accompany students to class for note-taking and communication support. The school district provides transportation to and from campus and it purchases books for students. The University provides a graduate assistant from the School of Education to coordinate recreational partnerships with undergraduate education students, office space, and the use of campus facilities. University professors and graduate teaching assistants across disciplines and departments serve integral roles as members of the instructional team. Students take courses in typical college classes along with the general college population. Students' participation in Program One ends when they walk the graduation stage with their peers from the University.

### *Program Two*

There are even fewer programs that support adult learners (older than 21 years) with significant disabilities in college settings (Hart et al. 2006), yet for many students the desire to keep learning does not end when they “age-out” of the public school supported Program One, or any other program that supports students until age 21. Program Two was created in 2006 when former Program One students realized that their educational opportunities at the University were about to end. In this case, the adult learners themselves provided the push to get this program started by requesting a continued opportunity to attend college, and the director of the adult service agency responded by writing a five-year renewable contract to get funding for these services. Program Two, thus, is a collaboration between the same private University as Program One and an adult service agency, and it provides educational support to students after they reach age 21. The adult service agency provides a certified special education teacher who coordinates the support of six adult learners in auditing college courses across disciplines. Additionally, six campus mentors are provided who serve as paraprofessionals providing support both in classes and navigating the campus.

The creation of Program Two was possible, in many ways, because Program One paved the way. Many of the lessons learned from facing the obstacles presented to Program One were shared with Program Two developers in the initial planning and implementation stages. Although they both serve students with significant intellectual disabilities, the ages of the students and the funding streams to support these programs differ. While it is possible for a student who has participated in Program One to later be enrolled in Program Two, these programs are not consecutive—meaning it is not a given that after completing one program the student moves into the second. In the history of these two programs, one student has participated in both programs.

### Findings

In response to the research questions, several themes emerged that merit further exploration. These themes are organized around the research questions. They are: (a) benefits of these services, and (b) obstacles to implementation. Each is discussed below.

#### *Benefits of These Programs*

Our research suggests that major stakeholders perceive these programs as making a difference in the lives of the students as they are allowed access to higher education. These programs center on creating opportunities for students who have traditionally been rejected from University education and on breaking down stereotypes and assumptions about people who are labeled as having significant disabilities. When answering the first research question (regarding the benefits of these inclusive postsecondary programs) three types of perceived benefits emerged: (a) benefits to students with disabilities, (b) benefits to college classmates, and (c) benefits to college faculty. Each of these themes is listed below with illustrations from the data. Additionally, these themes are listed in Table 4.

Table 4

#### *Key Findings*

Benefits of Programs	
Theme	Sub Theme
Benefits to Students with	Student growth

Disabilities	New dreams and possibilities Ordinary moments: Opportunities for friendship
Benefits to College Classmates	Learning to include Natural interaction
Benefits to College Faculty	Planning for instruction Walking the talk

Obstacles to Implementation	
Theme	Sub Theme
Institutional and Logistical Obstacles	Pretend services: Course selection and auditing Scheduling Paraprofessionals Other logistical obstacles Access to parking, library, typical student services
Attitudinal Obstacles	Faculty resistance The problem with special Arranged marriages: Regulating friendships

### *Benefits to Students with Disabilities*

*Student growth.* According to the stakeholders in this study, individual student growth was one of the biggest perceived benefits of attending college classes. Danielle, one of the program coordinators shared a story of Dan, a student who is just beginning these services and his reaction to being in college after years of “being in hell.”

He began in January. He is now in his second semester and he’s still saying to me things like, “I just can’t believe what good care you take of me. I just can’t believe how focused you are of my needs. I can’t believe I’m sitting in a college class.” So he’s numb at the difference between the life styles he has led in his academic years.

Many of the stakeholders spoke of a shift that took place as the students begin to identify themselves as learners, some for the first time. For most of the students served, their K-12 experience was marked by segregation and limited access to general education classrooms. Simply being part of a college classroom was a striking juxtaposition to prior experiences. The next two quotes illustrate these findings. According to Danielle:

I’m really happy about seeing students with disabilities taking themselves seriously as learners. I’m seeing them face that horrible identity that they had been given as not worthy of instruction and not able to learn, and take some academic risks. One of the students just showed me her first paper for the semester and I think she saw the benefits of sustaining

attention to an academic task that is hard...I see students really being much more proud, much more full. So giving themselves another chance of a new definition and building on strengths rather than identifying by what they can't do. That is the real power here.

The certified special education teacher from Program Two, Sarah, speaks of the "work it takes" as students redefine themselves as individuals who can learn, complete assignments, and can do well in college. Sarah sees the experience of applying oneself to a difficult task and completing it successfully as the pathway to growth in these students, and in most students:

They stare down their anxieties and their self-doubt. They've worked hard here. It's nothing special about taking a class per se or memorizing all those discreet elements of history. It's the effort you put into it, the way you applied yourself, the growth that came out of putting yourself through something. None of us remember the discreet elements of World War II, but did we become different people for having moved through our undergraduate years? And that's definitely what I've seen happen for our students too.

Program Two coordinator, Theresa, works with the families, and she spoke about the shift she has seen in the perspectives of family members:

I've had families say, "My God I knew it was in her. We never saw it so clearly." So it's incredible when you can really put someone in a place with an expectation and they can do it. It's like you have to change what you do and think about all people with disabilities. Now we have to presume competence. It is just criminal if we don't. What I learned is that learning happens when you just look to the mind inside and just kind of ignore the outward appearances of the disability.

Not only do students see themselves differently after exposure to college classes, but their families see the changes too. These two programs have allowed students with disabilities to redefine themselves as learners and others to see them as competent, contributing members of the University community. These shifts in perception echo the findings of Mosoff et al. (2007), who identifies "confidence" as one of the major components of inclusive postsecondary education.

*New dreams and possibilities.* Thomas, a former University Program One coordinator spoke of the lack of hope that many students with disabilities have after high school due to lack of opportunity. He shared that the existence of these services lends itself to a new possibility and hope for many of these students:

The biggest strength of the program is that it happened at all. It's here, so there's the possibility. There's no possibility of friendship, of meaningful participation, of inclusion in a community if the people aren't even there. That's its biggest strength, that it creates the possibility. And now we have a vision of what this could mean for both populations of students who we keep apart so often in our society.

This hope of possibility was echoed by a parent, Kate, who has a student in the program. She has presented at a conference for people who have the same disability as her daughter, and she spoke of being struck by the parental response as she shared her daughter's inclusive college experience:

When we were asked to talk at the Rett syndrome conference and we went there and people were like, "What's out there for adult services? What do you do when this little yellow school bus doesn't come?" And what we were shown was a day treatment program where they go every day and it seems nice, and it is nice... Then you show the video that the [University] students made of [my daughter] having a beer at one of the bars here with her classmates and they just burst out crying. They went, "Oh my God, she looks so normal drinking that beer." And just...it just gets people to just dream that this is possible. Choices are here.

The very existence of these programs is a big shift for students and their families. Many parents and individuals with disabilities could not imagine dreams of college until they learned of these programs. Once the doors to the University opened to them, many of the stakeholders spoke about friendship as the next big dream that students had as they came to college. This dream was realized in many situations.

*Ordinary moments: Opportunities for friendship.* The opportunity for social interaction with peers is a benefit that is consistent in the literature on inclusive higher education programs. Several researchers (Casale-Giannola & Wilson Kamens, 2006; Hamill 2003) have found that friendships have formed from inclusive college experiences. Danielle, Program One coordinator spoke of an experience that came out of an ordinary moment of humanity that turned into a true friendship. She spoke about Sam, a very intelligent student with autism with challenging behavior who uses Facilitated Communication.

He took an anthropology class during his first year here and it was his first big lecture, he could not stay in the big lecture hall he was making noises and looked anxious. I left so we didn't embarrass him. While we were out [in the hallway], the teaching assistant invited us in to her small group. We got to the small group and we went around the room and Sam typed the following on his communication device [by means of an introduction to the rest of the class], "MY NAME MEANS THE KING OF KINGS AND I'M TRYING TO LIVE UP TO THAT REPUTATION" And I [Danielle] said, "Oh, by the way, Sam has autism and so sometimes he needs to leave the room and move a little bit and hope it doesn't bother you. But if anybody wants to ask questions after class that would be cool." This guy stayed after class and sat down with Sam and said, "I'm Joshua." He saw the person. He became the first friend that Sam ever had and they have had that friendship for a year and a half... His personhood became illuminated. His full personhood which sort of rearranged autism as certainly a challenge but it wasn't all of who he was. So the friendship came out of just ordinary moments.

When Danielle spoke about Sam's experience she added that that first interaction extended to going out to lunch, doing things together on the weekend, and celebrating together at college graduation. She felt that this friendship was real and genuine and would not have occurred if Sam were not in this college classroom. She felt that it was as beneficial to Sam as it was to Joshua.

### *Benefits to College Classmates*

*Learning to include.* According to the stakeholders interviewed, these educational experiences clearly benefit the students (with disabilities) who enroll in the college classes, but these opportunities also benefit their University classmates. The students in the classrooms are now sitting beside people who traditionally have not been part of the academic community. They are learning alongside peers that they may have not had access to during their earlier schooling experience and many of the stakeholders report that this experience has an effect. Danielle spoke of the reaction other college students had to the presence of a student with a disability:

I asked the other students, "You may know that a [program one] student was in your class, how did this affect your learning?" In most cases the students will say, "I'm loving it. Now I see diversity. Now I really understand more about people with disabilities and it's not that they can't learn it's just that they learn differently and at a different pace." I have seen enough of those results to feel like we're making an impact.

Another perspective came from a professor in the school of education. Meg teaches future science teachers. She spoke of the impact having a student from one of the programs in her class had on the other students:

It's also good for the other students in the class. Now even before they are entering the other classes that talk about difference, differentiation, and inclusive practice, they have to see how I am including [this student]. They have to participate in including her, and I think that is good for them.

*Natural interaction.* Another professor, Sunny, shared the opportunities for natural peer interaction that occurred during her introduction to special education course. Dianna, a student in Program One, came to Sunny and suggested that her teaching assistant not sit near her during class, because she felt it got in the way of spending time directly with peers during cooperative group activities.

I told Dianna that I was OK with the teaching assistant moving away from her. Because I knew that Dianna was right. It was going to make the interactions more natural. What I noticed, was that she was not only recognizing the importance of peer interactions, but it was the first time I saw her advocating for herself.

Colleen, a former Program One coordinator reflected on an experience she designed that would allow students from the University to spend time with a student from the program doing recreational activities or just "hanging out together." These students were asked to reflect on their experiences each week.

What the University gained from having these students was "typical" students would have the opportunity to spend time with a peer who has a disability and they could learn just by being with that person. So by having the opportunity to interact with them over time through a focused experience and that's what I like about service learning is that when it is truly done correctly and when you are really doing reflective practice, students can learn much more than they would learn if they were reading about people with disabilities.

## *Benefits to College Faculty*

When Meg, a University faculty member who supports a student with disabilities in her science classroom, was asked about the positives of these experiences her response follows:

There are lots and lots of positives. So many that I can't even...if you were to ask me the reverse questions what would the negatives be I wouldn't have an answer for you. Part of the reason I think it is positive for her [the student] is it's pretty clear she hasn't had a lot of science experiences ever. And so her just being able to have a chance to think and get engaged about these topics she smiles pretty much throughout the whole time she is in my class. She participates verbally in my class. She asks questions and she tries to engage with other students. Those are all terrific things.

*Planning for instruction.* Interestingly, Meg spoke at length about how having a student with a significant disability in her classroom made her a more effective instructor. She spoke of being forced to think ahead about what she expects socially in the classroom and articulating that to everyone. She stated that now she has to be clear with, "What my expectations are for bringing notes to class and bringing materials to class." This new transparency is not just helpful for the student that she supports in class, but for all of the college students:

For me she helps me think about what kind of things she is going to need to be successful and... oh yeah those are things all my students need to be successful. So me being sure that I have been clear about class agendas, me being sure that I am clear about what my expectations are for class behavior, for how we interact with each other, for learning outcomes being explicit about all of those things. They don't just help her, they help everybody.

*Walking the talk.* This professor also spoke of finally feeling like she is "walking the talk." This University is steeped in the philosophy of inclusion. Inclusion is a central component to all of the education courses offered in the school of education. She explained that she was finally practicing what she preached. Meg described the effect of these experiences on the doctoral students who help her teach the course:

These issues of inclusion they have taken courses about aren't esoteric any more, now they are real and we can't pretend that we just espouse inclusive practice; we can't talk about inclusive practice as if it is something people should do. We have to do it. We have to walk the talk and that's a really powerful thing... If I had a chance to give a message to higher ed folk about this program I guess my bottom line would be it's a win-win. Nobody loses here. I can no longer imagine working in a place where this wouldn't be possible.

Similarly, Sunny described her excitement about modeling for future inclusive educators the types of instruction that she expects her students to integrate into their own teaching.

When Dianna came into this classroom, I knew I had the opportunity to provide to my students a living example of inclusive education in action... I knew I shouldn't screw this one up [laughing]. I had to think deeply about how to create meaningful access to the course content for all students (including Dianna) and make visible my pedagogical decision making. This was all done without isolating or singling out Dianna in any way... not an easy task.

When Kate, the parent and co-founder of Program One, was asked about the reaction of University professors to having students with significant disabilities attending their classes, she reported she was surprised at how open most people were:

I thought many, many of the University professors and instructors that we worked with were pretty open minded and allowed this to happen... There have been some professors who have been so natural, so welcoming, so appropriate in their behavior, expecting that she will make an assessment of them in their teaching techniques. "How can I do this better?" Looking at her, saying, "Oh my God, I should get a textbook that has bigger print." So we've had unbelievable experiences with teachers. One teacher at an exit interview said to [my daughter], "Did you enjoy the course?" Well, I think she said "no," which prefaced the next question, "Why?" and my daughter said, "It was too easy." I know that professor kind of walked out of the lunchroom, shaking her head going, "Oh my God. I just got told by a ...she didn't like my course. It was too easy."

The above quote illustrates not only the openness of some University professors, but also hints at the learning that took place for some of these faculty members. Interactions with these students changed the way that these faculty members thought about their teaching and instruction.

The previous section described many of the positive changes these programs have brought to this University. The stakeholders interviewed felt that these programs added value to the University. Next we will focus on the obstacles these stakeholders encountered in the implementation of these programs.

### *Obstacles to Implementation*

In response to the second major research question, it is clear that many obstacles continue to exist in this work: institutional/logistical obstacles and attitudinal obstacles. Institutional/logistical obstacles include course selection and auditing courses instead of taking courses for credit, parking, transportation, and scheduling difficulties. Attitudinal obstacles include factors such as fear and faculty resistance (Table 4). It is important to note that none of the stakeholders interviewed or the authors of this article contend that these obstacles are reasons not to engage in inclusive higher education. Rather, they are obstacles that need to be addressed to further enrich and strengthen the experience of higher education for students with disabilities.

### *Institutional and Logistical Obstacles*

*Pretend services: Course selection and auditing.* Engagement in academic coursework with typical peers, across disciplines, departments, and schools is a key component of both programs. Therefore selection and registration in courses is pivotal. Both programs operate from a perspective of student-centered, individualized instruction, and course selection is driven by students' interest. However, institutional and logistical obstacles complicate course selection. Colleen describes one way that course selection was hindered due to the difficulties presented with having leveled courses:

A lot of courses we were having to target were the 100 and 200 level courses. Because we couldn't get them [the students] into the upper level courses, a lot of those had prerequisites and required pretty specialized knowledge.

This then limited the students to lower division courses, those frequently taken by freshmen and sophomore undergraduates. While that may not seem problematic, those introductory courses are often quite large, making individualized supports within a supportive classroom community less probable.

Course selection is tenuous for other reasons as well. For Program Two, the students register through a department within the larger University that supports part-time and non-traditional learners. This unit has erected a registration barrier that impede student access. Sarah, a program teacher, describes her frustration with this registration policy:

They have put a hold on our registration. By the time these six students come to register for a class they are being told that they have to have clearance for registration by going to see the professor. They have to go get audit permission from a professor first.

This requirement of faculty permission was a thorn in the side of all participants interviewed and demonstrates the institutional obstacles to inclusive higher education. Kate, whose daughter has been enrolled in both programs, states:

We have to ask a professor if it's okay if we're in the class? That ain't happening for my kid. It's clearly on the books. We aren't going to ask. We won't do it. No other student does that. We're not doing it.

Her frustration with this logistical barrier is clearly evident. It seems that she objected to having to ask permission for each class because student without disabilities are not required to do the same.

An additional challenge inherent in the implementation of both programs is that students are not allowed to enroll in courses for credit. Instead, they audit courses with the permission of the instructor. Similar to the findings of Hamill (2003), despite the fact that they attend the classes, complete the assignments, and take the exams, these students do not earn official credit for their work. Sarah explains:

The audit thing is very confusing because our students attempt to do all the assignments and they do all the exams, and they do all the papers. I swear they're the hardest working folks in the room. So the audit is a barrier - it sets the public up for certain assumptions that they're not going to do the work.

Program coordinators and parents hope for a day when students will have the opportunity to earn credit for their efforts. In the words of Theresa, Program Two coordinator, "it's somewhat of a pretend service because people aren't taking classes for credit, they are not working on degree programs. ...It's unfortunate that people are putting in so much work but not getting full credit or benefit for that."

*Scheduling.* In this section, we explore other programmatic constraints that emerge both out of University policies of rules, but also from the structure of the programs themselves. Earlier we discussed the obstacles inherent in course selection and registration for students in both programs. There is a related logistical barrier for students in Program One that further complicates this process. As this program reflects collaboration between the University and the local city school district, the students are transported to the University in accordance with the public school schedule. Coordinator, Colleen, explains:

It was difficult getting in classes and organizing the schedules because one of the constraints is that we have to work on the city school's timeframe. So when you have got the students there at 7 in the morning, and I'm sorry but there's not a whole lot of undergraduate students that are wandering around the union. It's just not like what happens when you're a first year or sophomore student. They were going home about the time that things were really happening on campus.

Program One students arrive at campus first thing in the morning and are bussed home by early afternoon, just when campus is coming alive. This poses a challenge both to the selection of courses and to the development of social opportunities on campus. The students in Program One miss many of the opportunities for nonacademic interaction with the students on campus. While the program has both academic and social development functions, if students are not physically on campus during the times when typical University students are gathering, opportunities are lost.

*Paraprofessionals.* A second logistical and structural barrier also relates to the opportunities for social growth. This is the utilization of paraprofessionals to support the students while on campus. Although Danielle, Program One coordinator and teacher, shared that intensive paraprofessional support was a positive aspect of this program, other stakeholders did not see this type and intensity of support as positive, but saw it instead as a barrier. Thomas, a former Program One University coordinator argues:

The other barrier that was structured into the program, from my point of view, was the heavy reliance on paraprofessionals. There were paraprofessionals at the time working on the staff that were really enjoying the freedom of the campus in a way that wasn't necessarily getting their jobs done. You know, they would be using the computer labs for personal purposes and stuff like that instead of supporting students. Also the fact that we felt like a student would need a person kind of attached to them all the time. There was this concern about safety. This is a big space where they could go all sorts of places. It felt like the student could never be on his or her own. No one ever felt that that was safe. It created this atmosphere, to me, that really separated the students even more, and it was done with the best of intentions, but you had this kind of world in which this student always had a 'zoo keeper' along with them.

The negative impact of paraprofessional support on the social interaction of peers with disabilities in K-12 education has been well documented (Causton-Theoharis & Malmgren, 2005; Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli & MacFarland, 1997; Malmgren & Causton-Theoharis, 2006). Our findings suggest those concerns are not confined to the school-age arena and emerge in higher education as well. Students in both programs receive support from paraprofessionals, referred to as "teaching assistants" in Program One and "campus mentors" in Program Two. While the name differs, the function is essentially the same - to support the students' access to the academic curriculum and to implement any necessary adaptations and accommodations. In some cases, those supporting adults are also called on to provide communication support. For the teaching assistants in Program One, many of them came to this program from positions in the K-12 public schools, where the expectations and responsibilities were vastly different. That role shift was not always easy. According to Colleen:

When you have been in a world that tells you that your job is to control and contain and supervise and all of a sudden you're asked to support that's a very different role. That was a difficult shift for people. And also having the whole wide campus with no four walls to contain you I think that was difficult for them as well. So what very quickly happened is it turned into a program with everybody sitting in the Union together at the same time eating their lunches...I mean we were back to that segregated table in the cafeteria you know.

Her frustration at the drift toward the familiar, the segregated, and the institutional, is evident. Colleen argues that in response to a new environment and new freedoms, many paraprofessionals demonstrated similar institutional approaches to the education of students with disabilities that had marked so many of these student's K-12 histories.

The stakeholders saw the gathering of two or more students with disabilities in the same place in very disparate ways. Danielle, Program One coordinator saw value in having students with disabilities congregate together at key times for affiliation, socialization and sharing their experiences. Conversely, the teacher and coordinator of Program Two both believe

that students with disabilities should not be together to avoid the stigma of the collective. Because of this belief and as a way to avoid the practices of disability specific congregation, the coordinator of Program Two wrote into the funding request that campus mentors would not be paid if students with disabilities were congregating together.

*Other logistical obstacles.* In addition to classroom support and modifications, other institutional hoops got in the way of student access to the campus community. For example, it is difficult for students to obtain identification cards, which allow them sufficient access to check books from the library. Parking is also problematic, especially for students in Program Two, who do not arrive on city school buses. Science education professor, Meg, describes:

This student, she's got to walk like 15 minutes to get to my class because of things like parking won't let her come close. Why? Why can't the University permit her and her paraprofessional to have access to that parking lot for two hours twice a week? Why is that an issue that she and her paraprofessional have to work out? Those kinds of things are barriers for my student.

Obtaining library cards and finding parking are details that all undergraduates must address, but for these students many logistical obstacles have already been overcome. For example, students in Program One walk in graduation with their peers, something that was denied to earlier program participants. For these students, who challenge the traditional ways of being a college student, every detail is a new obstacle to consider. But Meg describes a hopeful vision:

I think if these kinds of programs take hold and become more widely known, I would like to think that the structural kinds of barriers will begin to be taken care of and better in more systematic ways so that more folks feel comfortable in thinking about including these folks in their courses.

Meg identifies the importance of time and increased prevalence of programs such as those described in this study to shift the conversation around access to higher education and to eradicate some of the structural and institutional obstacles that still exist. However, she also highlights the importance of faculty comfort as it relates to thoughtful inclusion, concepts that are more attitudinal than structural. This leads us to the last set of obstacles to implementation.

### *Attitudinal Obstacles*

Structural and organizational obstacles have had a significant impact on the development and functioning of these two programs. Perhaps, however, the biggest barrier to implementation of inclusive higher education reform is attitude. Similar to other studies (Hart, et al., 2004), the participants in this study identified attitudinal issues as primary obstacles.

*Faculty resistance.* Some of the attitudinal obstacles surfaced when students from these programs attempted to enroll in courses. It was in those moments that faculty insecurities and resistance to students with disabilities came to the forefront. Colleen describes the process of seeking permission to enroll students from Program One into University courses:

Some were surprised, many said I don't think we'll have enough room in the class, and it was really hard to push it. We tried to make it as easy as possible, saying "You're not responsible for their [adaptations]." Okay, I realize now this is a real contradiction because we wanted them to have an academic experience but we also made it clear to these instructors that you won't have any direct responsibility for adapting the curriculum and grading their work or assessing them in any way because that was the big fear. A lot of folks felt like they weren't qualified to do that nor did they have time.

Some faculty resistance was expressed in terms of logistical constraints - not enough space, not enough time. Others gave no reasons for their refusal, but simply denied the request for permission. The program coordinators obviously anticipated some faculty resistance to the request for entrance and attempted to curtail that resistance by telling faculty members that they did not have to assume responsibility for the students' progress or accommodations. The study participants expressed discomfort at the negotiation and compromise required, but they also wanted these programs to move forward and students to get access to academic experiences, even if they, as the coordinators and teachers, did the lions' share of the work. These teacher deals (Biklen, 1992) are reminiscent of early efforts in K-12 inclusion, where special education teachers bartered with general education teachers for the right of students with disabilities to attend general education classes, as long as those special educators took care of the modifications and individualized supports.

*The problem with special.* Another barrier is the widely-held perception that it takes specialized skills and training to be able to interact with and teach students with significant disabilities. Sarah, the teacher for Program Two explains:

This place seems to think you need special knowledge to interact with these folks. That's what I hate about special ed. I almost want to do away with the designation of special ed. ...that probably speaks to why having a special program, having to have special knowledge interferes with people's ability to just include people as learners who want to learn.

Many participants spoke of the danger inherent in the concept "special." This concept is similar to Mosoff et al.'s (2007) theme of authenticity, which she identifies as a key component of inclusive education. Many, in our study, expressed a desire to be seen as less "special" and more "typical." As Sarah attests, having a special program makes many people think they need special training and if they do not have that specialized expertise, they are not equipped to teach. Sadly, students with disabilities miss out on the opportunity to receive instruction from knowledgeable faculty, who simply do not feel "special" enough. Professor Meg describes how this worry over specialized information created unnecessary anxiety.

I think some of the initial barriers I was worried about were of my own creation. The student that is in my class currently is diagnosed with cerebral palsy and I thought I don't know anything about cerebral palsy, how am I going to support her? And what I'm realizing is she is in my classes. That all those perceived barriers in terms of being ignorant about cerebral palsy those were all mine. Those didn't have anything to do with the student or the system. Those were excuses if you will that I had made as to why I couldn't possibly support this student. The more I work with her the more I realized, oh I do have the skills to be able to support her because I am already doing this for this kind of student. In the past I've had kids that had visual impairments and I made these accommodations. No big deal. I just do them again.

Meg aptly articulates what happens when those perceived fears and insecurities intersect with the experience of actually supporting a student with a disability. Once she got to know this student she realized that she *does* possess the necessary skills. It was fear, not lack of specialized knowledge, that was the true barrier.

*Arranged marriages: Regulating friendships.* The last attitudinal barrier relates to social interaction and friendship development. From the outset, both programs espoused academic and social gains as potential benefits. The developers, therefore, created a peer mentor facet into the structure of the programs. The students with disabilities are matched up with typical college students and encouraged to engage in recreational and social activities. Obviously, the hope is that these peer mentoring relationships will develop into something more reciprocal and less programmed. While that has happened in some cases, in many, the relationship ends once the required time has been spent. Thomas describes this phenomenon:

I mean it's not that there wasn't caring, but it was not on an equal footing in any sense in terms of human relationship. Either, 'I'm doing this as a favor for you,' or 'I'm doing this because I have to for a class,' or 'I'm doing this cause I'm interested in you,' but they weren't really ready to let them into their lives as people who would remain important to them. Now, there were a couple of exceptions to that, but that was the pattern. It's more like an arranged marriage.

The creation of opportunities for nonacademic peer interaction is vital to the goals of both programs. However, this peer mentoring structure can be seen as a barrier to the development of full inclusion in the social life of the campus if these "arranged friendships" are the only source of peer interaction. They often preclude the development of "real" friendship.

Despite these structural and attitudinal obstacles, the advocates and participants in these programs spoke with hope about the possibilities for continued progress toward a more inclusive higher education community. In the final section of the paper, we consider how this new vision and the success of students in these inclusive higher education programs raises questions about both K-12 education and higher education for students with significant disabilities.

## Implications

As the push for inclusive opportunities at the postsecondary level continues to gain momentum and more students with significant disabilities are seeking enrollment in higher education, colleges and universities must keep pace with this growing trend. These two programs are representative of much that is happening around the country. These two programs have not been presented as ideal or perfect examples of inclusive education at the college level. However, they bring to light key issues in the field of inclusive higher education and highlight the challenges still to be overcome. Perhaps more importantly, they demonstrate the potential of inclusive higher education for individuals too often denied access to the experience of college. As our findings suggest, these programs offer many benefits to the individuals with disabilities, their college classmates, and the professors who are teaching the courses. Based on these findings and our own experiences, we believe

that inclusive college programs should not only continue, but should be developed on all college and University campuses to expand the options for students with significant disabilities post high school.

As colleges and universities develop these programs, we see direct implications for future programs and those already in place. In learning about the obstacles and barriers, effort must go into elimination or mitigation of these issues. Universities must consider effective ways to allow for student choice in course selection and to give appropriate credit for classroom participation. Secondly, universities must lift logistical obstacles to allow for access to appropriate scheduling experiences, in-class support, parking, library, and other campus services. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the attitudes of University faculty and staff need to change to allow students' access to class content in ways that are inclusive and thoughtful of natural peer connections.

This study raises many questions. The most pervasive of these relate to K-12 education. All of the stakeholders posed different versions of the question, "If we can demonstrate students' success here in an inclusive setting, why are these students receiving a segregated K-12 education? This puts a lot of pressure on educators during those younger years to step up to the plate." A University program coordinator, Colleen, shared her concerns with segregated K-12 experiences.

These students have an uphill climb because they are excluded from the very thing that they need to succeed. So early on we need to think about that and stop excluding kids from the mainstream of the curriculum ... We are deciding early on that they will not be college material, when these are our opinions. We need to help parents learn to see their children as competent learners and that they have a basic civil right to a decent education.

Beyond, K-12, this study also has implications for higher education. As more of these programs come into existence, some of the concepts at the foundation of higher education will be called into question. First, the presence of these students forces higher educational institutions to wrestle with notions of meritocracy and gate keeping. In other words, who is allowed into this University and who is denied access completely? What role does admission serve? Second, the presence of these non-traditional students will call into question traditional forms of instruction. Alternative teaching methods and lessons built on multiple intelligences and universal design will be necessary to address the increasing diversity present in inclusive higher education. Third, the role the University plays with outside agencies or school districts will need to be considered. Will Universities continue to host these community agencies, or will Universities own the efforts themselves and support the students as complete members? Finally, will the Universities create or eliminate obstacles for these students?

### Limitations and Future Research

Despite the interesting results from this study, it has limitations, and future research can expand on this investigation in several ways. First, as previously noted, we interviewed eight participants in two programs housed at one University, which limits generalizability. Therefore, examining programs at other Universities and soliciting more participants could allow for a more expansive analysis and comprehensive understanding of inclusive postsecondary education. Second, student voices are absent from this study. In an effort to garner information about the programs themselves and the development of inclusive higher education opportunities we focused initially on the program staff, University faculty, and parents, who were all part of the conceptualization of the programs. Focusing on the unfiltered voices of the students who participate in these programs would yield very important findings. We have already begun collecting interview data from student participants for a second study. Thirdly, we realize that this study has examined benefits to the students with disabilities without getting information from the students themselves. However, the stakeholders were able to report on the positive changes they saw in students through their participation in these programs. Further investigation would strengthen these claims.

Other possible avenues for future research would be to examine the following questions that were raised by this study. How can we get around the obstacles to inclusive higher education? How can more students with significant disabilities get access to the opportunities afforded the students in these programs? How can universities manage services like these more effectively? How can these programs become less "special?"

In the words of Program Two coordinator, Theresa, "We're just trying to do normal, ordinary, nothing special. If we can do normal and ordinary and nothing special than I think we've succeeded." Danielle, Program One coordinator, speaks of the

continued challenge of answering the questions raised by this study, “I know it takes a long time and you have to be patient and as [Burton] Blatt would say relentlessly optimistic.” As with any major reform effort, change often happens slower than those fighting for that change would like, but with continued effort and “relentless optimism” a new vision of higher education is emerging where all, even those who have been traditionally excluded from halls of academia, have a right to belong, succeed, and learn.

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