

“Realize That Students Are Capable”: Perspectives of Students With Intellectual Disability on Their College Experiences

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Introduction

As the enrollment of students with intellectual disability in colleges and universities increases, so does the need to evaluate existing postsecondary education programs for students with intellectual disability from multiple perspectives. These programs are designed for students with intellectual disability, and the perspectives of students with intellectual disability should be at the center of program development, evaluation, and improvement. Implementation of new and revised programming elements should support students’ postsecondary education and employment desires, individual autonomy, and overall personal development. Findings from postsecondary education research that include the voices and/or perspectives of students with intellectual disability are especially useful in understanding aspects of programs that enable independence and support a pathway for sustainable employment and career building for students with intellectual disability. As we develop and evaluate programs, we must consider students’ perspectives on known program elements that work well and elements that need improvement.

To support the consideration of student voices in program development and evaluation, we conducted a brief literature review of articles that included the voices and perspectives of college students or college graduates with intellectual disability. The aim of this review was to identify common program elements or experiences that students (1) reflected on positively and/or (2) could be improved upon. In this Insight Brief, we summarize the findings from our research review. We end with a summary of recommendations made by or based on the perspectives of students with intellectual disability that can be used to improve postsecondary education programs.

Method

As part of its charge to disseminate research and best practices related to improving postsecondary education for students with intellectual disability, the Think College Inclusive Higher Education Network compiled a list of published research on postsecondary education for students with intellectual disability. Each article in this list was coded by two trained members of the research team for study purpose and design type. All disagreements were discussed until 100% agreement was reached. From the full list, we initially identified 21 research articles that included the perspectives of students with intellectual disability. Within these 21 articles, we then looked for perspectives of students on programming that either worked well or could be improved on and found that students provided recommendations in nine of the 21 articles.

We isolated 44 quotes or summarizations of student responses related to aspects of their postsecondary education experience in these nine articles. Two members of the research team developed themes and subthemes, then grouped the statements by theme. We identified two overarching themes with subthemes:

1. defying low expectations
 - a. employment and preparation for work
 - b. social inclusion
2. independence/interdependence
 - a. the role of program staff
 - b. the role of peer mentors
 - c. the role of families

As we develop and evaluate programs, we must consider students’ perspectives on known program elements that work well and elements that need improvement.

RESEARCH ARTICLES REVIEWED (IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER):

Bacon, J., & Baglieri, S. (2021). Perspectives of students labeled intellectually disabled at college: Using disability studies in education as a lens to contemplate inclusive postsecondary education. *Journal of Disability Studies in Education*, 2(1), 27–49.

- Perspectives from 31 adult-aged students in regional day programs or a high school transition program partnering with a 4-year university
- Evaluated the experiences of students with intellectual disability who participated in a college program on relationships and interdependence

Eisenman, L. T., Rolón-Dow, R., Freedman, B., Davison, A., & Yates, N. (2020). “Disabled or not, people just want to feel welcome”: Stories of microaggressions and microaffirmations from college students with intellectual disability. *Critical Education*, 11(17), 1–21. <http://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/criticaled/article/view/186499>

- Perspectives from nine graduates of a 2-year program
- Explored student reflections of campus encounters through frameworks of microaggressions and microaffirmations

Feathers, K. H., & Schadler, D. E. (2020). Transition programs for individuals with disabilities: A post-secondary college experience leading to greater independence in life and work. *Journal of the American Academy of Special Education Professionals*, Winter 2020, 7–37.

- Perspectives from five students enrolled or recently graduated from a high school transition program on a university campus
- Analyzed students’ perception of their lives related to their sense of self, relationships, self-advocacy, and choice making

Francis, G. L., Reed, A. S., & Howard, M. E. (2020). Interactions with and between families and professionals in college: Perspectives of young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. *Inclusion*, 8(2), 163–179. <https://doi.org/10.1352/2326-6988-8.2.163>

- Perspectives from 10 program graduates in 2- and 4-year programs across the country
- Examined the perspectives of program graduates regarding their interactions with families and program staff as well as students’ perceptions regarding the interactions between families and program staff

Love, K., & Mock, M. (2018). Participatory action research and student perspectives in a rural postsecondary education program. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 38(1), 43–52. <https://doi.org/10.1177/8756870518783707>

- Perspectives from six students in a 4-year program
- Shared student experiences of attending a postsecondary program in a rural region

Miller, A. L., & Chun, M. (2022). Perspectives of two college students labeled with intellectual disability: Supports during the moving in and through stages of transition. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 42(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v42i1.7516>

- Perspectives from three students in a 2-year program
- Evaluated how students with intellectual disability view and interact with their support systems as they transition into being college students

Oakes, L. R., & Thorpe, S. (2019). The sexual health needs and perspectives of college students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities and their support staff: A brief report. *Sexuality & Disability*, 37(4), 587–598. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11195-019-09602-6>

- Perspectives from four students in a 4-year program
- Examined the sexual health knowledge and access to resources for students with intellectual disability in a postsecondary program and program staff

Paiewonsky, M. (2011). Hitting the reset button on education: Student reports on going to college. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 34(1), 31–44. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0885728811399277>

- Perspectives from nine adult-aged students concurrently enrolled in a high school transition program and community college
- Used VoiceThread, a digital storytelling website, for students with intellectual disability to document their experiences in a postsecondary education program.

Wilt, C. L., & Morningstar, M. E. (2020). Student perspectives on peer mentoring in an inclusive postsecondary education context. *Journal of Inclusive Postsecondary Education*, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.13021/jipe.2020.2461>

- Perspectives from five students in a 2-year program
- Evaluated the perspectives of students with intellectual disability and peer mentors on their relationship and experiences in the program

Findings

Here we have included summaries from the articles we reviewed about program elements or experiences that students reflected on positively and/or that could be improved upon.

Theme: Defying low expectations
Subtheme: “I would like to work there and get paid”
Articles included: Francis et al. (2020); Love and Mock (2018); Miller and Chun (2022)

Three studies highlighted practices in employment and preparation for work that show students’ recognition of the expectations held for them by program staff and others. Programs typically prepare students with intellectual disability for employment through exposure to different job sectors, enrollment in courses that lead to a career path, and unpaid/paid internship or employment experiences (Domin et al., 2020). In the articles reviewed, students with intellectual disability recognized the concrete skills learned in their respective programs that either did or will help them gain employment. For example, in Love and Mock (2018), one student, John, remarked that he learned “how to interview for a job” and Monica, shared that she learned “how to get a job” (p. 5). In Francis et al. (2020), Christian described the importance of his employment preparation experience in the program when staff helped him “set goals of what [he] wanted to achieve” (p. 170). Lennon also shared that program staff “helped [him] figure out how to plan a resume, how to do an interview, and how to start the process of interviewing” (Francis et al., 2020, p. 170).

John said, “I don’t like the volunteer part because I have been volunteering at the [store], but I would like to work there and get paid”

Though unpaid work experiences (e.g., volunteering or internships) are not uncommon for college students, they often have limited potential to lead to paid employment (Grigal et al., 2019). The perspectives of students interviewed by Love and Mock (2018) indicate that students feel programs may overuse unpaid experiences, which sends the message that students with intellectual disability cannot feasibly engage in paid work experience, even though they are working as anyone else would. Students in this study recognized a main purpose of attending college was to pursue paid employment, but most felt these opportunities were not available to them during their time in college despite being prepared for employment throughout. For example, John and Monica also agreed that though they worked, they didn’t feel as if they learned specific employment skills. Monica stated, “just because I did jobs doesn’t mean I learned stuff” (Love & Mock, 2018, p. 6). Students also recognized that work should result in pay and unpaid employment was not a valued experience that led to paid employment:

Monica shared, “I try to get a job, but it’s not working out.” When asked whether she knew why she had difficulty, she explained, “Because I am in a program, so I don’t get paid for working. I am working for free” ... John said, “I don’t like the volunteer part because I have been volunteering at the [store], but I would like to work there and get paid” ... Christine said she was “still waiting” for paid employment (Love & Mock, 2018, p. 6).

One student interviewed by Miller and Chun (2022), Diana, described this problem as a redundancy in which students were expected to engage in the same or similar experiences over the course of their programs instead of being able to move on when. She said, “I mean, this program, it’s two years... and it’s just a little redundant in my opinion. I think one or two times are fine, but the whole two years, it’s a little repetitive” (Miller & Chun, 2022, p. 1).

Theme: Defying low expectations

Subtheme: Social inclusion

Articles included: Eisenman et al. (2020); Feathers and Schadler (2020); Francis et al. (2020); Wilt and Morningstar (2020)

Social experiences are an essential part of college life, and many programs have embedded social opportunities and requirements (e.g., each student must join a school club). As such, social inclusion emerged as a common subtheme in three of the articles reviewed (Feathers & Schadler, 2020; Francis et al., 2020; Wilt & Morningstar, 2020). Many of the findings in this subtheme center on the unstructured “free” time students have in between classes and events in college. Many students spend their free time in common spaces like the student union, library, or dining hall. However, learning how to comfortably access these spaces and make friends is not always easy, especially for students who are new to campus and the autonomy of college life. Review of the three articles showed peer mentors provide significant social support to students in postsecondary education programs to help them acclimate to these new environments.

Social inclusion support students receive can also lead to increased social independence. For example, students interviewed by Wilt and Morningstar (2020) described feeling more comfortable engaging in new social experiences, like making new friends, when they had the support of their peer mentors. Yet they realized over time, high levels of social support were no longer needed. One student, Lauren, said:

“I think at the beginning of freshman year I know it was emphasized a lot that we try to branch out of... [program] a little bit ... and they... [staff] really wanted us and the peer mentors to try to connect with other people, so I think that helped, because now I’m noticing that I don’t really need that support in that area of like, talking to other people, like I have made friends in my English class this semester and outside of... [program]” (Wilt & Morningstar, 2020, p. 8).

Students with intellectual disability in postsecondary education programs form friendships that leave a lasting impression, especially when students are ready to graduate from the program. A student in Feathers and Schadler’s (2020) study said, “it hurts me a lot to say goodbye to my friends because my friends is a really big deal to me. I wanted to be in college longer” (p. 22).

Students in postsecondary education also shared negative social experiences in various studies. For example, five students featured in Eisenman et al. (2020) shared stories of micro-aggressive incidents they experienced when in their program. One student, Fred, shared that “sometimes people treat people with disabilities as kids. That can make you feel uneasy. You can be 20 years old, and they’ll treat you like a 10-year-old” (p. 6). He experienced this while working in his on-campus job with the assigned job coach. Fred also shared that he has learned to respond to this treatment, should it occur again. Another student, Nicole, also shared a negative experience wherein students who were not in the program were saying “mean words” to her while attending a campus event and said, “look at this kid” to which she responded, “I am not a kid, I’m 21” (p. 8). Nicole was able to debrief about the incident with a friend afterwards. Though both students were able to work through their negative campus experiences, their stories illuminate the “othering” felt when public misperceptions of disability are at the forefront.

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Theme: In[ter]dependence

Subtheme: Peer mentors: “they got to learn from us, too”

Articles included: Bacon and Baglieri, (2022); Miller and Chun (2022); Paiewonsky (2011); Wilt and Morningstar (2020)

Although most articles we reviewed touched upon the idea of independence, four articles (Bacon & Baglieri, 2022; Miller & Chun, 2022; Paiewonsky, 2011; Wilt & Morningstar, 2020) included students’ reflections on the supports provided to them by peer mentors related to independence. The support provided by peer mentors at the beginning of a student’s program helped instill autonomy and confidence in using self-help and problem-solving skills. For example, Bri said:

“In the beginning of the school year the peer mentors would help us, and they would be there by the bus stops and help get us on. Then, I was like okay, I can do this by myself. I got this. It was just kind of cool I could tell them, ‘Hey, I’ll meet you at so and so.’ When in the first week of school I was nervous about [navigating through the campus] because it was huge, but I definitely felt more independent. I could do things on my own without needing help. If I did need help, I would ask for it.” (Miller & Chun, p. 1, 2022).

Because peer mentors are of a similar age and are also students at the college, they can connect with students in postsecondary education programs through shared, college-specific experiences and “passing-on” of tips that make college life easier, more fun, and even less daunting (e.g., how to get from building A to building B faster or which cafeteria has the best cereal options). Most students interviewed by Wilt and Morningstar (2020) described connecting with peer mentors over shared college experiences and recounted simply enjoying time spent with their mentors. One student, Nicole, said “I love hanging out with the peer mentors, and I hung out at the Union, and I just like, I love to hang out with people because I love to join lots of people hanging out with me.



It’s really fun and I really enjoyed it, hanging out with peer mentors” (p. 5).

Students also perceived relationships with their peer mentors as mutually beneficial. For example, Colin recognized his relationship with peer mentors was not one-sided when he stated, “they got to learn from us, too” (Bacon & Baglieri, 2022, p.37). Bri similarly noted the mutual support they provide one another feels natural and respectful of their respective ages. She said, “they’ll help me and then I’ll help them, so it doesn’t feel like I’m a little kid that needs help and babysitting. It’s nice that they treat us all equally” (Miller & Chun, 2022). Multiple students noted their relationships with peer mentors could develop into genuine friendships over time. Diana, a student in a postsecondary education program, said:

“It’s just been a really cool experience to get to know him and vice versa because he knows the troubles I have. He knows, for example, the paper I have to do. I was feeling very low. I was feeling very out of it. I didn’t feel like myself and he just snapped me back to reality and I kind of need that in a friend. And it’s just a friendship that I see growing” (Miller & Chun, 2022, p. 1).

Additionally, we found the concept of interdependence to be just as prominent in these articles. Though students in postsecondary education programs are learning skills to further their independence, they are not engaging in these experiences entirely alone—at least not all the time. Students with intellectual

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disability in these programs are often provided numerous sources of support to help facilitate independence. These supports teach students independence comes in many forms, and independence with support from others (i.e., interdependence) is a normal part of life for many adults both with and without disabilities. For example, Colin said, “I learned that it’s not just all about you, it’s all about how you share. Because you can’t just, like, go run a sports team and say “Okay, this is a one-man crew... It’s a team effort” (Bacon & Baglieri, 2022, p. 38).

Equally important to interdependence is acknowledgement of too much dependence on others. Some of the students in Paiewonsky (2011) agreed mentors and coaches did give more help than was needed at times. While all appreciated the supports provided to them by mentors, too much help made students feel “overprotected” or even “babied” (Paiewonsky, 2011, p. 37). Support from mentors should focus on developing students’ autonomy because, as three students put it, sometimes “you have to learn to do college work on your own” (Paiewonsky, 2011, p. 37).

Theme: In[ter]dependence

Subtheme: Support from program staff

Articles included: Francis et al. (2020); Oakes and Thorpe (2019)

Two articles (Francis et al., 2020; Oakes & Thorpe, 2019) included student’s reflections on support from postsecondary education program staff and its effect on their independence as students and adults. The first article focused on overall student experiences with staff and the second focused on experiences with staff related to sexual education. Both show students acknowledge and even appreciate staff support

when related to future employment aspirations and knowledge and skill acquisition. For example, Christian said program staff helped him “set goals of what [he] wanted to achieve” (Francis et al., 2020, p. 170), which is an important step in deciding future employment and life pathways. Another student, Lennon, reflected staff “helped [him] figure out how to plan a resume, how to do an interview, and how to start the process of interviewing” (Francis et al., 2020, p. 170). The process of setting goals or preparing for a job interview does not have to be done in a vacuum; students should use resources and support available to them when making decisions that will impact their future. Two other students in Francis et al. (2020) shared program staff provided emotional support when they were “feeling stress” (Mae; p. 170) or needing “help[ing] with anxiety” (Gabriel; p. 171). Similarly, students interviewed by Oakes and Thorpe (2019) acknowledged the sexual education support available to them from program staff and some indicated wanting to use that support, given their interest in intimate relationships.

The articles reviewed for this theme depict a struggle between program staff and students on the amount of independence allotted during their time in the program. Students expressed deep frustration when they recounted moments in which their autonomy was not respected. For example, though proper sexual education is important, some students in Oakes and Thorpe (2019) did not feel ready to begin those conversations or lessons with program staff. In interviews, students said, “I am totally uncomfortable with being a part of that”, “a few years from now after college... that is something I will learn more about”, “I will probably learn more right after college”, and “I don’t want to learn more right now, not yet” (p. 594). Students suggested program staff/instructors provide copies of the sexual education materials and resources to them ahead of time as this would help better prepare for these conversations when they were ready to have them.

Students interviewed by Francis et al. (2020) reported instances in which program staff “cross[ed] the line” (Sean; p. 169) by “questioning” (Zach; p. 169) their decisions

or stepping in to resolve students' "personal love business" (Sean; p. 169) and disputes with peers. When support is not sought out by students, this level of intervention from staff was perceived as overbearing and demoralizing to their overall independence. This sentiment is best summarized by Gabriel who believed program staff "did not realize" how intervening in their relationships "hurt" students who have as much of a right to privacy and dignity as any other student (Francis et al., 2020, p. 169).

Students also noted the topic of overstepping personal boundaries in the amount of oversight program staff impose on daily activities, such as getting up on time, taking public transportation, cooking, or going off-campus with friends. Zach described feeling undignified when staff determined he was "not ready" to engage in daily activities even though he "felt ready" (Francis et al., 2020, p. 170). To help resolve these larger issues, students recommended program staff "act very professional" and allow students to sort out their own personal lives and generally enforce "fewer rules" over daily activities. Most importantly, students want program staff to "know ... that [young adults] are independent" and trust that they "know what to do" (Francis et al., 2020, p. 172).

Theme: In[ter]dependence

Subtheme: Role of families

Articles included: Francis et al. (2020); Miller and Chun (2022)

Findings from Francis et al. (2020) and Miller and Chun (2022) provided student perspectives on the role of parents have in students' college experiences. Students featured in both articles appreciated their parents' continuous advocacy and their emotional and financial support. For example, in Miller and Chun (2022), Diana and Bri shared how their parents helped them navigate the college application process. Bri's mom said, "let's just give it a shot" (p. 2) after learning about the program and helped her complete and submit the application. Similarly, Diana said "my mom got me into this program... She realized, 'Hey, this program actually helps her be more independent'" (p. 2). Students

interviewed by Francis et al. (2020) also shared how their parents maintained high expectations for them and provided encouragement as they continued in the postsecondary education program. Some of the students mentioned relying on their parents for emotional support; Mae called her "parents every night just to say goodnight", Lennon called his family daily to "catch up", and Cooper talked to his parents about classes or just to share how his "day is going" (Francis et al., 2020, p. 170). Most students shared how their parents or families provided financial support for tuition, housing, food, and transportation. Sean's parents even "paid a little more money" so he could receive additional specialized services to live independently (Francis et al., 2020, p. 170). Overall, the students showed appreciation for the support provided by their families.

Students were also aware their parents sometimes struggled with allowing them to be independent adults. Christian, a student interviewed in Francis et al. (2020), noted it might be difficult for parents whose children with disabilities want to go to college because "some parents are worried about certain situations and, as a result, do not allow their children to attend college" (p. 169). Gabriel similarly reflected students lose "the initiative to go out on their own" when parents have a lot of "control" over them (Francis et al., 2020, p. 169).

Parental control and access to personal information were concerning to many of the students. Some found the level of information



shared with families by program staff to be invasive and “a bit nosy”, as Gabriel stated (Francis et al., 2020, p. 171). In the article, some students noted that program staff had shared class attendance, grades, bedtimes, and even food choices with families. This level of information sharing is not common for other college students. It is unclear if program staff in the article had obtained permission from students to share information with their families. All programs must ensure students consent to information sharing with families so that there is compliance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Regardless of whether consent was given, it is evident that students in the article were generally unhappy with their personal information being shared. Finn, a student interviewed by Francis et al. (2020), even acknowledged the lack of privacy “would be holding back on [students] pushing toward independence” (p. 171). Other students indicated they avoided sharing housing, relationship, or employment information with families, as they did not “know how [parents] would react” (Francis et al., 2020, p. 169) and did not want to risk being told they could not pursue their own interests or preferences.

To help families adapt to their children’s growth as college students and adults, Quinn recommended parents “talk with your children and let them make their own decisions and be confident that they can make good ones” (Francis et al., 2020, p. 171). Similarly, Christian recommended “let[-ting] kids be a lot more independent, but also . . . hav[ing] [their] back, just in case” to being a coach: “Like how in sports, coaches on the field guide you. They don’t actually do the work for you, they guide

you” (Francis et al., 2020, p. 171-172). Both Quinn and Christian describe a mindset shift parents and/or families must undergo to fully understand they are not dealing with kids in high school anymore, but rather young adults in college who need support instead of oversight. To this point, adult students who hold their own legal rights should be the primary point of contact between the parents and program staff. Students must decide for themselves the level of involvement and type of information they want program staff to share with family members. Programs and families must come to understand that if the student does want the family to be involved, conversations with program staff should be with the student and not merely about the student. Finally, nearly all students in Francis et al. (2020) indicated needing space to experience college life because as Gabriel put it, “the main reason for the [program] is for us to be more independent” (p. 171).

Discussion

Student perspectives in the studies reviewed showed they had clear expectations for their futures: employment in careers they wish to pursue, lasting friendships and/or relationships, and autonomy in decision-making and life choices. Students also made clear they enrolled in postsecondary education programs to prepare for the future they envisioned. In Table 1, we summarize student recommendations for program staff, peer mentors, and families with additional resources to support each area. Above all, two recommendations for improvement stood out: 1) paying students for working and 2) treating college students with intellectual disability like “typical” college students.

Pay for work is not negotiable

Of the postsecondary education experiences students with intellectual disability reflected on, those related to employment preparation were most concerning. Many programs connect students with work experiences to improve upon skills needed for success in future work settings. These skills are more than likely to be taught initially through unpaid internships or volunteer opportunities, and although these are

Above all, two recommendations for improvement stood out:

- 1) paying students for working and**
- 2) treating college students with intellectual disability like “typical” college students.**

Table 1. Student Perspectives of Program Elements or Experiences that Students Reflected on Positively and/or Could Be Improved Upon

Recommendations for:		Check out these additional resources:
Program Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow for student autonomy and consider whether too much oversight is being provided. • Focus career development on concrete skills, like creating a resume, applying, and interviewing. • Pay students if they are working and limit time spent on unpaid experiences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building Inclusive Campus Communities: A Framework for Inclusion • From the Field: Strategies on Career Development and Employment
Peer Mentors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support independence through interdependence—the students you support have a lot to teach you also. • Fade supports over time to avoid overprotecting students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentor Models and Practices for Inclusive Postsecondary Education • Peer Mentor Training Video Series
Families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help students get ready for independence in college by fading support in high school. • Provide support for applying to and funding college. • Provide emotional support while in college but learn to let go (even though it's hard!) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparing Your Son Or Daughter for College: Suggestions for Parents of Children with Intellectual Disability • Preparing for Postsecondary Life

common experiences for many college students, few students remain in unpaid positions for long periods. Rightfully, students with intellectual disability expressed significant frustration when they recounted the times they were expected to work for “free” or without pay. The students noted that constant employment training without pay felt fruitless and repetitive.

For programs to create pathways toward employment and independence for students with intellectual disability, they must facilitate employment exploration opportunities where students can learn and improve upon work-related skills through paid experiences. This is particularly important considering previous study findings that show students with intellectual disability in postsecondary education programs are more likely to be employed in paid positions if they have previous paid work experience (Qian et al., 2018). Programs that are truly interested in developing

students into well-equipped employees and independent adults should ensure their students are compensated for work and incorporate elements of financial advocacy and independence into their larger programming. Program staff can use students’ pay to teach related skills, like money management and life planning (e.g., home purchases or family planning) that are essential to an independent life and can help students realistically prepare for the future they envision for themselves.

Treat college students like college students

While all students with intellectual disability featured in the articles perceived the types of support they were receiving from program staff as positive, some students highlighted areas in which their college experiences differed from other college students who were not in a postsecondary education program.



From the student quotes, we learned that program staff who impose additional rules and oversight effectively make students feel “othered”. Not only did students find this frustrating, but they were also not given the opportunity to problem-solve and learn from experiences, as all college students must.

The same concept (treating college students like actual college students) rings true for peer mentors and families. Though students can create interdependent relationships with family members and peer mentors, both parties need to be wary of providing “too much” support. Learning to “let go,” especially when it relates to a loved one or friend, can be difficult; but by not doing it, families and mentors can hinder a student’s independence. On campuses, peer mentors who are overprotective of students and offer constant support may be contributing to a less-than-authentic college experience. Families, similarly, must allow their children to grow from their college-based experiences without hands-on support and oversight of their daily activities and interactions.

Limitations

We recognize the present review was limited by its inclusion of only peer-reviewed research. There are, of course, other ways students with intellectual disability have voiced their perspectives on their experiences in postsecondary education, such as through their advocacy and self-advocacy efforts. The studies included in the review had small sample

sizes and may have had limited representation of diverse perspectives, including those of students from various ethnic, racial, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds or with co-occurring disabilities. This could have resulted in an unintentionally narrow understanding of the experiences and needs of college students with intellectual disability. Further, it is possible that research articles reflecting the perspectives of students with intellectual disability may have been missed in our literature search. However, we believe our review provides an important reflection both on what we have been able to learn from peer-reviewed research as well as where there may be a need for dedicated efforts in the future to engage greater numbers of students with intellectual disability in research that is published in peer-reviewed journals.

Implications for program evaluation and improvement

This review of research emphasizes the importance of paying attention to the perspectives of students with intellectual disability in the development and continuous improvement of postsecondary education programs. Relying on proxy perspectives from parents or staff for understanding areas of strength and improvement means we are not capturing the lived experiences and perspectives of the students themselves. Students have an important perspective on the accessibility and inclusivity of their college program, and understanding their experiences can help the program adjust course to ensure a more successful experience for both current and future students.

Capturing the perspectives of both currently enrolled students and graduates should be built into program evaluation protocols to ensure that student voices are heard and valued in the program improvement process.

It is essential that programs establish mechanisms for gathering ongoing feedback from their students to identify emerging needs or challenges and inform programmatic improvements. Some ways to gather student perspectives include surveys, focus groups, advisory committees, or individual interviews. Capturing the perspectives of both currently enrolled students and graduates should be built into program evaluation protocols to ensure that student voices are heard and valued in the program improvement process.

Implications for research

A clear finding from this review is the relatively small number of studies to date that have examined the perspectives of students with intellectual disability in postsecondary education. From an initial list of over 300 research articles, we found only 21 that included the perspectives of students with intellectual disability and only eight in which students reflected on programming that either worked well or could be improved. Further, these studies have small sample sizes, in part due to the relatively small numbers of students with intellectual disability enrolled at any one institution where a researcher may be conducting a study. We call on researchers to address this disparity by engaging in research in this field that results in greater understanding of the student perspective.

One way to tackle this challenge is through inclusive research methodology, such as Participatory Action Research (PAR). As Paiewonsky (2014) explains, “In PAR, students with intellectual disabilities are not just research subjects. They are invited to become co-researchers. This leads to richer results and to an increased sense of contribution among students who take part in this work” (p. 1). An example of PAR with college students with intellectual disability is the Put Yourself on the Map research project (see Paiewonsky et al., 2017). By adopting a PAR approach to research, college students with intellectual disability can be empowered to actively contribute their voices, perspectives, and expertise to the research process, thereby increasing their representation in academic scholarship.

We call on researchers to address this disparity by engaging in research in this field that results in greater understanding of the student perspective.

Conclusion

As students with intellectual disability are increasingly accessing higher education, it is important for programs to consider student perspectives into their initial design and ongoing program improvement efforts. The research reviewed found several areas of strength in current postsecondary education programs as well as areas for improvement. By listening to the voices of students, programs can ensure they are offering opportunities that allow college students to fully engage as experts in the program development and improvement process.



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