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Implications of inclusive postsecondary education programs (IPSEs) on quality of life for young adults with intellectual disabilities

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Implications of Inclusive Postsecondary Education Programs (IPSEs)

on Quality of Life for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

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An Honors College Project Presented to

the Faculty of the Undergraduate

College of Education

James Madison University

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by Sarah K. Eggleston

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Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Educational Foundations and Exceptionalities, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors College.

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PUBLIC PRESENTATION

This work is accepted for presentation, in part or in full, at the Honors Symposium on April 21, 2023.

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Abstract

Students with intellectual disability (ID) who are aging out from qualifying for special education services through the public school system often encounter difficulty in the transition to early adulthood. While students with disabilities in Virginia have access to employment and transition services to aid them in seeking job placement, some students with ID still carry aspirations of going to college like many of their peers without disabilities. College is an experience that allows emerging adults to gain independence, social skills, pivotal identity development, and opportunities to explore academic and professional interests, while increasing their qualifications for more competitive employment. In order to make college a more accessible option for students with ID, institutions of higher education (IHEs) have begun implementing inclusive postsecondary education programs (IPSEs). This honors project highlights the closest approximation to an IPSE program offered at James Madison University (JMU) through a video format, in order to justify the need for a full program to be implemented. Additionally, it explores the emotional well-being, self-determination, social inclusion, and interpersonal relations of students who are attending or have previously attended an IPSE program, as compared to those without that source of academic and social structure in their life.

Keywords: intellectual disability, college, IPSE, inclusion, transition

Implications of Inclusive Postsecondary Education Programs (IPSEs) on Quality of Life for

Students with Intellectual Disabilities

The transition out of high school marks a period of uncertainty, anxiety, and/or critical identity development for many emerging adults (Hicks & Lewis, 2015). The daily structure provided by an academic routine is lost and regularly scheduled interaction with others is no longer provided. These challenges are often amplified for students with intellectual disabilities (ID), for whom college does not always appear to be a viable or dependable option and entry into the workforce comes with many barriers. Consequently, youth with ID often face social isolation and high unemployment rates compared to their nondisabled peers (Lindsay et al., 2019).

Because they are less likely to attend higher education, youth with ID are frequently deprived of the "opportunity to learn age-appropriate academic content and learn alongside their peers without disabilities", despite their expressed desire to go to college and/or live on a college campus (Kleinart et al., 2012, p.26). For many young adults, college is much more than a pathway to a degree; attending college means seeking independence, developing social skills, creating relationships, and exploring one's own identity independent of their parents. These aspects of a college experience can serve to benefit individuals regardless of ID, and thus, should be made an option for individuals with ID. In response to such desires, inclusive postsecondary education programs (IPSEs) enable young adults with ID to gain access to postsecondary education in an inclusive and accommodating environment that offers appropriate levels of support (Kleinart et al., 2012).

Intellectual disability is described as "a disability originating prior to the age of 18… characterized by significant limitations… in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior" (Grigal et al., 2012, p.225; *IDEA* Sec. 300.8 (c)(6), 2018). While the precise definition

of ID varies across three widely used classification systems: ICD-10, DSM-5 and AAIDD-11, all three systems accept an IQ of 70 or below (or two standard deviations below the mean) as an indication of ID (Carr, A. & O'Reilly, G., 2016).

Historically, the label "intellectual disability" was referred to as mental retardation[1], but ID has since become the preferred term (Grigal et al., 2012; *IDEA* Sec. 300.8 (c)(6), 2018). Not only has the terminology used to refer to individuals with ID changed in recent years, but so too has their sense of belonging in society. Significant developments in how individuals with ID are perceived and treated have emerged in the past 50 years, and more specifically, in the past 20 years (Kleinart et al., 2012). It was not until the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142) in 1975 (now the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004), that students with ID were ensured access to a public education, let alone college (*IDEA* Sec 300.17, 2017; Grigal et al., 2012). It was rarely expected or believed that individuals with ID would pursue an education beyond high school until the passage of the Higher Education Opportunities Act of 2008 (HEOA). This act helped support access to higher education and offered financial aid to students with ID and their families (e.g., federal pell grants, work-study opportunities) (Domin et al., 2020; Kleinart et al., 2012; Plotner & Marshall, 2015).

Following the passage of HEOA, Congress authorized the creation of *Transition and Postsecondary Education Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability* (TPSIDs) in 2010 (Domin et al., 2020). This initiative "aimed at creating, expanding, or enhancing high-quality, inclusive higher education experiences to support employment outcomes for individuals with ID", through a set of standards and an evaluation framework for participating programs (Domin

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[1] Note that this is an outdated term that is considered offensive. The term "intellectual disability" has been adopted by Congress, government agencies, and various public and private organizations.

et al., 2020, p.329). Through the 2010 TPSID initiative, 27 institutions of higher education

(IHEs) received 5-year grants from the Department of Education to implement their program.

Since that time, the government has offered grants to 25 more IHEs in 2015, and another 22

IHEs in 2020 (Domin et al., 2020; ThinkCollege, 2022). Within the state of Virginia, Virginia

Commonwealth University's (VCU) "ACE-IT in College" program was a participant in the first

cohort of IHEs involved; since that time, no other IHEs in the state have been recipients

(ThinkCollege, 2023; Virginia Commonwealth University [VCU], 2021).

Aside from the program that exists at VCU, just three other IPSE programs (not funded

under a TPSID grant) exist in the Commonwealth of Virginia: George Mason University's

(GMU) "Mason LIFE Program", a four-year program serving students with ID and Autism,

"College Steps", a nonprofit organization that has partnered with community colleges in

Northern Virginia to provide additional supports to students with "social, communication, or

learning challenges", and the "Inclusive Learning Enabled Action Program" (ILEAP) at

Mountain Gateway Community College (see Table 1) ("College Steps", 2022; Think College,

2023). This puts the state of Virginia behind other states on the east coast in terms of the number

of IPSE programs implemented (see Figure 1). Given the shortage of IPSE programs within the

Shenandoah Valley region specifically, there are a limited number of students who are able to be

served and a clear motivation for JMU to begin offering an IPSE program of its own. Not only

could this program serve Virginia residents, but it could also serve students in parts of West

Virginia, where only one IPSE program exists.

Table 1

Inclusive Postsecondary Education Programs in Virginia (as of April 2023)

Name of Program	Location	Does it offer a residential component?	Percent of Time Spent with Students without Disabilities	Length of Program
ACE-IT in College	Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) Richmond, VA	No, students must be from the Richmond area.	75-99%	2 years
The Mason LIFE Program	George Mason University (GMU) Fairfax, VA	Yes	50-74%	4 years
College Steps	Alexandria, VA	No	75-99%	2 years
Inclusive Learning Enabled Action Program (ILEAP)	Mountain Gateway Community College Clifton Forge, VA	No	50-74%	2 years

Note. Retrieved April 1, 2023 from Think College (2023). *College search*. https://thinkcollege.net
/college-search?f[0]=tc_state_province%3AVirginia

Figure 1

Think College Search Map

Note. From Think College. (2023). *College search* [Infographic]. https://thinkcollege.net/college-search
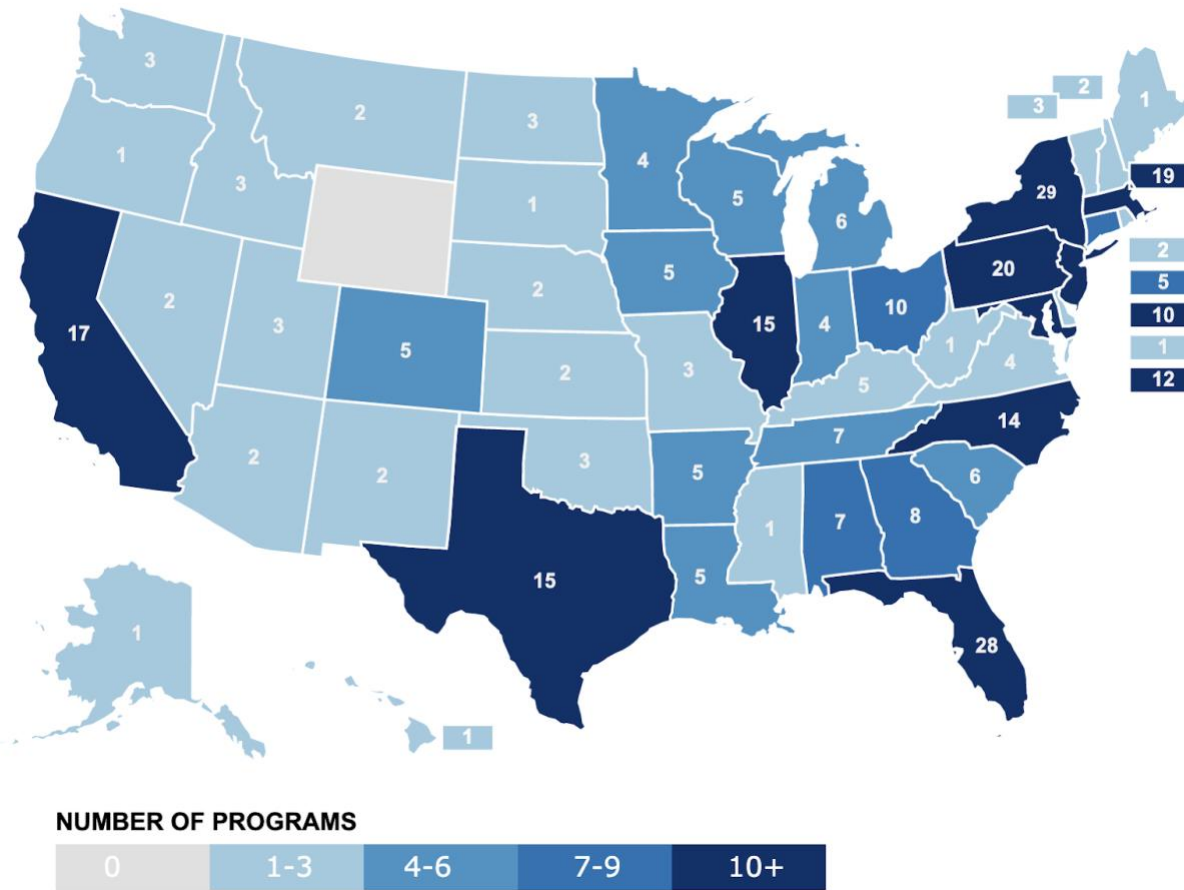
Literature Review

Given the recent origins of IPSE programs, there is inconsistency among the IPSE

programs and services that exist across different settings and little evidence-based practice to

support the efficacy of one type of program over another (Grigal et al., 2012). Out of a survey of

149 programs at institutions of higher education in 39 states, four-year colleges or universities

constituted 51% of the programs. Another 40% of the programs were at a two-year college, and a

remaining 10% were at trade/technical schools (Grigal et al., 2012). Some programs offer a dual

enrollment option, wherein students ages 18-21 remain enrolled in high school while they attend

college (Plotner & Marshall, 2015). Programs are often identified as being either stand-alone/substantially separate, fully integrated with the general student population, or hybrid/mixed. In a hybrid/mixed model, students are able to engage in inclusive academic coursework and social activities while receiving separate additional support in life skills/academics (Kleinart et al., 2012; Plotner & Marshall, 2015). Alternatively, the fully integrated individualized model provides students with all of their support within inclusive settings (Plotner & Marshall, 2015).

Existing literature is primarily based upon descriptive studies, qualitative studies, and single-subject case studies (Grigal et al., 2012). Most existing literature relies on semi-structured interviews and/or surveys administered to either students or professionals who have worked to support students with ID through the transition out of high school. While these data-collection methods offer the advantage of allowing individuals to share their perspectives in a more candid manner, it can be difficult to compare these qualitative findings to one another or to generalize from single-subject case studies.

Despite the variation in programs and difficulty in comparing them, a systematic review including data from 18 studies over a 20-year period found that participants from all of the transition programs that were assessed reported improvement in one or more of the following areas: "college enrollment, self-determination, self-confidence, social and vocational efficacy, autonomy, social support, career exploration, and transition skills" (Lindsay et al., 2019, p.2492). This systematic review highlights the fact that postsecondary transition programs can positively influence the transitional experience and related outcomes regardless of how they are formatted. While IPSE programs are still in the early stages of development, the programs that have emerged offer promising practices to support successful outcomes for students with ID (Grigal et al., 2012).

Project Overview

This honors capstone project attempts to highlight the efforts of existing IPSE programs and address the need for more programs to be developed in the region — beginning with James Madison University (JMU). This is accomplished in two ways, by a) presenting a narrative review of the current research to describe how IPSE programs can improve quality of life, and b) documenting the inclusive experiences that are fostered by participation in EXED 309: Supporting Community Access for Young Adults with Disabilities, commonly called the "Friday morning program".

Through a video format, I have highlighted the efforts of my advisor, Dr. Laura Desportes Bowman, and her colleague, Dr. Nancy Barbour, towards instituting an IPSE program at JMU. I have done so by interviewing students who this program would potentially be serving and gaining their perspectives on going to college. Currently, JMU hosts students (ages 18-21) from a nearby rural high school, Central High School, and the quasi-urban Harrisonburg High School on Friday mornings. These are postgraduate students who are on the cusp of aging out from receiving special education services from the public school system. These students are granted access to special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) through the age of 21 (*IDEA*, 2004). During the transitional period out of high school, the emphasis is placed on developing practical life skills that can serve them in vocational and residential settings and help foster their independence. JMU's Friday morning program, offered as a three-credit semester-long course to exceptional education (EXED) minors, helps foster such independence and social inclusion in the wider community. Through the program's efforts, students in their high schools' special education programs are invited to spend time on a college campus engaging in inclusive activities with JMU students. From

activities like riding the intercampus shuttle to the dining hall for lunch, to shooting hoops at the

University Recreation Center (UREC), the Friday morning program allows its participants to

develop meaningful ties with the JMU community.

Through my attendance of the Friday morning program, I have sought to document how

it allows the students it serves to develop a sense of community inclusion, and how it has

influenced their desire to attend college. By doing so, I hope to elevate the voices of an

underserved and undervalued population and empower educators to implement these programs in

colleges. Additionally, I hope to create a greater awareness among JMU students and staff of the

efforts and goals of this program, as it serves as a steppingstone to the potential development of

an IPSE program at JMU.

Design & Methods

This project will implement a mixed-methods design, combining elements of both

qualitative and quantitative data. A portion of my project will take the form of a narrative review,

through which I will describe the research on social outcomes, emotional well-being, self-

determination, and community integration among students who attended an IPSE program. This

review of existing research will help to justify the benefits of IPSE programs for students with ID

and the need for greater community access to such programs.

Quality of Life

"Quality of life" (QoL) assessments offer valuable insight into personal well-being across

multiple dimensions of an individual's life, making them a useful tool for assessing how

individuals with ID are being cared for within disability service systems (Conner, 2016;

Schalock, 2020; Schalock et al., 2011). QoL frameworks take a multidimensional approach at

assessing the supports that exist on both the individual and societal levels for individuals with

ID; in doing so, they "provide a framework for policy development, best practices, and outcome evaluation" (Schalock, 2020).

Because quality of life is not concretely observable, but rather a social construct that is influenced by people's own perceptions, it is challenging to define (Brown et al., 2013; Conner, 2016). As such, a variety of QoL assessment tools have been developed, most of which consider both subjective and objective criteria in relation to QoL (Conner, 2016). Generally, for QoL to exist, not only must an individual's basic needs be met, but he/she must also have the "opportunity to pursue life enrichment in major life activity settings" (Verdugo et al., 2012, p.1037).

For the purposes of my research, QoL will be considered based on the eight domains of Schalock and colleagues' conceptual model (2016). This model has been specifically designed and used to convey the important components of quality of life for individuals with ID. The eight domains it considers as relevant to QoL are: physical well-being, emotional well-being, material well-being, interpersonal relations, social inclusion, personal development, self-determination, and rights (Conner, 2016; Verdugo-Alonso et al., 2017). While all eight domains of Schalock and colleagues' framework collectively assess quality of life, I want to target the dimensions of emotional-wellbeing, interpersonal relations, social inclusion, and self-determination, as they are areas in which students with ID frequently experience rapid decline shortly after graduation from high school.

Table 2

Selected Quality of Life Domains and Exemplary Indicators

Quality of Life Domain	Exemplary Indicators
Self-Determination	• Autonomy/personal control • Choices
Interpersonal Relations	• Interactions (social networks) • Relationships (family, friends, peers)
Social Inclusion	• Community integration • Community roles
Emotional Well-being	• Contentment (satisfaction, enjoyment) • Lack of stress (predictability and control)

Note. Adapted from *The Quality of Life Supports Model: Components and Applications* [Infographic], by Schalock, 2020, https://www.apbs.org/conference/files/2020presentations/Keynote-Schalock-text.pdf

Video Documentation

For the other piece of my project, I have created a video documenting the activities within the Friday morning program and interviews of students with ID who attend. I have chosen this form of media because I believe it will showcase the students in this program most effectively. For many students with ID and their families, the prospect of determining reliable plans for the student's future is an emotionally charged one that requires careful planning and consideration. To hear from their voices about their experiences at JMU and to see the friendships that this inclusive experience has fostered will convey the goal of my project better than any written piece of work could attempt to do. I also believe that this form of media is more accessible and consumable for a broader audience— not just to educators and professionals, but to JMU students, students with disabilities, and/or their families.

Participants & Procedure

Semi-structured interviews have been administered and documented by film, along with footage of the day-to-day events of the Friday morning program. Interview participants were recruited from the group of Friday morning program attendees based on the following criteria: participants must have a diagnosed intellectual or developmental disability (IDD) and have regularly attended the Friday morning program for at least two semesters. They must also be willing and able to provide informed consent to be filmed and to participate in the research.

Prior to participation in the interview, all participants who wished to be featured were briefed on the intent of the research and the kinds of questions that would be asked. Participants were asked to repeat back to the researcher the purpose of the research to convey their understanding. If at any point, a potential participant did not appear to comprehend the purpose of the research, the interview was discontinued, and footage was not kept for usage. Participants who provided oral consent to be filmed and featured on video were also verbally informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any point if they so wished. Prior to publication of the video, participants received viewing access to the footage that they were featured in and were given the opportunity to offer a final form of oral consent.

Participants who were not interviewed but were featured in the video also provided their oral consent to be captured on film. The final product contains footage of both the JMU student participants and our high school partners. I plan on sharing this video at the Honors Symposium and making it publicly accessible through a video streaming platform such as YouTube, Vimeo and/or JMU's Scholarly Commons webpage.

Social Isolation Among Young Adults with ID

As youth transition into young adulthood, autonomy and independence are gained, while the high school environment is lost; consistent throughout these changes, however, is the importance of social inclusion (Merrells et al., 2019). While some students may choose to live with their high school best friend in college, others may wish to get as far from home as possible by attending an out-of-state school. Regardless, the expectation when going to college is that opportunities to seek friendship will exist.

Since youth with ID tend to have fewer social interactions than those without ID, it comes as no surprise that this period in their lives can feel isolating, especially when friends, peers, and/or siblings have chosen to go away to college (Merrells et al., 2019). In a study of 18-24-year-olds with ID who were either living alone in the community or with their parents, the feelings of being "segregated, excluded, and 'treated like an outcast' in [their] community" appeared as common themes (Merrells et al., 2019, p.16). Moreover, they cited challenges in "experiencing, initiating and maintaining peer friendships" (Merrells et al., 2019, p.17). As a result, many adults with ID have "very few, if any friends" (Amado, 1993, p.279-280).

The experience of loneliness for individuals with ID can be attributed to several factors, namely: their own perception of being of less value than their peers without disabilities, the lack of employment opportunities available to them, the amount of time spent with family instead of same-age peers, and the segregated nature of programs they have participated in (Merrells et al., 2019).

While day programs specifically designed to serve individuals with ID exist, they do not seem to be accomplishing the goal of inclusion. Many of these programs are stand-alone programs, meaning that individuals with disabilities' main interactions are with other individuals

with disabilities. This segregation from members of the broader community perpetuates the idea that individuals with ID are outcasts and must form relationships only with other people "like them" (Melillo, 2022). According to Cole et al., high school students who are placed in more inclusive academic settings are exposed to a more rigorous curriculum and are better prepared to be successful in post-graduate academic and employment settings, as compared to students placed in more restrictive settings (2022). Thus, it stands to reason that postgraduate students also fare better when they remain integrated in inclusive educational, work, and/or community settings, as opposed to segregated environments.

Apart from the limited social interactions provided through formal disability programs, young adults with ID reported that their main interactions were with family members. Given the limited scope of their social interactions, many young adults with ID report frequent feelings of boredom. They report spending their time engaging in mundane tasks that offer little to no social and mental stimulation (Merrells et al, 2019). Despite being motivated and capable, many individuals with ID are stifled by their surroundings and question their own purpose and life goals.

Many states use the National Core Indicators (NCI) assessment to view the impact that state-funded services have had for their constituents with intellectual/developmental disabilities (IDD). In order to assess community inclusion, participation, and leisure of constituents with IDD, a series of "yes" or "no" questions were asked. The 2020-2021 state report shows that only 26% of respondents from Virginia (N= 710) indicated that they had gone out for entertainment in the past month. This is compared to the national average of 40% among individuals with IDD (N= 19517). Similarly, only 17% of the Virginia constituents (N= 713) indicated that they were a member of a community, as compared to 26% of the national sample (N=19548). Another area

where there appears to be a significant deficit among Virginia respondents is in freedom and choice-making. Only 46% of the Virginia constituents (N= 283) said they were able to go out and do things in the community as often as they want, compared to the 72% national average response (N= 10280) (National Core Indicators, 2021). These numbers suggest that the Commonwealth of Virginia could do a far better job of meeting the desires and needs of adults with IDD.

IPSE Programs & Quality of Life

Employment Outcomes

Though vocational rehabilitation programs exist and are offered in Virginia through the Department of Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS), far more promising outcomes appear to exist for individuals who take advantage of both opportunities (vocational rehabilitation *and* an IPSE program). Because of growing expectations of a college education for employment, college is becoming more and more of a "necessity" than a "luxury" (Butler et al., 2015, p.295). More education leads to higher rates of employment for individuals both with and without ID, and, given that individuals with ID are among the group with the lowest employment rates, college is especially impactful (Butler et al., 2015, p.295). Not only were students with ID who utilized both of these programs "26% more likely to exit with paid jobs than those who only used vocational services", but they received "an average 73% higher income" (Kleinart et al., 2012, p.27).

Socio-Emotional Wellbeing & Inclusion

Aside from the clear advantages in seeking and obtaining employment, there is substantial literature to support the benefits that IPSEs offer towards emotional wellbeing and social outcomes. Butler et al. compared the NCI measures from a random sampling of non-

students with IDD in Kentucky (ages 18-30) to a student sample (2015). The student sample was

composed of individuals who had spent two or more semesters in a pilot IPSE program at

Northern Kentucky University called "SHEP" (Supported Higher Education Project). The

student group reported higher levels of physical health, employment, and volunteerism than the

non-student group (Butler et al., 2015).

Students who attended an IPSE program have also reported "increased satisfaction across

several life domains, including emotional well-being, interpersonal relationships, personal

development, self-determination, and social inclusion" (Kleinart et al., 2012, p.28). While 83%

of the student group from SHEP reported having friends to do things with, only 54% of the non-

student group said the same (Butler et al., 2015). Another comparative study found that 94.4% of

students who had attended an IPSE program said that they could go on a date, as compared to

39.3% of the NCI sample (Lee & Taylor, 2022; Sheppard-Jones et al., 2018). These comparisons

emphasize how IPSE programs can help individuals build social competence in different realms

of their life.

In a scoping review of student outcomes based on 16 different studies of IPSE programs,

six of those studies mentioned improvement in socialization as a student outcome. One study by

Henderson et al. (2017) found that students who had participated in an IPSE program reported

that they "made new friends, got along with others…[and] were willing to ask for help" (Lee &

Taylor, 2022, p.240). The friendships that students make tend to be with both their peers within

the IPSE program *and* degree-seeking college students who were in their inclusive classes or

who served as peer mentors (Spruit & Carter, 2021).

One likely reason for improved social prospects among IPSE program attendees is that

they are given frequent opportunities for involvement, such as playing on intramural sports

teams, attending performances in the arts, and joining clubs of their interest (Kleinart et al.,

2012). Another way they develop friendships is through internships, which connect them to

others with similar professional interests. These experiences and relationships are invaluable,

given that friendships during the college years are essential for receiving emotional support and

developing a sense of belonging (Spruit & Carter, 2021).

Self-Determination

Autonomy & Goal-Making. Postsecondary education programs help students form

specific goals through a "person-centered planning process" designed to "meet the needs,

preferences, and interests" of each student (Moore & Schelling, 2015, p.131). By placing

students at the center of this decision making, IPSE programs foster self-determination and

empowerment. In programs like VCU's ACE-IT program and GMU's LIFE program, students

are able to express their interests and strengths and pick out their courses accordingly ([VCU],

2023). This ability to explore their interests and display autonomy in personal decision making is

not typically possible in high school where there is a predetermined set of course requirements.

Through this process, students can learn what things they do and do not see as careers for

themselves.

Not only do IPSE programs help students build autonomy, but they help build

confidence. In a study of 34 graduates from an IPSE program in Maryland, (21 of whom

identified as having ID, three with ASD, two with multiple disabilities, four with "other"

disabilities, and eight unidentified) the majority of respondents indicated that they were "much

more" or "quite a bit better" prepared for life in the community after being in the program

(Moore & Schelling, 2015, p.139).

At the beginning of the program, most of the participants expressed their intent to "earn a competitive job after employment", "gain more independence", "make new friends", and "improve basic academic skills" (Moore & Schelling, 2015, p.139). After completing the program, they reported high levels of accomplishment of these goals (Moore & Schelling, 2015). This finding conveys how students who attend IPSE programs tend to feel satisfied with the personal growth they have experienced as a result. Moreover, it shows that IPSE programs tend to target the things that students perceive as most important to their success.

Independence in Daily Living. Another area in which students who attended IPSE programs saw improvement was in performing daily living skills (Lee & Taylor, 2022). Five of the studies explored in a scoping review of IPSE programs reported students' improvement in daily living skills such as doing laundry, cooking, paying bills, and maintaining personal hygiene (Ryan et al., 2019; Lee & Taylor, 2022). The ability to perform these essential tasks not only makes young adults with ID more self-sufficient, but also more capable of living independently from their parents, like many of their same-age non-disabled peers. Among a sample of 27 graduates of IPSE programs, 44% of those individuals lived independently after participating in the program (Lee & Taylor, 2022).

Parent Perspectives

In a study by McIntyre and colleagues, the researchers interviewed 30 mothers of transition-aged young adults (ages 18-24) with ID. These mothers completed Schalock's Quality of Life Questionnaire (QOL-Q) and responded to open-ended interview questions regarding important components of their child's QoL. Most mothers acknowledged the importance of having basic needs met and having something to keep their child busy on a regular basis, but many also considered having social contacts and friends as an important part of their child's

QoL. Eight of the participating mothers had children who had already exited from high school. Seven of those eight highlighted opportunities for independence as being important, and some expressed fear that their child would not have such opportunities. The young adults considered in this research were not enrolled in an IPSE program, but displayed needs that an IPSE program could attempt to address. Enrollment in an IPSE would provide natural opportunities for social engagement and friendship development that could ultimately improve QoL (McIntyre et al., 2004).

In another study, family members of transition-aged individuals (ages 14-25) with ID were surveyed about what they considered to be the most important components of an inclusive postsecondary education program (N=108). 87% of those family members were the individual's mother. Responses were scored on a five-point Likert-type scale where "1= not at all important" and "5= very important." Program components were ranked by family members in the following order of importance from most to least: focus on employment after graduation (M= 4.36, SD=1.15), structured activities (M= 4.24, SD=1.09), individual choice in curriculum (M= 4.22, SD=1.12), inclusive learning environments (M= 4.08, SD=1.24), opportunity for certification in a vocational area (M= 4.01, SD=1.29), access to a college campus (M= 3.60, SD= 1.43), residential options (M= 3.47, SD= 1.45) (Griffin et al., 2010). Though some components scored more highly than others, all of these considerations received mean scores that leaned towards the "important" end of the spectrum. This detail conveys how *all* of these components held value to the family members who responded, regardless of how they ranked in comparison to one another. While residential options were not the most crucial component of their consideration, they still acknowledged it as an important feature to an IPSE program.

Another useful finding from the study was that 73% of participants cited that the biggest

barrier to their child accessing a postsecondary education was a "lack of general information or

guidance". Second to that was, "school and other staff did not help me understand" (36%), and

third was "financial constraints" (36%) (Griffin et al., 2010, p.342). This data suggests the need

for better resources to offer awareness of these programs and their benefits. Many family

members in this study had generally positive views about IPSEs but had not received sufficient

information for it to become a plausible option for their child. If an IPSE program is not

presented as an option during the formal process of special education transition planning (which

typically begins at age 14), special education funds cannot be accessed to support any of the

costs of IPSE programs (L. Desportes, personal communication, January 15, 2021).

Unfortunately, in this way, many opportunities available to individuals with ID go unrecognized

or overlooked, and students are unable to reap the benefits of IPSEs.

Implementation of an IPSE Program at JMU

Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion

Currently, there are 317 recognized IPSE programs within the United States, yet only

four of those programs exist within the state of Virginia (Think College, 2023). Despite JMU's

stated recognition of the importance of access, diversity, and inclusion on campus, it has yet to

fully embrace this segment of the population as members of its community. JMU's core qualities

and strategic goals for the years 2020-2026 include the following goals:

Goal 2B: The university will implement policies, programs, and practices to increase the

diversity of students, faculty, and staff.

Goal 2C: The university will expand access and build bridges to cross existing

socioeconomic, geographic, learning, and/or other barriers to participation in academic

pursuits and campus activities.

Goal 2G: The university will develop new initiatives and continue to expand support for

the success of non-traditional students. (James Madison University [JMU], 2023)

By implementing an IPSE program on campus, JMU has the opportunity to develop itself

in accordance with these goals. This program would not only remove barriers of access to

education for youth with ID living in the Shenandoah Valley region, but it would bring valuable

opportunities for learning to the current JMU student population. By having on-campus

interactions with students with ID, current JMU students will have the chance to confront biases

and build an understanding of how to interact with this population. The ability to interact with

individuals with disabilities is important not just for future special educators, but for health care

providers and mental health counselors alike. All of these professionals are likely to come into

contact with an individual with ID during their career. For reference, the prevalence of

depression among individuals with ID is the same or higher than it is for the population as a

whole, yet there are only a limited number of trained therapists who are comfortable with

offering services to individuals with ID. Individuals with ID and/or their families often have to

seek out specialized psychological services rather than meeting with professionals who are able

to adapt their services to accommodate their needs (Smith et al., 2021).

The same issue exists for individuals with IDD while seeking other medical services.

Medical professionals are often provided with inadequate training to address the needs that this

population presents, and therefore express discomfort in working with this group. In a study of

27 first-year medical school students, the benefits of having simulated patient encounters with

individuals with IDD were explored. Students were randomly assigned to one of two groups.

Group one, the control group, watched a video about IDD healthcare and then took a quiz. Group

two engaged in simulated patient encounters with four individuals with IDD. Both groups

offered feedback on their experiences and were scored using a communication skills assessment.

Participants in the experimental group stated that the experience "highlighted gaps in [their]

knowledge", revealed communication challenges with the patients, and helped them to better

understand the "unique skill set" needed to work with patients with IDD (Coret et al., 2018,

p.323). Overall, the experimental group reported that the exposure to individuals with IDD

allowed them to gain comfort and confidence in working with this population. They felt more

skilled at adapting their language and communication for each individual patient, and they

learned to accept the discomfort they felt around discussing disability with the patient (Coret et

al., 2018). These findings convey how even people who are training to be medical professionals

tend to lack knowledge and experience in interacting with individuals with IDD. Because of this

challenge, it makes sense to allow JMU students to gain experience working with this group

during their college education, rather than once they are already on the job. Not only would this

help them to become better advocates, but also more adaptable, well-versed professionals.

Funding & Affordability

Of the 317 IPSE programs that exist, less than half of those programs are classified as a

Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary program (CTP), through which they are able to

offer federal financial aid to students (Papay & Weir, 2023). Traditionally, students are required

to be working towards a degree or certificate, have a regular high school diploma or GED, and

take college entrance exams in order to qualify for federal financial aid; however, CTPs remove

those barriers to accessing higher education and make college a more affordable and attainable

endeavor for students with ID. Students attending a CTP are eligible for pell grants or federal

work study as long as they show a financial need and are making satisfactory academic progress

within the program (Kleinart et al., 2012). If JMU applied and was accepted to become a CTP,

the university could meet the needs of more students and families.

Degrees/Certifications Conferred

CTPs carry provisions for accommodations and curriculum modifications that are not

otherwise allowed for students with disabilities in higher education. Section 504 of the

Rehabilitation Act of 1973 stipulates that students with known disabilities have the right to

"reasonable accommodations" to help them succeed in the classroom, but these accommodations

"cannot alter the course content or objectives" (Kleinart et al., 2012, p. 29). On the contrary,

CTPs allow for courses to be taken for credit or as an audit. Students with ID taking courses for

audit *can* receive a modified curriculum at the discretion of the professor (Kleinart et al., 2012) .

Rather than receiving a grade for the course, they will have "AU" written on their transcripts for

audited courses. Audited courses do not lead to traditional college credits, but they do often

contribute towards some kind of certificate awarded through the CTP program ([VCU], 2021).

This option allows students to have flexibility in what courses they take and to gain meaningful

knowledge and experience in an individualized manner. By permitting students to receive a

modified curriculum within courses, CTPs ensure that students' personal learning objectives are

being met.

VCU's ACE-IT program, which serves as a model in Virginia, considers program

participants to be non-degree seeking students. They receive a Certificate of Completion

endorsed by the VCU College of Education after fulfilling the program requirements of

coursework, on-campus employment, and an internship ([VCU], 2021). While this is not

considered a college degree, it is a credential that is only awarded after satisfactory performance and progress within the program. Rather than through a grade, students' performance and progress is assessed by course instructors using a rubric. This rubric is completed based on a number of factors, including the student's class attendance, completion of course projects, tests, or quizzes, participation in class, and quality of work. Based on their fulfillment of these criteria, students are described as either "exceed[ing] expectations," "meet[ing] expectations", making "satisfactory progress" or "does not meet satisfactory progress" ([VCU], 2021, Certificate section, para 3). This rubric system ensures that effort, dedication, and consistency are required to complete the program and that faculty members hold students to high standards. Students are not guaranteed to be selected for the program, nor are they guaranteed the certificate of completion if they do not fulfill the necessary requirements.

Apart from the coursework that students in the ACE-IT program complete to receive the Certificate of Completion from the College of Education, they must also engage in part-time on-campus employment and an internship that takes place during their final semester. The inclusion of these requirements helps ensure students' readiness for employment after the program and provides them with experiences to highlight on their resumes. Sometimes, these internships even lead to careers. If they do not, however, the student's support team works with them to help them obtain competitive employment after graduation in a field of their interest. With this being said, it is important to note that students who attend IPSE programs gain more than just the experience of taking audited courses. They receive a person-centered education focused on directing them towards long-term success. They build relationships with individuals who can provide personal references for them, and they receive professional experiences that allow them to compete with other applicants ([VCU], 2021).

Professor Perspectives

It is important to consider how the implementation of an IPSE program at JMU will affect professors who invite students with ID to take their courses. It is quite possible that faculty members will be reluctant to enroll students with ID into their courses if they anticipate that it will create a greater work or time commitment for them. Existing research from another university program can help professors gain perspective on this concern (Hall et al., 2021).

In a study conducted by faculty at Vanderbilt University, 23 professors shared about their recent experiences of teaching students with ID (Hall et al., 2021). At the time of the study, the university had 35 students enrolled in its non-residential, four-year CTP. These students were all between the ages of 18-26. Students in this CTP take a series of specialized courses, as well as one or two audited traditional university courses each semester.

Within the study, focus groups were held to interview professors who had spent one or more semesters teaching their courses to students with ID. When asked how much support they had to offer students with ID as opposed to other students, the responses were as follows: 11 faculty members said that the amount of support they provided to students with ID was "somewhat less" than what they provided other students, 10 faculty members said they spent "somewhat more" time assisting their students with ID than other students, and seven said that the support they provided to students with and without ID was about the same (Hall et al., 2021, pp.6-8). This mixed range of perceptions suggests that there was no significant overall difference in professors' time and effort needed to support students with ID as opposed to other students. In cases where more support was needed, it was usually spent "adapting material, building rapport, or checking in" on these students (Hall et al., 2021, p.8).

Faculty from the SHEP program in Kentucky suggest that programs in their infancy should start by having students enroll *only* in courses from professors who have explicitly stated their willingness to participate in the CTP. Faculty of VCU's ACE-IT program have followed the same practice of only having faculty who express a willingness to include a student participate (L. Desportes, personal communication, 2021).

Faculty from the SHEP program also recommend that programs offer training and ongoing support to professors and partner with college students who wish to serve as mentors for inclusive on-campus activities (much like the JMU students in the Friday morning program currently do) (Kleinart et al., 2012). By developing a peer mentoring program, JMU students could help support their peers academically and socially and potentially earn credit for it.

Student Perspectives

Griffin and colleagues administered a survey to 256 current college students on the campus of Vanderbilt University to assess the attitudes that college students held towards the inclusion of individuals with ID in their classes (2012). The survey consisted of 35 questions scored on a Likert-type scale where 1 indicated "no" or that they agreed the least and 5 indicated "yes" or that they agreed the most. These questions covered the following topics: demographic information, "interaction with individuals with ID", perceptions of people with ID, "willingness to interact with students with ID", and "positive and negative attitudes towards including students with ID in college" (Griffin et al., 2012, p.236). A full 25% of the students who participated stated that the closest interaction they had ever had with someone with ID was through encountering a stranger in a public setting. This statistic extends the argument that degree-seeking college students should receive greater exposure to disability before entering

their professional careers. Lack of experience with members of a minority group can often

translate into a lack of knowledge, which lends itself to biases and stereotypes.

Despite the large portion of students who had little to no experience with individuals with

ID, the students in this sample held generally positive views about students with ID, suggesting

an openness to learning alongside them. They indicated a mean response score of 4.52 for

"willingness to interact with students with ID at college" (SD= 0.56), and a mean score of 4.20

for "perceptions of abilities of students with ID" (SD=0.65) (Griffin et al., 2012, p.236). Current

university students' positive attitudes about IPSE programs on their campus provide

encouragement that JMU students will similarly benefit.

Program Model

Parents of individuals with IDD and members of the JMU community provided their

input on their preferred format for a potential IPSE program at JMU. From a sampling of 118

parents of youth with IDD, over half of them (55.1%) stated that they would like for JMU's

program to include a full residential component, much like what is offered to other students. The

second most common preference (22%) was for the program to be residential Monday through

Friday and for students to go home on eekends. The remaining votes were for a half-day program

with dual enrollment in their school division (14.4%) and a full-day program with dual

enrollment in their school division (8.5%) (Desportes et al., 2019).

Similar findings existed among members of the JMU community who were polled on

their preference; 49.2% of the 197 JMU community members who responded stated that they

would prefer the program to include a full residential component. Through this model, students

would have the opportunity to develop independence, daily living skills, and a sense of identity

independent of their parents. Moreover, they would gain experience mediating peer conflict and learning how to treat shared living spaces — all skills relevant to adulthood.

Results

In combination with the existing research on how IPSE programs can support QoL for students with ID, the interviews conducted in my research serve to convey a genuine need for an IPSE at JMU. The five students who were interviewed and recorded by film each expressed an appreciation for the experiences they have had through the Friday morning program, as well as a desire to come to JMU if an IPSE program were offered. These participants are each prospective students that JMU has an opportunity to serve.

During my interviews with participating students, the question "*What has been your favorite part of coming to JMU?*" was asked. One participant responded by stating, *"I like it here because… to see my JMU friends, and I am so glad that I met new friends,"* Another participant mentioned that *"[He] like[s] doing some fun things like dancing and playing games."*

In response to the question, *"What have been some experiences you have had in the Friday morning program that stick out?"*, one respondent said the following: *"I always like the part where on the very last day we… share about something that [we've] really liked… There are some students that are shy or people who don't verbally communicate, but they will come up and say something. I think that's always empowering for JMU students to hear, and also for them as well."*

These responses speak to the impact that the Friday morning program has had on students who attend it, along with the opportunities it provides for social inclusion, interpersonal relations, and self-determination.

Discussion

The overall findings of this research corroborate the initial theory that IPSE programs support QoL for young adults with ID, particularly in the domains of self-determination, interpersonal relations, emotional well-being, and social inclusion. Consistently higher rates of success in these areas were reported for students who attend(ed) an IPSE program, as compared to young adults with ID who have not. In addition to the improvements noted in these domains, it was also worth noting the advantages that IPSEs provided for obtaining employment.

The interviews of students who attend the Friday morning program open a dialogue for discussing what college means to students with ID and how inclusion is empowering. While the Friday morning program allows these students to experience JMU's campus, it simply can not meet all the needs that an IPSE program could help meet. However, the students it serves create promise that there is both an interest and a need among residents of the local community.

Limitations of Research

While this research provides insight into how existing IPSE programs have served the students who attended them, the researcher was unable to collect reliable data assessing the QoL of students who are the target population for this program (ages 18-26, living within an hour radius of JMU, diagnosed with an intellectual or developmental disability). Data was based on similar groups of students within the same age range and with IDD. However, the discrepancy in QoL between students who did and did not attend an IPSE program may, in fact, be more pronounced for students living in this region. This may be because individuals living in rural settings have less access to day support groups, social networks, and organized programming than those who live in urban or suburban settings. Consequently, many students with IDD within this region may be more prone to feelings of isolation, lack of social networks, and lack of

inclusion than the findings suggest. If this is the case, then an even stronger case can be made for the need for JMU to develop resources to serve this population. There is room for future research to explore this issue.

Conclusion

There are many reasons for JMU to implement a program of this kind: advancement in DEI efforts, opportunities for students with ID to develop social skills and independence, improved vocational outcomes for students with ID, experiences for JMU students to enhance their professional skills and build relationships with diverse same-age learners, etc. Additionally, JMU is in an ideal location to serve the needs of a community where no other programs exist. By creating an IPSE program, JMU will convey its responsiveness to community needs and the needs of historically underserved and undervalued students. The strategic plan that JMU has laid out stresses the vision to become a leader in engagement based on three main facets: engaged learning, civic engagement, and community engagement ([JMU], 2023). The argument can be made that an IPSE program will enhance engagement in all three of these realms.

While this research opens doors for subsequent efforts to be made towards the implementation of an IPSE program at JMU, it will take many helping hands and voices to make it happen. My hope is that this project brings recognition to not only the need for a program of this nature at JMU, but the talents and passions that its potential participants have to offer to JMU's community. These students are driven, eager, and ready to pursue a postsecondary education. For JMU to act on this readiness would be a win for everyone involved.

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