WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BELONG? ATTITUDES AND EXPERIENCES

OF STUDENTS WITH AND WITHOUT INTELLECTUAL

AND DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

ON A COLLEGE CAMPUS

by

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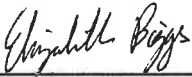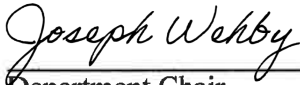
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Many university campuses in the United States now have inclusive postsecondary

education programs (IPSEs) that provide young adults with intellectual and

developmental disabilities (IDD) access to higher education. This descriptive qualitative

study aimed to explore the attitudes and experiences of students with IDD and their

undergraduate peers related to disability, inclusion, and belonging on a college campus at

a large private, research-intensive university. Using individual semi-structured

interviews, the study included 20 participants who were part of one of the following

groups: (a) a young adult with IDD who was enrolled in the university's IPSE program,

(b) an undergraduate student who served as a peer mentor with the IPSE program, or (c)

an undergraduate student who was unaffiliated with the IPSE. Findings about student's

attitudes were summarized across participant groups, showing that students across groups

had similar personal definitions of inclusion, belonging, and disability. Students

experiences with social interactions and relationships varied, however, which was

summarized across four themes: (a) Campus involvement, (b) Social interactions, (c)

Relationships, and (d) Campus culture. Implications for research and practice are shared

that relate to the need for IPSE staff and university administrators to leverage individual

connections across students in different groups to build meaningful relationships for

students with IDD and their peers in inclusive universities.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The value of a college education has consistently increased in today's ever-changing society (Trostel, 2015). Obtaining a college degree has a myriad of benefits, including higher chances of employment and economic mobility (Trostel, 2015). By 2027, 70% of jobs will require a degree from a four-year university, fueling the push toward higher education (Grigal et al., 2021). In addition to academic development, many students seek out the social experiences and relationships that college affords. Universities boast a wide array of clubs and organizations, giving students opportunities for connectedness and personal growth. At least in part due to the combination of academic and social benefits from going to college, 94% of college graduates report being happy or very happy (Trostel, 2015).

Importantly, institutes of higher education face a tremendous challenge in ensuring success for students who come from widely varying backgrounds, including related to race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, religious identity, sexual orientation, and disability status. The Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) movement has played a large role in shaping institutes of higher education. But, although higher education institutions have added DEI statements to their overall mission and implemented other efforts, many feel the efforts do not go far enough to truly support

equity and inclusion for diverse student populations, including students with disabilities (Dwyer et al., 2023). This challenge spans across institutes of higher education and other organizations and workplaces. For instance, according to a recent survey, approximately 90% of companies prioritize diversity, but only 4% acknowledge disability (Harvard Business Review, 2021).

Addressing equity and inclusion for young adults with disabilities in institutes of higher education is important because the benefits of a college experience and degree extend to young adults with and without disabilities. Opportunities for higher education are important for young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) (i.e., disabilities that affect long-term intellectual or physical development, including intellectual disability or autism) (Schalock et al., 2019). Just like for their peers without IDD, inclusion in higher education programs can be life-altering for young adults with IDD, supporting positive outcomes and growth across a variety of domains (e.g., well-being, relationships, personal development) (Kleinert et al., 2012).

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Growth of Inclusive Post-Secondary Education
Programs for Students with IDD

An increasing number of universities have begun providing opportunities for students with IDD with inclusive post-secondary education programs (IPSEs) within recent decades (Kleinert et.al, 2012). IPSEs aim to integrate students with IDD into the everyday landscape of college campuses. According to a college database by Think College (2019), current estimates show more than 300 IPSE programs spanning 49 states. Although IPSE programs have certainly grown in recent years, progress has not been linear.

The early history of IPSE programs can be traced back to the mid-1970s, when the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) first mandated that students with disabilities were entitled to a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in K-12 settings (Department of Education, 2023). Prior to the enactment, only approximately 20% of children with disabilities attended a traditional school (Department of Education, 2023), and these numbers rarely included children or youth with more significant support needs, such as students with IDD. The EHA provided a legal framework for including students with disabilities in typical educational settings; however, there soon became a new question: "What happens when they graduate?" Neurotypical peers could attend

college or begin employment after graduation, but students with IDD were often excluded from post-secondary planning. The lingering effects of institutionalization were apparent in many programs that emphasized rehabilitation rather than independence and a meaningful adult life (Flexer et al., 2013). Due to a lack of support and options, various stakeholders began to push for the inclusion of formal transition services within the EHA. Importantly, the 1990 reauthorization, which was called the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) mandated these services within special education law. The transition services that were, and continue to be, mandated by IDEA are results oriented— emphasizing that student interests and strengths must be taken into account as teams work together to plan for meaningful post-school outcomes (Flexer et al., 2013).

Throughout the late 1990s, IPSE programs began to slowly gain traction. But, a legislative change in 2008 fueled even greater change for young adults with IDD to have access to higher education opportunities. This legislation was the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA), which legitimized IPSE programs by defining Comprehensive Transition Programs (i.e., identifying specific components that should be present in a post-secondary education program serving students with IDD) and by creating financial aid and work-study options for students in IPSE programs (Lee, 2009). Aside from expanding financial access, HEOA also established a national center for IPSE programs, referred to as the Transition and Postsecondary Education Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) (Department of Education, 2023). This policy thus

provided funding for institutions of higher education to create IPSE programs that would act as models for other institutions.

These legislative changes opened pathways for students with IDD to attend college that would not have otherwise existed. As of 2021, there were 35 (TPSID) sites across the country, with 98% of 494 enrolled students having an intellectual disability (Grigal et al., 2021). Given the various needs of students, IPSE programs differ in length, area of study, and diploma type. According to Grigal et al. (2022), 35.4% of programs are two years long, followed by only 12.8% of programs being held at four-year universities. Admission requirements vary across programs, ranging from minimum and maximum age levels to distinct high school diplomas (Grigal et al., 2022).

What Does it Mean to Be Included and Belong in Higher Education?

Generally, inclusion refers to the "intentional, ongoing effort" to include diverse people and advocate for their participation in groups or organizations (Tan, 2019). Within the realm of disability, inclusion takes on a more practical meaning, typically referring to the integration of students with disabilities and their neurotypical peers (Merriam-Webster, 2023). Longstanding debates surrounding *meaningful* inclusion have become particularly relevant, which may be due, at least in part, to a lack of guidance from IDEA about what inclusion should look like. This is because IDEA relies on the concept of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) in its legislation, not inclusion (Gordon, 2006). Within IPSE programs, inclusion is thought to take place in a variety of settings (e.g.,

classes, clubs, events). However, Bjornsdottir (2016) emphasized the subjectivity of meaningfulness, sharing how teachers or administrators are the ones who choose what is meaningful for inclusion, rather than the students themselves. The concept of *belonging* also relates to conversations about meaningful inclusion. The human need for belonging is thought to be innate— spanning across families, friendships, and romantic relationships. For instance, Baumeister and Leary (1995) emphasized belonging as a motivational construct, arguing that un-belonging is a deep-rooted fear that can cause mental and physical ailments (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). They contextualized belonging as being related to relationships, emphasizing that (a) humans require frequent contact with one another and (b) meaningful bonds are stable and long-lasting (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

　　Similar frameworks have been used to shape modern understandings of belonging, particularly about student belonging in educational settings. Biggs and Carter (2021) alluded to the idea that students should feel "at home" in their classrooms, arguing that each student should feel a sense of value from their peers and teachers (p.1). Their framework includes ten essential elements of belonging for students with IDD, including being "present, invited, welcomed, known, accepted, involved, supported, heard, befriended, and needed" (Biggs & Carter, 2021). Used in tandem, each element can support notions of what it means to belonging within both the classroom and within the greater context of a student's school and community.

Importantly, peer relationships are thought to be one of the most influential aspects of belonging (Biggs & Carter, 2016). Over time, friendships serve a myriad of benefits, such as enhancing emotional well-being, creating a sense of identity, and providing a safe space to navigate challenges. Moving through adolescence and into young adulthood, peer relationships are essential for working through life stages and changes (Carter, 2008). For instance, Gowing (2019) found at the secondary school level that peer relationships were the most common indicator of feeling connected. Socializing was noted as being students' utmost concern, rather than academic advancement.

Student Attitudes and Experiences as Indicators of Inclusion and Belonging

Given the importance of peer relationships for inclusion and belonging, it is important to consider how students with and without IDD relate to one another on college campuses with IPSE programs, including their attitudes and experiences. The formation of meaningful relationships among students with and without IDD depends on a variety of factors, including proximity and participation in campus life. Because they spend more time with students with IDD in IPSE programs, peer mentors may be especially important as points of connection between students with IDD and the larger social network within a college campus. Carter et al. (2021) found that peer mentors often describe their relationships with students with IDD as friendships, and their findings also suggested that students who severed as peer mentors felt their role as a mentor contributed to feelings of positivity about the relationship. Similarly, Wilt and Morningstar (2020) found that

students with IDD enjoyed spending time with their peer mentors, particularly when receiving assistance on academics or exchanging campus-related information. However, a lack of research exists that includes the perspectives of undergraduate students outside of IPSE programs about their attitudes and experiences interacting with fellow university students with IDD. Instead, current literature tends to focus on the experiences of students with IDD and their peer mentors.

Although IPSE programs aim to support inclusion in campus life for their students, there can be challenges. For instance, in a recent review, Papal et al. (2018) found that approximately 33% of IPSE programs offered housing for students, but this housing was typically specialized rather than integrated with their peers without IDD. As another example, 63% of universities had specific course requirements for IPSE students that involved hosting classes in segregated classrooms or buildings (Papal et al., 2018). Although these findings are not representative of all IPSE programs, they do illustrate the tension surrounding the perception and practice of meaningful inclusion, as well as the need for further research. IPSE staff and other college leaders may be largely unaware of their own bias, and in turn, limit the involvement or potential contributions of students with IDD (Kleinert, 2012). Oakes et al. (2021) found that stakeholders may fear "rocking the boat," leading inadvertently to segregated programming or activities (p. 11). Thus, IPSE programs risk 'othering' their own students, even while their efforts appear to be well-intended. In contrast, students with IDD often long for the same experiences of their peers, regardless of outside opinion or attitude. Vaccaro and Newman (2015) found that

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students with ID rely on "supportive relationships" to develop a sense of belonging, many of which are formed in dormitories or classes with neurotypical peers (p. 680).

Purpose of the Current Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the views and experiences of university students related to inclusion and belonging for students with IDD enrolled in an IPSE program on a single college campus in the southern United States. We focused on the views of three different groups of students: (a) students with IDD, (b) undergraduate peer mentors within the IPSE program, and (c) undergraduate students who were not formally affiliated with the IPSE program. We wanted to understand how attitudes and experiences around inclusion and belonging might align or vary for students across these three groups, and we were particularly interested in how students from across these groups perceived their interactions and relationships with one another. So we addressed the following research questions:

1. What attitudes or personal definitions do students with IDD and their university peers hold toward inclusion, belonging, and disability?

2. What are the experiences of students with IDD and their university peers related to their interactions and relationships with one another?

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH DESIGN AND PROCEDURES

Overview

This qualitative study involved descriptive analysis of semi-structured interviews undergraduate students with and without IDD. Qualitative descriptive research aims to explore and describe social phenomena while remaining close to the data in the interpretation of findings (Maarouf, 2019; Sandelowski, 2010). Our team used a pragmatic paradigm, which means that we made methods-related decisions (e.g., sampling, data collection, data analysis) based on the goal of using our research to gain practical insight into a real-word issue, believing these findings could inform future action (Maarouf, 2019). The research team was composed of three individuals from a private, four-year research university— myself (a masters-level graduate student in the Department of Special Education), a faculty research mentor who was an Assistant Professor of Special Education, and an undergraduate research assistant. In terms of my positionality, I am a White, cis-gendered female in her mid-twenties who is currently working toward her M.Ed. in Special Education. My interest in the field of special education began when I was an intern at a day support program for adults with IDD. Throughout my experience, I grew more curious about community integration for individuals with IDD. The day program offered a variety of experiences, but I became observant of the attitudes of various stakeholders (parents, instructors, coaches, etc.), and,

in turn, how those attitudes affected opportunities for meaningful inclusion in the community. As a graduate student, my research interests are focused on what *meaningful* inclusion would look like for all students, and I am interested in exploring the impact of people's perceptions of disability and belonging on experiences of young adults with IDD in educational settings, including IPSE programs.

Participants

Participants were 20 young adults across three undergraduate student groups at a single private research university with a 4-year IPSE program: (a) students with IDD who were enrolled in the IPSE program ($n = 5$), (b) students who served formally as peer mentors with the IPSE program ($n = 7$), and (c) peers who were not formally affiliated with the IPSE program ($n = 8$) (see Table 1). To be included, young adults had to be an enrolled undergraduate student at the identified university and self-identify as being part of one of these three groups. Across all three groups, participants ranged in age from 18 to 22 years ($M = 20$ years).

The students who were not enrolled in the IPSE program had a variety of undergraduate majors, but the most common for peer mentors was Special Education ($n = 4$) and the most common for unaffiliated students was Medicine, Health, and Society ($n = 4$). When asked about their experiences with disability, peer mentors and other undergraduate students indicated whether they (a) had family members with disabilities ($n = 4$), (b) had friends with disabilities ($n = 3$), (c) currently volunteered with disability

related organizations ($n = 2$), and/or (b) identified themselves as having a disability ($n = 2$).

For the students with IDD enrolled in the IPSE program, all of the students met the requirements for enrollment in the program, which were: (a) between the ages of 18-26 years old, (b) have a diagnosed intellectual or developmental disability (e.g., autism, Down syndrome, intellectual disability), (c) completed high school and received a standard or alternate diploma (e.g., special education diploma, occupational diploma), and (d) have a strong desire to attend college. Descriptions of how these young adults described their own disability can be found in Table 2.

Table 1

Study Participants by Student Group

Student Group	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Class Year
Students with IDD			
Peter	Male	White	Junior
Liz	Female	White	Freshman
Jake	Male	White	Junior
Emily	Female	White	Sophomore
Cat	Female	Black/African American	Sophomore
Peer mentors			
Grace	Female	White	Junior
Molly	Female	White	Junior
Savannah	Female	White	Junior
Madison	Female	White	Sophomore
Mia	Female	American Indian/Alaskan Native, White	Sophomore
Anna	Female	White	Freshman
Zoe	Female	White	Freshman
Unaffiliated peers			
Jill	Female	Hispanic/Latino, White	Sophomore
Kate	Female	White	Senior
Sam	Female	White	Senior
Sarah	Female	Asian	Freshman
Will	Male	Asian	Sophomore
Taylor	Female	White	Senior
Amy	Female	Black/African American	Senior
Emma	Female	Hispanic/Latino, White	Freshman

Table 2

Students' With IDD Self-Descriptions of Disability

Pseudonym	Self-Description of Disability
Peter	"Learning difference. Hard to read. Hard to see things."
Liz	"Autism"
Jake	"Down Syndrome"
Emily	"Down Syndrome"
Cat	"Williams Syndrome", "I got scoliosis on my back"

IPSE Program

The 4-year IPSE program was housed within the College of Education and

Human Development at a private research university. The university had an

undergraduate population of approximately 7,000 students, including 48% male and 52%

female. A total of 45% of the undergraduate population was classified as being racially

and ethnically diverse, representing over 70 countries. The IPSE program was founded in

2010, and was formally recognized as a TPSID site in 2015, eventually transitioning into

a federally funded 4-year program. IPSE students are expected to maintain a rigorous

schedule, including: (a) a minimum of 2 university courses per semester, (b) independent

living courses, (c) career development seminars, and (d) various service requirements.

Students are encouraged to be active participants in the campus community through

clubs, sporting events, and orientation events. In their first year, students are allowed to

enroll in a self-advocacy and leadership concentration, completing approximately 900 hours of personal development across four years. Within this study, two students were members of the program: Cat and Liz. In their third year, students begin integrated internships in a variety of community settings. Since the start of the IPSE program, approximately 81.3% of graduates have entered into competitive employment upon graduation.

A foundational component of the IPSE program is a peer mentoring program. Each year, over 100 volunteers work with the program, including undergraduate and graduate students. Collectively, mentors spend approximately 8,000-9,000 hours per year with the students enrolled in the program. Mentors serve in a variety of roles, including (a) lunch partners, (b) workout partners, (c) academic tutors, (d) daily planners, and (e) campus life planners. At the beginning of each academic year, peer mentors participate in training that provides information about the students they will be working with, as well as strategies to provide effective support. The purpose of the mentor program is to build reciprocal relationships across student groups while providing natural peer support to students with IDD in the IPSE program.

Recruitment and Screening

A variety of recruitment methods were used to contact students across the three included groups during the Spring 2023 semester. First, we collaborated with IPSE program staff to obtain a list of professors who included at least one student with IDD in their undergraduate course during the previous academic year. A total of nine professors

disseminated study information to students who had been enrolled in their course, including all of the students in the course with and without disabilities. Second, we used mass email and informal interactions to invite students affiliated with the IPSE program, including students with IDD and undergraduate peer mentors.

Recruitment materials directed interested students to brief online questionnaire hosted on the REDCap platform (Harris et al., 2009), which involved questions to screen for inclusion criteria and to simultaneously gather demographic information about potential participants. A total of 35 eligible potential participants completed the questionnaire and were contacted to set up an interview, of which 20 participants responded and participated. The 15 students who did not respond to the request to set up an interview included six unaffiliated undergraduate students, four students with IDD, and four peer mentors.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, individual interviews held near the end of the Spring 2023 semester. We utilized an interview guide which was developed collaboratively by the research team (see Supplementary Materials), arranging the questions into three categories: (a) Experiences with interactions and relationships, (b) Attitudes about disability, inclusion, and belonging, and (c) Conclusion. Questions were aligned but not identical across the three student groups.

I conducted and audio-recorded interviews, holding the interviews either in-person ($n = 15$) or through Zoom ($n = 5$) based on participant preference. I used a

conversational interview style, which helped build rapport and encouraged participants to expand or clarify their responses as the interviewer asked unscripted follow-up questions. Interviews lasted between 10-30 min (M = 17 min), and participants received a $15 gift card for their time. I took notes during each interview to support the development of appropriate follow-up questions. Following each interview, I completed a written reflection to share with my faculty mentor and the undergraduate research assistant (e.g., how the interview went for the interviewer and participant, affect of the participant, prominent ideas raised in the interview).

Data Analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed, verified, and then de-identified by the research team. We then uploaded them to Dedoose (version 8.3, 4.1), a web-based application used for qualitative analysis. Analysis involved a collaborative, inductive approach with three iterative rounds of coding (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019; Saldaña, 2021). The first round of coding involved open coding, also sometimes called initial coding (i.e., breaking interview transcripts into smaller excerpts and then creating codes to label the ideas in each excerpt; Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019; Saldaña, 2021). At the start of the first coding round, an undergraduate research assistant and I independently reviewed each transcript and wrote memos that included lists of ideas for potential codes. The two of us then met with a faculty research mentor to use our memos to create an initial electronic codebook which listed codenames that could be used during the open coding process. Since we used an inductive coding approach, though, we allowed for new

codes to be added to the codebook when novel ideas were discovered in the data. After this initial meeting, our open coding process involved: (a) analyzing and coding transcripts independently, and then (b) meeting to discuss and come to consensus on how to code each excerpt.

During the second round of coding, the undergraduate research assistant and I independently reviewed each coded excerpt from all of the transcripts and wrote memos with our ideas about emerging themes and other general thoughts. Following this independent memoing, we met for critical discussion with the faculty research advisor who provided feedback and peer debriefing. Through critical discussion, we decided to synthesize and report the data separately for the two research questions. First, for how participants described their personal definitions of inclusion, belonging, and disability, we decided to summarize data by each of the three participant groups, which allowed for representing each group's views well. Second, for how participants described their interactions and relationships with one another, we identified four themes which spanned across participant groups: campus involvement, social interactions, relationships, and campus culture. Therefore, we decided to use this thematic framework for the second research questions.

Finally, in the third round of coding we used this coding framework to review all of the coded transcripts, searching for confirming or disconfirming evidence. No disconfirming evidence was found for the themes, but this final round of analysis allowed

the team to generate additional memos to explore further and understand the themes with greater nuance.

After the third round of coding, and prior to compiling the final results, I used participant member checks to support the trustworthiness of my interpretation of the findings (Elo et al., 2014). The process of member checking included sending each participant a one-to-two-page document which summarized the main ideas across interviews in that participant group (i.e., students with IDD, unaffiliated peers, peer mentors). For students with IDD, I met with students individually and provided a modified member check summary, which included a PowerPoint presentation written in plain language. I asked each participant to review the summary and respond to the following questions: (a) To what extent does this summary reflect your thoughts and experiences and (b) Is there anything you would like to change? A total of three peer mentors, three unaffiliated undergraduates, and one student with IDD responded to member checks, confirming that the summaries represented their thoughts and experiences well. No one responded to the member checks with any additional comments or concerns.

Importantly, we used several strategies to enhance trustworthiness, including: (a) using a team-based approach with triangulation across researchers through collaboration and peer debriefing, (b) being reflexive about our identities and potential biases, (c) conducting iterative analysis with three rounds of coding and efforts to search for confirming and disconfirming evidence, (d) integrating member checking into the

research process, and (e) reporting findings through thick, detailed descriptions (Leko et al., 2021).

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Findings are organized based on the research questions, specifically related to (a) the attitudes or definitions that each student group held about *disability*, *inclusion*, and *belonging*, and (b) the experiences of students with IDD and their university peers related to their interactions and relationships with one another. Responses are described below, using pseudonyms for participants (Table 1).

Attitudes About Disability, Inclusion, and Belonging

This section describes the personal definitions held by students across the three groups about disability, inclusion, and belonging.

Defining Disability

Students' ways of defining disability were fairly aligned across the three groups (i.e., students with IDD, peer mentors, other peers), although peer mentors and unaffiliated undergraduate students appeared to be more nervous to try to define disability than students with IDD who were in the IPSE. Many peer mentors and other undergraduate students used the euphemism "differently-abled," or something similar, to define disability. Zoe (a peer mentor) mentioned how disability refers to "some type of different ability to do something," pointing out how actions may be "different…than what's typically seen." Similarly, Sam (an unaffiliated undergraduate student) mentioned,

"I think that a disability could be anything that differentiates an individual from the neuro-physical, typical individual."

Sam's definition emphasized something that often came up for peer mentors and other unaffiliated peers as they explained their view on disability: norms and standards. Will (an unaffiliated undergraduate student) shared that disability refers to a person who is "unable to perform like… normative tasks" or who may not be able to "function normally in society." In the same way, Emma (an unaffiliated undergraduate student) shared that a disability is "anything that diverges from what a stereotypical norm would be," later mentioning that coming up with a singular definition of disability was "really hard."

Similar to Emma, many peer mentors and other undergraduate students noted that they found it hard to define or describe what they thought a disability was, particularly because the scope of different disabilities made it difficult to form a succinct definition. Amy (an unaffiliated undergraduate student) shared:

> It's difficult because there's so much variety. Even people with like the same label, or
> same condition, or whatever, like, could have vastly different experiences. So, I think trying to find the words like conceptualize these very broad things is like very difficult.

Anna (a peer mentor) shared that as a student majoring in special education for students with high-incidence disabilities, she found it difficult to define disability, saying "in the high incidence realm… disability looks very different." Aside from the range of disabilities, some participants described that they were afraid or nervous to inadvertently

use harmful or derogatory language. Zoe (a peer mentor) shared how she "loved people with disabilities so much" that she didn't want to "say something that would upset that community." Similarly, Madison (a peer mentor) mentioned that it's difficult to "define it especially without like knowing exactly what it is," mainly because "you don't want to accidentally offend someone by using the wrong definition."

Students with IDD who were enrolled in the IPSE were the most confident when they were talking about and defining disability, more than their university peers. Each participant disclosed their diagnosis, as well as any co-existing conditions. Peter (a student with IDD) shared that his "learning differences" can make it "hard to read" and "hard to see things," but he also acknowledged that he has to "be nice and all that and treat them all the same" when interacting with other students in the IPSE program. Emily (a student with IDD) disclosed her diagnosis of "Down syndrome," noting how she's become empowered to educate those around her:

> So, with more people with disabilities, they can just share what they have [their diagnosis]. And that's what I consider—people that do have disabilities, they can just show people how much they have and love about their disability. And I still share it a lot with people who don't have disabilities.

Defining Inclusion

Participants across the three groups also aligned in how they defined or viewed *inclusion*. Across participant groups, inclusion was sometimes hard to put words to, but typically defined in terms of physical actions or efforts. For instance, many peer mentors and unaffiliated peers used terms like being "invited" and "involved" to describe

inclusion. Madison (a peer mentor) explained, "When I think of inclusion, I think a lot more about actually— people, like, outwardly extending the offer or feeling like— inviting everyone, I guess." Yet, inclusion also seemed difficult for peer mentors and unaffiliated students to define. Kate (an unaffiliated undergraduate student) shared how she "tried to think of a word besides being included," with similar sentiments being shared by others. The term "being included" was mentioned by many participants as what inclusion actually meant, highlighting that it was often challenging for them to find the words they wanted to use. For instance, Sam (an unaffiliated undergraduate student) shared, "So, I think inclusion to me means finding a place and being included."

Similar to their university peers, students with IDD often used the term "included" to define inclusion. One participant who was enrolled in the IPSE (Liz) used references to specific activities to define inclusion. She shared, "I think when we did Special Olympics every Monday, we did basketball, and I love playing basketball… I just want people to feel included and have fun." Jake (a student with IDD) noted, "Inclusion means like, if you are involved with someone. Like I'm include[d] when people always talk to me. And because I want to be more included instead of me left out [*sic*]."

Across all three groups of students, it was clear that they believed inclusion required effort and intention, not just proximity and presence. Sam (an unaffiliated undergraduate student) explained this by contrasting the terms diversity and inclusion. She explained: "So, you know, there's diversity, which is, you know, whenever you have a bunch of differences together. And inclusion is when you're actually like—you're

seeking to bring those people in." Similarly, Emma (an unaffiliated undergraduate

student) stated:

> Inclusion, to me means taking steps and implementing policies to, I guess, for lack of a better word, like include diverse groups of students— whether they're differently abled, come from different backgrounds, have different customs and, I guess, ways of life.

As a point of difference across participants, some peer mentors and unaffiliated peers

stated that inclusion was really about actions or policies, rather being the term used to

describe the internal feelings of a person. Others thought of inclusion as involving both

those actions and the positive emotions of the individual person that flowed from the

actions. For instance, Kate (an unaffiliated undergraduate student) shared that inclusion is

"not necessarily a feeling," but it is "being invited into a space or community." Taylor

(an unaffiliated undergraduate student) shared that inclusion is "creating spaces" where

everybody "add[s] value... and feels comfortable."

Defining Belonging

Participants across groups defined *belonging* as a deeply emotional experience—

ultimately about the feelings and lived experience of the individual person within a

group. Some students shared that belonging is a natural and important extension of

inclusion. For instance, Anna (a peer mentor) mentioned, "I think belonging goes with

inclusion. But more in the emotional sense of how you feel once you are included…

feeling as though you're comfortable in a space and supported." Similarly, Savannah (a

peer mentor) shared, "Inclusion is something that comes from like a group—like you are

being included. Versus belonging is the sense you feel in yourself when you are included."

Although participants emphasized that belonging was about a person's lived experiences, they also defined belonging similarly to inclusion as an ongoing process that is reliant on effort from others. Sarah (an unaffiliated undergraduate student) noted that inclusion is an "initial step" towards belonging, but feelings of comfort and security often "come in later." In the same way, Sarah shared how "even if you're included, you may not feel like you belong." To experience belonging, she explained that "you need to actually form a connection with other people," and "have something similar with them."

The notion of having something in common with other friends was commonly talked about by students within the IPSE program as an important part of belonging. Emily (a student with IDD) shared that knowing what the other peer mentors are doing helped her to feel a sense of connectedness to the community, and thus feel like she belongs. Similarly, Jake (a student with IDD) mentioned that he "wants to be friends with everybody," emphasizing the importance of relationships within belonging. Peter (a student with IDD) explained that some people "belong together," noting when he spends time with others he feels "happy" and "cheerful."

Across all three participant groups, the experience of belonging was identified as an essential part of humanity. Liz (a student with IDD) shared that she wanted to be "part of something," revealing an innate desire to connect with others. Similarly, Grace (a peer mentor) shared that the value of being "known by others" can be a "socially validating"

experience. When asked about her feelings towards belonging, Emily (a student with IDD) explained, "I feel good. It makes me feel— Want to share the world with everybody and including my friends too."

<div align="center">

Experiences Related to Interactions and
Relationships with One Another

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The four themes about students' interactions and relationships with one another were: (a) Campus involvement, b) Social interactions, c) Relationships, and d) Campus culture. Each theme is described below.

Campus Involvement

Campus involvement looked quite a bit different for peer mentors and the other unaffiliated peers than for students with IDD enrolled in the IPSE program. Peer mentors were highly active on campus, as indicated by them holding leadership positions, being involved in Greek Life, and engaging in academic clubs. Many leadership positions that peer mentors held were directly tied to disability-related organizations. Madison (a peer mentor) talked about how she's a "current lead" as a peer mentor, while also serving on "exec with Special Olympics." Similarly, Zoe (a peer mentor) had served a variety of roles within the IPSE program, including being a "workout buddy", "daily planner," and "tutor." Aside from her obligations in the IPSE program, she described being involved with "Special Olympics once a week" which has "been so fun."

Undergraduate students who were not formally affiliated with the IPSE program boasted similar campus involvements. Amy shared:

So, I've been over-involved since I got here. I was part of four different dance groups... Outside of that, I have conducted research for the last like two and a half years. I've served as a peer reviewer for the [undergraduate research journal]. And I've been in a couple of different cultural orgs. So, this year, I was president for the [club #1], co-president for [club #2], Senior Advisor for [club #3], and there are a couple other things, but those are like the most notable thing.

Amy (an unaffiliated undergraduate student) was among many of the university peers who described themselves as being "over-involved." Taylor (an unaffiliated undergraduate student) talked about helping her professor "write his next book," aside from "being a part of athletics for the past four years." Similar to peer mentors, most of the participating university peers who were not formally affiliated with the IPSE program described holding leadership positions. For instance, Sam (an unaffiliated undergraduate student) noted being "VP of Finance and Chapter President" of her sorority and serving on the school newspaper in her earlier years at the university.

Although participating university peers were highly engaged on campus, students with IDD described participating in fewer clubs and organizations, typically in organizations specifically designed for students with disabilities (e.g., Special Olympics and Best Buddies). For instance, Cat (a student with IDD) explained "I like to hang out with my Best Buddies. My best— they help me with my homework and stuff." Similarly, Peter (a student with IDD) shared,

And then I eventually got into Special Olympics last March. That was fun. I enjoyed that. And I'm still continuing that. I applied to be president for the fall, which I hope I will hear back. I'm also part of Best Buddies, so different kinds of organizations I really enjoy.

Outside of Best Buddies or Special Olympics, the IPSE program hosted activities and events for its members. Emily (a student with IDD) mentioned, "We do a lot. We been doing clubs, we go to mixers, parties, everything. It's great." Two students with IDD mentioned participation in clubs or organizations beyond those designed specifically for students with disabilities. Emily (a student with IDD) shared her involvement with a dance group and noted that "it's really fun to do." Similarly, Jake (a student with IDD) described his involvement in "clubs, golf, and other stuff, too."

Social Interactions

Peer mentors described interacting with students in the IPSE program more than university peers who were not affiliated with the program. Some mentors saw students in the IPSE program multiple times per week. For instance, Anna (a peer mentor) shared that she saw students in the IPSE "at least once a day" due to her various roles as a mentor. Aside from role-related duties as a peer mentor, Anna mentioned that she had "just become friends" with her mentees, describing that they "hang out" or greet each other "in passing." Similarly, Grace (a peer mentor) mentioned:

> Probably, like three or four days a week. I see students [in the IPSE program] for at least an hour. And sometimes it's their tutoring, but sometimes it's just from bumping into them around campus or planning to go to events together.

However, university peers who were not affiliated with the IPSE program described having limited interactions with students with IDD on campus. For several of the unaffiliated university peers, the only social interactions that they had were in the classroom. Will (an unaffiliated undergraduate student) shared, "I only know one student

[with IDD] in one of my classes. I don't think there's a lot of interaction at all." In the same way, Taylor (an unaffiliated undergraduate student) mentioned, "I had a class with a student [with IDD] that was like my tablemate. … Before that, I actually didn't have a student in my classes before. But I would say limited interaction."

Outside the classroom, when unaffiliated university peers did describe interacting with students in the IPSE program, these interactions typically took place in specific settings. Programming for students with IDD within the IPSE often took place in one specific area of the physical college campus. This location, often called "the Commons" by students, was where the College of Education and Human Development and freshman housing (for all undergraduate students) were located; but, it was separated geographically from the rest of the main campus of the university. As a result, several participants mentioned that they felt students with IDD rarely ventured outside of their campus hub on "the Commons". For instance, Amy (an unaffiliated undergraduate student) described:

> I think it takes a bit more effort to like, actually be in their like, area "the Commons." And like to be able to have those conversations with them. Especially since like, they're primarily based over here in "the Commons", where it's like, most of my stuff is on [other area of campus].

Many of the students with IDD who were enrolled in the IPSE program described their own feelings of comfort for "the Commons." Peter (a student with IDD) mentioned, "So, I am mostly on "the Commons…" because we're always on "the Commons." Other students shared that they liked the social interactions that they had when they were on

"the Commons." Liz (a student with IDD) described, "So, I think before or after classes, I was going in "the Commons" and hanging out with my friends."

Some university peers felt uncomfortable during interactions with their fellow university students with IDD, particularly because they felt that the students with IDD lacked social boundaries. For instance, Zoe (a peer mentor) explained, "But I feel like, in all honesty, sometimes it's just like, I'll be trying to go to "the Commons" gym to work out and like, next thing I know, I'll look to my left, and one of the students [with IDD] like, will be there like trying to talk to me. And it's like, hey, like, can I have like 10 minutes to just, like, finish my workout or whatever." University peers also sometimes described negative stereotyping of students with IDD that they witnessed on campus. Emma (an unaffiliated undergraduate student) mentioned how she had overheard "pretty negative comments about maybe, like the volume of their interaction, or like their conversations or their appearances."

Despite the few negative experiences, many interactions between students with IDD and university peers (including both peer mentors and unaffiliated peers) were well-received. Generally, conversational content was described as being light-hearted and surface-level. Anna (a peer mentor) shared, "A lot of times, we talk about our weekends, especially because it's on a Monday. Kind of catch up. We talk a lot about their social life… I don't know, just really casual conversation."

Given the time that they spent with students with IDD, peer mentors often experienced conversations with students in the IPSE program that went much deeper than

interactions for university peers who were not affiliated with the program. Peer mentors often described interactions that would go beyond talking about daily events or the support they needed to provide in their role (e.g., tutor, workout buddy). For instance, Zoe (a peer mentor) explained how "some of my students will bring up deeper things," describing an experience where a student with IDD disclosed the death of a loved one. For students with IDD who were in the IPSE program, some of these students wanted to be able to have conversations and interactions that went beyond surface-level conversations with their university peers, including peers who were not peer mentors with the program. Jake (a student with IDD) mentioned, "Um, actually getting to know about their backstories. You know, because I know about [university peers unaffiliated with the IPSE], and other friends. I know them. But um, I don't know what their backstories are." For other students with IDD, peer mentors and similar relationships (e.g., Best Buddies) provided opportunities for meaningful interactions. Emily (a student with IDD) talked about enjoying interactions with her peer mentors, which she explained were initiated equally by her and her peer mentors:

> I decide to see them when they walk by. Or, if they were in the [gym name] with me or something, they may just come over. They tutor me, or they also work out with me. Or all these things.

Many unaffiliated university peers shared how their own comfort with disability played a significant role in their interactions or lack thereof. Students noted that they sometimes had to overcome nervousness. For example, Sam (an unaffiliated undergraduate student) mentioned that it "took like, time to, like, get to a place where I felt like…empowered.

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Like, I know how to do this, I can have a relationship, you know, with anyone." Sam

went on to share that her lack of exposure to students with IDD may have affected her

initial interactions:

> Like I'm qualified to go say hi to someone, or have a conversation with someone, even if I'm not, you know, a peer mentor or something like that. And that was more of a thing of like getting past this barrier of, "Oh, this isn't like something I should be doing. I'm not qualified", as opposed to "I can't do it."

Relationships

Many peer mentors and other undergraduate students discussed that developing

deeper relationships with students with IDD at the university depended on whether there

was enough opportunity to engage and get to know one another. Sarah (an unaffiliated

undergraduate student) shared that "unless you're in an organization that's kind of like

directly involved with students [with IDD], it is a little bit more difficult [to build

relationships]." Anna (a peer mentor) described similar feelings: "I think that if you don't

have friends who are [peer mentors], or if you're not a [peer mentor], it'd be hard to

understand, like, what the [IPSE] program even is." Given their limited interactions,

undergraduate peers who were not affiliated with the IPSE program felt they usually had

surface-level relationships with students with IDD. Kate (an unaffiliated undergraduate

student) shared that "it's difficult to get beyond…superficial type of conversation" given

the contexts in which she interacts with students with IDD. Yet, Kate went on to mention

the opportunities she did have to get to know students with IDD, saying:

> My best friend here [at the university]… she's, like, super involved with [name of peer mentor program]. And so, she'll bring her students to, like, to the dining hall, or like, I'll go to her events with her or whatever… I just don't think we do it enough.

Other undergraduate students and peer mentors felt that the opportunity to befriend students with IDD depended on the individual as much as the opportunity. Sarah (an unaffiliated undergraduate student) noted that her relationships with students in the IPSE program depended on "personality" and "vibes." Some students, like Will (an unaffiliated undergraduate student), shared that creating friendships with students with IDD was similar to how he felt about becoming friends with neurotypical peers. Specifically, he described that any difficulty or ease with making friends with students in the IPSE program was "the same as any other person," and built on things like personality and finding shared interests.

Other university peers (including peer mentors and peers unaffiliated with the IPSE) felt that, in some ways, it was easier to start to get to know students with IDD in the IPSE because they were often more outgoing and extroverted than other students. Mia (a peer mentor) shared:

> If anything, it's easier to get along with students [with IDD] than, like the general student body because…they would usually approach me and introduce themselves to me and with other, like, people on campus… it's sort of can be like, clique-y. But that is not the case with this group of kids.

Similarly, Savannah (a peer mentor) mentioned that she felt "it's a little bit easier" to have deeper conversations with students in the IPSE, noting that, in her experience, her fellow university students with IDD were often "more willing to share their problems…

than what people would perceive as an average student." This sentiment seemed to be shared by a majority of peer mentors, as Zoe (a peer mentor) mentioned that "it's really easy" to get to know students with IDD "compared to other students."

Similarly, participating students with IDD who were enrolled in the IPSE felt that they were open with others and wanted to make new friends. Cat (a student with IDD) mentioned that her disability makes her "more outgoing," and she explained that she often introduced herself to new people. Similarly, Peter (a student with IDD) mentioned, "I enjoy meeting all sorts of different people…different kind of cultures, different kind of races, they're human too." As Liz (a student with IDD) mentioned, the ability to "make new friends really easily" seemed to span across students with IDD and had a positive impact on their relationships with peers.

Campus Culture

Across interviews with peer mentors and other undergraduate peers, there was an underlying theme of otherness even as students discussed their interactions with relationships with students with IDD in the IPSE program. Positively, peer mentors described belonging for students with IDD as existing within certain programs or organizations. But they sometimes questioned whether students with IDD experienced belonging within the full university culture. Madison (a peer mentor) shared: "I think within the [IPSE], they feel a lot of belonging… Whereas I've been to other events [on campus] where I think they feel a little bit more isolated." Similarly, Zoe (a peer mentor) felt like the programs for students with IDD are its "own college," particularly relating

the limited way that the IPSE program is perceived as being integrated within the broader campus community. Jill (an unaffiliated undergraduate student) shared that she did not see a "huge integration" of students with IDD in the "rest of the student population." As a result, wondered if students with IDD "wouldn't always feel a sense of belonging" outside of their programming. Explaining that her own interactions with students with IDD have been "limited," Kate (an unaffiliated undergraduate student) felt that the university has a "long way to go" before students with IDD are "valued as a core element of the general student body."

Although many students shared critical perspectives, others praised the university for its inclusive efforts. Taylor (an unaffiliated undergraduate student) shared how having an IPSE program is "very progressive," going on to say that it is a "unique program that not a lot of universities have." Similarly, Emma (an unaffiliated undergraduate student) attributed her experience at the university to supporting her understanding and acceptance of people with disabilities, saying that "being around more diverse individuals" broadened her perspective. Emma also praised the university for creating "a sense of belonging" among its students. Similarly, Madison (a peer mentor) shared that specific clubs or organizations have helped students with IDD to "branch out of their bubble," especially through opportunities to meet and get to know the friends of peer mentors.

Although the undergraduate students who were peer mentors and who were not affiliated with the IPSE had mixed feelings about the campus culture and the extent to which students with IDD might have felt they belonged, students with IDD themselves

expressed a strong sense of belonging. Emily (a student with IDD) noted that her relationships with other students have caused her to "belong with other people," going on to say that she feels she "belongs in their minds." Similarly, Jake (a student with IDD) attributed his "teachers and friends" to his feelings of belonging, explaining that they help him do "homework and stuff." Jake went on to say that his friends teach him "how to be loved", particularly when "interacting with other people." Each student with IDD, regardless of involvement level or class year, attributed relationships as the main facilitator of their feelings of belonging. Similar to Emily and Jake, Cat (a student with IDD) shared that her friends bring her "joy and happiness." Aside from peer mentors and other undergraduate students, they also talked about being positively impacted by relationships with campus personnel. Peter (a student with IDD) shared that his on-campus job led him to a "good friendship," noting that their "strong connection" has taught him important "life lessons."

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Findings

Across the country, IPSE programs support inclusive efforts for students with IDD on college campuses (Grigal et al., 2022). As IPSE programs continue to grow, it is important to understand how inclusion is carried out in practice in institutes of higher education, and how this is experienced by different student groups. This study aimed to build on existing research on inclusion and belonging at the university level by examining the perspectives of students with IDD and their peers as they relate to disability, inclusion, and belonging—particularly by exploring the ways that these students experience social interactions and relationships with one another.

One of the first important findings from this research was that students across participant groups held similar attitudes towards disability, inclusion, and belonging. Related to the notion of inclusion, students across groups attributed action words to their definitions, such as by talking about making effort to create a physical and emotional space that welcomed diverse students. Some students, particularly peer mentors, went on to say that inclusion can be defined as specifically creating equitable spaces by providing equal opportunities to students who might otherwise be marginalized. These student responses are consistent with other research that has addressed the attitudes of

stakeholders at other universities. For example, Carter & McCabe (2020) found that peer mentors and other undergraduate students who were not affiliated with IPSE programs all value inclusive spaces, and they were in support of having equitable spaces on their campuses.

Similarly, the ways that students with IDD and their peers defined belonging also connected to previous literature, in the way that they described belonging as an internal feeling that often resulted from meaningful inclusion. Importantly, students with IDD closely linked belonging with their social relationships and friendships, which has also been reflected in prior research (Long & Guo, 2023). When thinking about perceptions of disability, peer mentors and other undergraduate students often referred to perceived differences or a stray from societal norms. However, students with IDD typically defined disability by talking about their own identity, and students like Cat and Emily referred to their disability with a sense of pride. These findings contrast those of (Mamboleo et al., 2015) who found that university students with disabilities other than IDD had a low willingness to disclose their diagnosis with others.

Second, our findings suggested that while the general attitudes were similar across participant groups about inclusion, belonging, and disability, the lived experiences were quite different. Peer mentors described that they had many opportunities to engage with students with IDD within mentoring sessions or structured events provided by the IPSE program. As a result, these students described their interactions as being frequent and overwhelmingly positive, although it is important to note that one peer mentor (Zoe) did

share a challenging experience in regard to social boundaries. This aligns with prior

research which has also found that peer mentors engage with students with IDD more

frequently than other university students, due to their roles and the contexts in which they

interact (Carter et al., 2018). Yet, undergraduate students who were not affiliated with the

IPSE reported limited interactions with students with IDD on their college campus, and

they also explained that few interactions went beyond surface level conversation.

Unaffiliated peers commonly referred to their opportunities to interact with students with

IDD as being limited to interactions on "the Commons," which was not necessarily the

place where they spent a lot of time. These findings are consistent with Carter & McCabe

(2021) who found that students with IDD may experience exclusion in different natural

settings on the college campus, such as in dining halls, as well as challenges befriending

students with IDD in inclusive courses. This study extends prior research in important

ways because there is limited research exists that explores the perspectives of university-

age students who are unaffiliated with IPSE programs about challenges or facilitators to

positive interactions and relationships with students with IDD.

      Generally, students with IDD described an overwhelming sense of gratitude for

their peers. Although some undergraduate students described a sense of hesitancy when

interacting with students with IDD, students enrolled in the IPSE program unabashedly

shared their positive experiences, particularly with peer mentors. Outside of time spent

with peer mentors, students with IDD did not mention engaging with other undergraduate

students who were not affiliated with the IPSE program, except for Jake. These findings

are consistent with those of Wilt and Morningstar (2020) who found that students with

IDD were generally reliant on peer mentors for social engagement on the college campus.

Although aligned with the existing literature in this way, our findings also extend this

literature giving insight into the views of each of these three student groups, including

peers who are not affiliated with the IPSE program, who have rarely been considered in

prior literature.

Third, our findings highlighted the challenges that might impact the formation of

friendships between students with and without IDD on college campuses with IPSE

programs that relate to the broader campus culture. Many undergraduate peers (both peer

mentors and unaffiliated peers) noted a sense of otherness for students with IDD within

the broader campus culture. For instance, peer mentors sometimes talked about how a

positive aspect of the IPSE program was that it created a strong social network for

students with IDD; but they also suggested that this might inadvertently lead to

segregation from other campus activities and relationships. As Kate mentioned, she had

opportunities to meet students with IDD by being friends with peer mentors with the

program, but this still indicated that the main 'ties' for students with IDD were within the

IPSE program, rather than the campus community as a whole. These findings are

consistent with other prior research. For instance, Grigal et al. (2018) found that IPSE

programs attempt to integrate students with IDD into university spaces, but it is typically

done under the guise of the program itself, rather than organic involvement and

membership. As some students (peer mentors and unaffiliated students) mentioned in this

study, the opportunity to befriend students with IDD felt limited if they participated in disability-related organizations such as Best Buddies or Special Olympics.

For some undergraduate students, particularly those without training in special education or other disability-related fields, confidence and comfort being around people with disabilities played a role in whether they engaged with students with IDD. Still, many peer mentors and other undergraduate students noted a desire to meaningfully interact with students with IDD—even though they sometimes felt uncomfortable. Some participants shared that they wanted to see more students with IDD living the "college experience," particularly through campus involvement and participation in different events. Similarly, Gibbons et al. (2015) found that college students strongly disagreed that students with IDD should only interact with students with disabilities. Instead, a majority of students in their study viewed participation of fellow college students with IDD in clubs and organizations as being positive. Thus, when presented with the broader literature, our findings suggest that university students are well intended about inclusion of young adults with IDD in higher education. But, university systems may be creating unintentional barriers for meaningful interactions among students with and without IDD that will take broader systems-level change to address.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

There are several limitations to this research that also pose important directions for future research. First, qualitative research has strengths in offering rich, contextualized findings, but this also means that our sample was limited to one

university. Attitudes and practices may differ at other institutions, and so additional research is needed to explore similar research questions at other institutes of higher education with IPSE programs, particularly in other states. Second, our sample did not reflect the demographics of the broader student population. We overrepresented female participants (85% identified as female across groups), and so in future studies, it is important for researchers to explore the experiences of all genders, including male students and those who identify as transgender or non-binary. Furthermore, our sample was not representative of the student population in regard to area of study, with approximately half of participants majoring in a program offered by the College of Education and Human Development (e.g., special education). To gather insight from a variety of educational backgrounds, researchers should expand recruitment efforts across all majors and concentrations. Third, we solely used interview data to explore responses, but future research using other methods (e.g., surveys, observations) could help in gaining a more comprehensive understanding of students' attitudes and experiences. Such future research should continue to attend to was to increase accessibility for students with IDD to participate in research, both as research participants and in collaborative research designs (e.g., as co-researchers).

Implications for Practice

Findings from this study indicate the important role of IPSE programs in providing opportunities for students with IDD to attend college alongside their peers without IDD. However, inclusion is more than presence. This means that the mere presence of IPSE programs on college campuses may not be enough to facilitate strong relationships among students with and without disabilities. In this study, students with IDD shared strong feelings of belonging within IPSE programming, but students who were part of the broader student population raised questions about the extent to which students in the IPSE program were fully included in campus life and culture. The extent to which unaffiliated undergraduate students befriended students with IDD appeared to be closely tied to whether they had opportunities and confidence to engage with their fellow university classmates with IDD. But, for many undergraduate students, both these opportunities and the comfort in doing this was limited. Interestingly, even though these perceptions of experiences varied, students across student groups generally shared understanding of disability, inclusion, and belonging as concepts.

These findings are important for many different stakeholders, including IPSE staff and university administrators. For IPSE staff, one of the most important findings relates to the perceived disconnect across student groups in experiences on campus, particularly differences for students with IDD and their fellow undergraduate students who were not affiliated with the IPSE in any way. It is important for staff to utilize the influence they have in their role to support authentic relationships for students with IDD in IPSE

programs, especially as they relate to opportunities for students to have meaningful

campus involvement. Given the students' desire to connect across groups, and the

importance of shared interest and commonalities for authentic relationships (Kossinets &

Watts, 2009), it is important that IPSE staff leverage points of individual connections

between students to foster integration into various parts of the campus community.

Currently, perceptions of likeness (or difference) seem to be the driving force behind

unintentional exclusion. For instance, peer mentors and students with IDD described

being in social networks outside of the general student population, which had ties based

on perceptions of similarity and shared interest. However, the importance of

commonality and shared interest can also be used by IPSE staff to guide future inclusion

practices for strengthening relationships, such as by seeking to understand the individual

interests of their students and then using these strengths and characteristics to connect

students to like-minded groups or people outside of the program.

Conclusion

As IPSE programs continue to grow, it is important for stakeholders to consider

the needs of all university students, including by fostering meaningful connections and

relationships across groups. The views expressed in this study suggest that university

students across three diverse groups view inclusion and belonging as a necessary part of

the human experience. But, they viewed their experiences interacting and relating with

one another in different ways—with traditional undergraduate students being more

questioning about how included students with IDD were than students with IDD

themselves. These attitudes must be attended to in the policies and practices of inclusive

college campuses to ensure authentic relationships and meaningful change.

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