

Postsecondary Education for Students with Intellectual Disability (ID): Complex Layers

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Abstract

This phenomenological research study investigated nine postsecondary programs for youth and young adults with disabilities to determine the range of supports and services provided as well as the program development process. Each program had unique features and components and those differences were typically the result of the mission, values, and/or priorities of the program directors and staff. Findings also indicated that there were a number of complex layers that program staff navigated as they developed, implemented, and evaluated their program activities and the impact they had on student growth and development. Some of these complex layers involved policies and procedures at the university itself. Other layers included collaboration with other agencies including local school districts and efforts to identify, collect, and analyze evaluation data that could provide information on important program components. Implications for policy and practice as well as further research are provided.

Keywords: Postsecondary education, intellectual disabilities, program development, qualitative research

Students with disabilities, and in particular students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (ID), continue to lag behind their peers without disabilities in terms of their postschool outcomes. Longitudinal studies have found that students with disabilities are more likely to be unemployed, to work at lower wages, and to be isolated from their communities and friends once they exit high school (National Longitudinal Transition Study-2, 2003). Students with ID are least likely to participate in postsecondary education and experience some of the most dismal adult outcomes (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Neubert, Moon, Grigal, & Redd, 2001). Compared with their age peers, youth with ID typically earn less, are engaged in lower skilled jobs, experience higher rates of poverty, and have limited access to employee benefits (Stodden & Dowrick, 2001; Wagner, Cameto, & Newman, 2003).

These abysmal transition outcomes have persisted despite more than 20 years of research and programming designed to prepare students for their transition from high school to adult life. These national efforts began as a call to the field to improve transition to employment experiences for young adults with disabilities (Will, 1984). Transition planning and services as mandated under IDEA 2004 (PL 108-446) require that schools provide individualized education programs

that prepare students for their post-school goals in the areas of employment, postsecondary education, and independent living. Many approaches have evolved to address this complex process and improve student outcomes; one of the most promising of these is the expansion of postsecondary education (PSE) programs designed to meet student transition needs (Webb, Patterson, Syverud, & Seabrookes-Blackmore, 2008). These PSE programs have been developed to reflect a range of perspectives and goals, so one program may look very different from another even though each is classified as a postsecondary education program (Thoma, Lakin, Carlson, Domzal, Austin, & Boyd, 2011). Attempts to categorize these programs have focused on the degree to which students with ID interact with peers without disabilities (Neubert et al., 2001), which may not be the most critical distinction between programs (Thoma et al., 2011). The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain a clearer and more thorough understanding of the range of programs, their goals/outcomes, and the practices they use to address the transition needs of young adults with ID. This study used phenomenological qualitative research methodology (Creswell, 2009; Moustakas, 1994) to investigate PSE programs for students with ID.

Review of Literature

Given such generally poor outcomes for youth and young adults with ID and the strong evidence that postsecondary education is generally associated with improvement in those outcomes for other groups of students (Baum & Ma, 2007; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010; Mischel, Bernstein, & Allegretto, 2007), there has been a growing commitment to providing access to postsecondary education for youth with ID (Hughes, 2009; Rusch & Wolfe, 2009; Talis & Will, 2006). Despite this movement, however, a review of published research on postsecondary education for individuals with ID found that much of it is focused on descriptions of programs or evaluations of program components (Thoma et al., 2011). While this research can be helpful for program development, it does not provide guidance about the efficacy of program implementation.

Types of PSE Programs

The Thoma et al. (2011) review of the literature on PSE programs for students with ID found a consistent method of categorizing these programs based on a model first identified by Hart, Grigal, Sax, Martinez, and Will (2006). They identified three distinct categories of programs: inclusive, substantially separate, and hybrid. Inclusive programs provided instruction to students with ID in classes available to any other students on campus and opportunities to participate in other campus activities and experiences, while substantially separate programs provided instruction in classes designed exclusively for students with ID. Those students often engaged in campus experiences open to all students and/or the general population (such as sporting events or on-campus concerts), but their coursework was typically separate. Students with ID attending programs categorized as hybrid participated in a mix of inclusive and separate courses and experiences.

More recent research on postsecondary programs has found that these three categories may be insufficient to differentiate between programs and conduct research designed to investigate the impact of participation in programs on improving postschool outcomes (Thoma, et al., 2012). The Institute on Community Integration (2011) outlined a taxonomy designed to identify key program components (in this issue). This work established a framework to guide future research based on components of programs and outcomes. In addition to this taxonomy, Grigal, Hart, and Weir (2011) identified

standards that program developers can use to evaluate the quality of their inclusive PSE programs and ensure greater consistency among inclusive PSE programs.

The work of the Think College project has been important to help guide the development of postsecondary programs for students with ID and, in particular, those programs funded under the Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability (TPSID) competition from the Office of Postsecondary Education in the U.S. Department of Education. Project staff members at Think College were charged with providing training and technical assistance to the 27 projects funded through TPSID and to collect and analyze evaluation data on project effectiveness. Projects funded under this program had to meet very specific guidelines and program requirements and were chosen based on a competitive peer-review process. The request for proposals for TPSID required that funded PSE programs have the following components:

- Provide individual supports and services for academic and social inclusion
- Include academic enrichment, socialization, independent living skills and integrated work experiences, and career skills
- Integrate person-planning planning in the development of the course of study
- Participate with the coordinating center in the evaluation of the program
- Partner with one or more local education agency (LEA) to support students still receiving special education under IDEA
- Plan for the sustainability of their program after the grant period; and
- Create and offer a meaningful credential upon the completion of the program (U.S. Department of Education, 2010)

The review of literature (Thoma et al., 2011), development of the taxonomy (Institute on Community Integration, 2011), and Think College standards (Grigal et al., 2011) highlighted an ongoing need to gain a better understanding of existing programs, their components, and organization. While projects funded under the TPSID program had some consistency in program components, procedures, and experiences, these are not the only PSE programs for students with ID. Other programs have also been developed at universities across the country, many of which were

established much earlier than the inception of the TPSID projects. So while there is an umbrella term “PSE programs for students with ID,” these programs can look very different, making it more difficult for program directors to understand whether the findings of a specific research study are applicable to their own program or participants. Programs could enroll students with ID only or expand their eligibility criteria to include a broader definition of intellectual and developmental disabilities, which could include students with traumatic brain injury and/or students on the autism spectrum. Program experiences could also be very different and may not be explained in sufficient detail to fully evaluate whether a specific research finding would have a similar impact. The purpose of this study was to investigate the similarities and differences between program components, procedures, activities, and experiences to document this relatively new development in the field. It is believed that this examination will help describe the history of this latest inclusive movement in the field of special education and provide a framework that can be used to support the development of a body of evidence-based practices to further improve and guide program development and implementation. This qualitative study was designed as an initial step in this investigation.

Methodology

This was a phenomenological qualitative research study, designed to gain a clearer understanding of PSE for students with ID (Creswell, 2009). Phenomenological research (Smith & Fowler, 2009) refers to research that seeks to explain a phenomena as it is experienced by those most directly involved. In this study, the phenomenon of interest is PSE programs for students with ID from the perspective of program staff. A number of PSE programs were identified to participate in this study and qualitative data collection included interviews, non-participant observations, and review of documents. Information was collected from teachers, faculty, program administrators, and/or parents when possible. Observations of program activities include students but, because the focus of this study was on the process of conceptualizing, implementing, and evaluating programs experienced by program directors and staff, students themselves were not interviewed. Document analysis focused on application materials; program descriptions; program evaluation documents when

available; program proposals for funding when relevant; examples of program activities (i.e., lesson plans, portfolios of student work, and/or instructional materials); and other marketing or program dissemination materials (i.e., videos, published manuscripts describing program components, and/or web-based materials).

Participant Programs

In all, nine PSE programs for students with ID participated in this research study, with five of them participating in all phases and types of data collection procedures. A purposeful selection process was used to identify participant programs (Creswell, 2008), identifying those programs that were relatively close to the researcher in location (Eastern, Southern, and Midwestern States) to facilitate travel for observation visits. In addition to proximity, participant programs were chosen to reflect the range of program types (that is, inclusive, hybrid, and substantially separate) and funding sources that exist in PSE for students with ID. Of the programs that participated in all aspects of the study, four of the programs were located in public universities; the other one was at a private university. Two programs were dual enrollment programs where students receive services from their LEA. Two other programs were funded through a grant from the U.S. Office of Postsecondary Education (OPE) under their TPSID, while one of the dual enrollment programs was also connected to the TPSID project funded at the same university. The last program received funding primarily through the tuition students and their families paid to the university. All programs were located at four-year colleges or universities, but not all programs were themselves designed to be four years in length.

Using the common categorization criteria for inclusiveness developed by Neubert et al., 2001, program directors were asked to categorize their program based on the inclusive criteria: one of these programs was a substantially separate program, two were inclusive, and the other two described the program as a hybrid program. Four other PSE programs for students with ID participated in one or more aspects of the research study. These programs participated in interviews of one or more program staff and most shared documents for analysis. They did not participate in observations, primarily due to time constraints in completing the study. Of these programs, three were funded through the TPSID grants while the other program was funded through tuition only. Two of these programs were lo-

cated at private universities (one in the South and one in the Northeast). The other two programs were located at public universities in the Midwest. One of these programs was a substantially separate program, while the other three described themselves as inclusive. See Table 1 for a summary of characteristics of all programs that participated in this research study.

Data Collection Procedures

This study used a variety of data collection procedures including semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis. Data collection began with an interview with the project director by phone. A semi-structured interview process was used to collect information about each program, which assured that consistent information was collected while permitting the collection of additional information unique to each. See Appendix A for the interview protocol.

Interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed into Word documents. An online transcription program was chosen that would assure the confidentiality of the interview data and a quick turn-around for receiving transcripts. Written transcripts were compared by the researcher to the corresponding recorded interview to check for accuracy (particularly for the use of acronyms, initials, and other more technical terms that were not easily understood by the transcriptionists). Once the accuracy of the transcripts was verified, the Word document was forwarded to the interviewee for a member check. That interviewee had the opportunity to expand on any answer, to delete or correct answers, or otherwise assure that he or she was comfortable with the answers to the questions. All participants responded to this request for a member check, either by sending comments and updates within two weeks using the track changes feature, or by saying that the transcripts were accurate as they were and required no further clarification. There were a few minor changes made to most transcripts, involving clarifications for names, acronyms, or program details. One transcript required a great deal of editing, mainly due to the poor quality of the interview recording. The researcher worked with the program director who was the subject of the interview to recreate as much of the interview as possible.

After initial interviews with the project director were completed, observation visits were scheduled. The project director was asked to identify the specific observation opportunities for the researcher. The researcher explained that the purpose was to see typical

examples of the PSE program experiences for students with ID, but allowed flexibility to identify the key components as well as the examples of where and when those activities occurred. For example, one director was particularly proud of the program's employment/internship activities, so the observations included three examples of the work that current students were doing on or near campus. Another program was proud of the fact that students blended into the campus and learned to be independent with their daily experiences. One of the observations at this site, consequently, focused on the teacher in the student commons who served as a checkpoint for students as they came and went to their various activities and/or classes.

In addition to the observations, the researcher conducted interviews with the key program staff on site and/or conducted follow-up interviews with the project director. For interviews with the project staff, a semi-structured interview process was again used. The original questions used for the interview with the program director were adapted to gather information specific to the interviewee's role and responsibilities. For example, the question on how the components of the program were chosen was changed to address the components related to employment when interviewing the program's job coach/employment specialist. Follow-up interviews with the program director were also semi-structured. The researcher developed follow-up questions after conducting an initial coding of interview transcripts and observation notes. The purposes of these follow-up interviews were to seek clarification for any unclear answers or discrepancies between data sources (e.g., interview and observation). The researcher kept a journal that was used to record questions and initial reflections from interviews and observations. These field notes were also used to identify follow-up questions.

Regarding the four programs which the researcher did not visit, interviews with additional program staff were completed for only one person. An observation scheduled at a second site had to be canceled due to time constraints. The other two programs agreed to participate in the study late in the year, making additional interviews and observations unfeasible for this time-limited study.

The last component of this research was the collection of documents for analysis. Project directors were asked to provide documents that described the program and/or how the program began. Most pro-

Table 1

Characteristic of Participant Programs

Program	Location	Type of University	Type of Program
University A	Northeast	Private; Urban	Dual Enrollment; Hybrid
University B	Midwest	Public; Urban	Dual Enrollment; TPSID; Connection; Inclusive
University C	South	Public; Urban	TPSID; Hybrid
University D	East	Public; Urban	Substantially Separate; Tuition Funded
University E	East	Public; Suburban	TPSID; Hybrid
University F	South	Public; Rural	Substantially Separate; Tuition Funded
University G	Midwest	Public; Suburban	TPSID; Hybrid
University H	Midwest	Public; Urban	TPSID; Hybrid
University I	Northeast	Private; Suburban	TPSID; Inclusive

grams had these documents readily available on their website and included application materials, examples of student work, listings of courses and/or programs of study, and brochures or flyers used to recruit students. Some projects shared the application submitted for the TPSID grant and one project shared results of a formal evaluation of their program that was used to guide program improvements. Two projects shared a DVD film that described their program and its unique features. Table 2 provides a listing of the data collected for each program.

Data Analysis

Once all interviews were transcribed, observations written into narrative reports, and documents collected, the researcher conducted a thorough qualitative analysis of the material. Saldana's (2009) coding manual was used to guide this stage of the research. First cycle coding utilized an *in vivo* coding method. *In vivo* coding uses the words of the participant as the codes to be sure that the correct language is employed for analysis.

The second cycle (Saldana, 2009) provides an opportunity to review the themes that emerged from the first cycle and then "reorganize and reconfigure to eventually develop a smaller and more select list of broader categories, themes and/or concepts" (p. 149). Additional discussions with project directors about these themes occurred as another step in the member check process. In addition, two outside reviewers

familiar with qualitative data analysis also reviewed the results of the first and second coding cycles, providing feedback and further analysis as a method of increasing the credibility of the findings. An example of this feedback resulted in identifying the theme of "complex layers," which was originally categorized as two themes: "working with LEAs" and "understanding university policies." One peer debriefer grouped those two categories into one theme labeled as "understanding policies and procedures" but through discussion between the researcher and the two peer debriefers, it was agreed that the underlying message was more than just understanding and following the policies. In fact, the comments revealed that they were learning to navigate between the requirements and cultures of the different settings in which program services were provided including local schools, university classrooms, and the campus more broadly, as well as community settings such as work, recreation, and neighborhood venues. In re-reading these comments, one program director's working of "complex layers" was determined to capture the breadth and depth of this theme.

Findings

The existing literature about PSE for students with ID identified a wide variety of program components. Program participants in this study included at least two programs from each of the three categories of PSE

Table 2

Data Collected by Program

Program	Interviews	Observations	Documents
University A	Project Director Teacher HS Administrator	Student study skills time Student club meeting	Application materials Student notebooks Program DVD Program description
University B	Project Director Project Coordinators High School administrator High School teacher State coordinator Parent	Student commons area Internship opportunity Meeting of program group	Application materials Lesson plans Bus transportation training procedures Examples of student work Videotapes of student interviews
University C	Project Director Project Coordinator Mentor coordinator Technology instructor Mentors Advising coordinator	Technology class Student life skills class Student transition/ employment class Student meeting time	Application materials Lesson plans Examples of student work FB page for program Videotapes of student presentations
University D	Project Director Project Coordinator Academic Coordinator Internship/Job Developer Parent	Math class (2 levels) Lunch time Meeting with students	Application materials Lesson plans Examples of student work Videotape of program
University E	Project Director Project Coordinator Job Coach Social skills coach Evaluator Student mentors State coordinator	Social skills class Internship sites (3) Individual tutoring	Application materials Examples of student work Evaluation report of previous program
University F	Project Director	N/A	Application materials Lesson plans Program description Course descriptions
University G	Project Director Program Coordinator Employment Coordinator	N/A	Application materials Program description Course descriptions PCP description
University H	Project Director	N/A	Application materials Program description Course descriptions
University I	Project Director	N/A	Application materials Program Description Course descriptions

types and included two that were dual enrollment programs. However, there were very few commonalities that emerged in each of these program types. In addition, differences between programs were not found to be related to the category of inclusiveness as much as to difference in program components and experiences. Differences included employment options, residential program options, student co-curricular experiences, role of parents, course instructors, and program missions/priorities. See Table 3 for a depiction of some of those differences.

Mission/Philosophy/Priorities

While programs had some commonalities and their scopes were relatively wide, these programs all had very specific missions/priorities. This resulted in a range of program components even among those with the same designation for inclusiveness. The range of components also occurred despite the relatively broad required components for programs funded under the TPSID competition.

For example, the program at University B described student self-determination as the overarching goal. As staff members described how they prioritized student goals and activities, they spoke about how that guided their work:

And so we hope to increase self-determination by having students more cognizant of how to participate actively in a meeting and run that meeting and then on a weekly basis in that [class]...we have them establish weekly goals for what they are going to be working on this next week and then every week they review those goals and determine how its working...we look for ways to build this into all that we do.

This program also provided more autonomy to students to make choices about their daily activities. Although there were options to take courses on campus, this was not a requirement and was left up to student choice. Participating students were observed engaging in activities in line with their individual goals rather than engaged in classes designed to address common goals as in other participant programs. For example, one student reported wanting to be a nurse. Her daily experiences included volunteer work in the hospital on campus, enrolling in an anatomy and physiology class, and learning to take the bus to ultimately make

her better able to apply for work in the future. Another student in that same program did not have a clearly identified career goal, so the majority of his day was spent in volunteer work experiences to explore options. He audited one class in the school of education on the use of instructional technology to improve his use of computers in daily life.

While all programs identified self-determination as a goal, not all made it a priority component. For example, the program director at University D indicated that participation in academic classes was the most important component of that program. In fact, this university's program was moving from being a substantially separate program to a hybrid one. During the on-campus observation, it was discovered that a student failed to show up for class. Program staff intervened to require that the student show up for class. This demonstrated that the academic program component was prioritized over facilitating student self-determination, which supports individual choice-making as a central tenet (Wehmeyer, Kelchner, & Richards, 1996).

Program staff spoke about times when the various goals of the program were in conflict with one another. In those instances, they were able to identify the priority goal that was used to guide a specific decision. For example, one program identified both attendance in college courses and increasing a student's independence in the community as key features. However, as program staff spoke about times when these goals conflicted with one another, they clearly identified which was most important. For example, program staff at University B stated, "If a student decided that he or she wanted to drop a course and instead work on learning to use a bus, that's what he or she did."

Another program at University I described the opportunity to take academic classes on campus as its primary goal. The course of study outlined on this program's website listed a vast array of academic classes, including ones developed by the program that were open to all students on campus. Both University B and I identified themselves as "inclusive" programs, but their differences highlighted a range of ways that students with ID were included on the college or university campus. Inclusion was not narrowly defined as inclusion in academic courses alone, but having opportunities to be included in the range of campus learning, social, and recreational activities.

Another program identified universal design for learning (UDL) as a key philosophical underpinning

Table 3

Features of Programs

Program	Type of Program	Academic Classes	Employment	Residential Component	Other Features
University A	Dual Enrollment; hybrid. Two years.	Audit classes. Some separate classes/experiences.	Employment funded through grant with local agency. Free to university, student paid by grant. Job coach from school district	None	Students learn to ride public transportation. Participation in student clubs. Summer program focuses on social skills.
University B	Dual Enrollment; TPSID connection; inclusive. One year.	Audit some classes, no separate classes.	Volunteer experiences on campus and/or nearby.	None	Students learn to ride public transportation. Focus on increasing student independence/self-determination. TPSID focus in coming year will help with expanding beyond one school district. May change to 2 years.
University C	TPSID; hybrid	Audit classes, some separate classes on life skills.	Vast internship options.	None	Started as dual enrollment program; but that stopped with TPSID funding. Focus on social networks.
University D	Substantially separate; tuition funded	Started as separate with no inclusive class options. Those are growing now.	Some internship options; program is focusing on increasing those.	Optional, not required.	Students at university are the teachers of the substantially separate classes and/or serve as mentors/resident advisors in dorm.
University E	TPSID; hybrid	Audit classes, some separate classes focused on using technology, employment, life skills.	Internship options mostly on campus.	Optional	Large mentorship component. Use of social media to communicate between students in program, faculty, community members. Sought state funding for scholarships for equity.
University F	Substantially separate; tuition funded	All separate classes focusing on employment, community living, independence	Internship and paid employment opportunities.	Required component; apartments off campus.	Project staff paid for by tuition charges. 100% employment outcome.
University G	TPSID; hybrid	Audit; some separate classes.	Internships and paid employment opportunities.	Parent participation is noted as important. Transition focus/person-centered planning.	
University H	TPSID; hybrid	Audit	Organized around specific employment training model.	Is planned but not yet implemented.	
University I	TPSID; inclusive	Audit; classes designed for program students are open to all students at school.	Internships		Use of technology important.

of their program. UDL is an approach to instructional design and delivery that creates access to learning by using methods, materials, and assessments that meet the needs of a range of learners (Center for Applied Special Technology, 20012. It “acknowledges that there is no one size fits all approach to students learning; teachers must deliver instruction in multiple ways and allow students multiple ways of expressing mastery” (Thoma, Bartholomew, & Scott, 2009, p. 8). Students in that program at University C took a class in a computer lab where they learned to use a variety of technology programs. They videotaped themselves throughout the program and posted examples of their work on a program Facebook page. They also used an electronic portfolio process to document their progress through the program. Despite the variety of campus experiences, program staff continued to question whether they were doing enough or having the desired impact:

...one of my biggest worries about the program is...if this is ultimately going to be a good use of the student’s time. I mean these are two valuable years that we are working with them, and if we’re not -- if this program isn’t ultimately successful in helping them to get to that next step -- then that’s really bad.

This concern with program impact was echoed as staff spoke about program conclusion or graduation. TPSID funding required a “meaningful credential” but regardless of how they addressed this in a proposal or at program inception, many of the program directors described uncertainty about how to meet or measure this goal. One program director from University D described how they made the determination of when a student had successfully completed the program:

I know also the challenge becomes, at what point do we say the student is ready? We have...some students -- who could stay with us forever because -- it could take them a while to reach a point of similar independence. I think that -- I could envision us allowing students to stay in a little bit longer [than two years]...

Another program director from University E spoke about the desired outcomes for students attending their program:

We want the students to be gainfully employed. We want them to not have a separate place. What we want the students to have the functional skills that they need, to eventually be able to meet their postschool goals, if they want to be in a position to eventually live on their own or live with a roommate. We want them to have the skills and the resources so that somehow be able to move themselves in that direction. We want them be independent by the time they leave us.

This individualization of priorities for students creates challenges in terms of knowing when the student has sufficiently achieved the desired outcomes. Successful completion is not measured in terms of accumulating a predetermined number of credits or passing some type of exit exam as is typical of post-secondary programs, but is more holistic than that. Program directors and staff used a variety of methods to determine when students had successfully completed their program including job attainment, attendance for a specific length of time (typically one or two years), passing a comprehensive portfolio that documented growth over time, and/or meeting transition goals identified through an individualized process such as a person-centered plan or student-directed IEP process. Yet most program directors identified that this remained an area of concern for them. As one program director from University A said:

The priority is the independence building of the whole student. That’s actually what it is. Is that it’s really the ability of the program to address the social aspect of each individual, the cognitive, academic aspect of each individual, the transitional needs, the job-related needs, and the functional needs. To put all of that together in a program that’s really going to address every aspect, so that each individual can be a successful adult.

Program priorities played a role in the types of assessments used to measure student progress toward program completion and students’ individual goals. One program director spoke about the challenge in identifying relevant assessments to document student growth in areas that matched their program’s priorities at University I:

Well, and that's something I think could be a real benefit to the field to come up with [assessments that measure student growth and outcomes]. It's not just employment. I think that another area that has been done very well at PSE program...is feeling a part of the college campus, and that's again something I don't know exactly how one measures, but when I look at all of the students that I've seen come out of this program, they have had so many opportunities to be involved in clubs, participate with sororities, manage teams, working out at the gym, going to the pool, participating in -- going to the sports events...This is just what you want to really be a part of a college campus and have that experience.

Program directors and staff were asked about the role of parents in their PSE programs. Not surprisingly, the degree to which they involved parents also reflected their priorities for participating students. Some programs sought an active role for parents, as this project director from University G described:

...one of our co-directors, has done such a great job working with the parents. We have monthly parent meetings...she tries to make it the parents' meeting and to address concerns that they have about their students, about their kids. I don't see how post-secondary ed programs can be successful without a very strong family and parent component.

Other programs described helping students assert a greater degree of independence while in the PSE program, similar to the experience of "typical" undergraduate students. As this program director said, the role of participants' parents is reflective of this program priority:

Then when we admit families we give a couple of orientation meetings with them to explain that college is different than high school, that in terms of communication, we are going to be communicating with your son or daughter, not with you. We treat our students like other college students, and we describe they will get support they need to be successful academically and socially, but we're not going to be taking your phone calls every day. This is college; it's different.

Another priority/mission of note had to do with the degree to which students were included in campus classes. The program director from University E described how inclusion guided their priorities, even when they had competing priorities:

We finally move into the new location, and then [including students on campus] actually became much easier. By that time, I think staff were convinced [that] having all these special classes is not such a good idea. And the students felt that way, too...We had said we wanted to wait until spring to have students sit [in] on some of the regular classes on campus. And the students said, No, no, no. I want to do it now. And so there were three or four of them who did that in the fall semester...sitting in on an English class, computer classes, I forget what else.

Another program director from University I spoke of the impact of their focus on full inclusion:

After class, I...was walking back to my office, and I looked out at the lawn in front of...our administration building...and there were about eight or nine students sunning themselves, talking. About four of the students were students with disabilities from our program, and five were...other random undergrad students. Just that picture for me kind of described the intangibles of [our program]. The students with disabilities won't think about themselves in the same way. They sense that they are in real ways like everybody else...It's what makes doing this worthwhile and important.

In summary, the program directors and staff were thoughtful in talking about their goals for the program and whether the challenges were worthwhile. The program director from University E's comments reflected a common theme heard in all interviews:

...I love this project. I struggle with it. Sometimes I'm not completely happy with the way it's unfolding, but I love it. And I think it's wonderful. Probably the struggles are more about my wanting it to be the best it can be.

While there were a number of topics that emerged from the qualitative coding, one theme emerged that

described each of these codes. This overarching theme can be described as *complex layers*. This theme is described more fully in the sections below, with quotes from interview data and examples from observations and documents reviewed for this study that illustrate the components of this theme.

Complex Layers

Many of the program directors and staff spoke about the complexity of developing, implementing, and evaluating a PSE program for students with ID. In particular, they did not fully anticipate the levels or layers of work that would be required to implement their vision for the program prior to getting involved in this work. Comments about complex layers and examples identified through observations and/or document analysis reflected complexity in such diverse activities as navigating university policies and procedures, working with school district or other community agency partners, and growing and/or improving their program.

University administration/systems. All program directors and staff interviewed for this research spoke at length about the difficulty they had understanding university administration/systems as they began the process of implementing or designing a PSE program. For example, one program director at University A described the process of getting university approval to have students with ID attend classes as follows:

Our largest challenge to date has been including young adults in academic classes without them formally registering and we initiated the program by using our friends. The University was upset that we were not following the rule that every student in the class must be a paying student. And so ... after establishing the advisory committee [we were able to] work out a solution for how the academic piece of the program will work.

In conducting observations at the various universities participating in this program, this struggle to become part of the university was at times very apparent. Most universities' programs were located within their School of Education, often because program staff and directors worked as faculty in departments of special education or they were part of larger university centers of excellence in developmental disabilities (UCEDD), funded through the Developmental Disabilities Act (DD-Act). These grant-funded programs often were

located in more remote locations on campus and program staff focused on community research and service projects so they had less experience with navigating university policies. Documents shared by program directors and staff looked like any other document disseminated by the university (i.e., they used official university and/or school logos and colors). However, despite their appearance, many of these documents communicated information about program features that were very different from programs and services available to or required of other university students. One example of this was the information required for admission to the program.

Most university programs have admission information located or linked from a broad university undergraduate admission webpage where application forms, fees, and contact information can be found and program requirements are provided. Not so in the case of these PSE programs. In most instances, these programs were not listed on that page, nor were they listed on the website for the programs of the School of Education. Instead, information about the program was listed under research projects or in descriptions of community-engaged service programs of the university or research center responsible for overseeing the program. Some programs had their own website that was shared with potential students through their high schools or transition case managers and with the general population through a link to the Think College website (www.thinkcollege.org). One program that participated in this study was not listed on the Think College website and was also not found through a search of the university's website, but did maintain a Facebook page for current students.

Another layer of complexity related to the application process was working with the university on determining student status. Some university programs admit students with ID into a certificate program; others admit students into their program with a "special student" status. Still others accept students into the program without having a university student status. Instead, they are "X-program" students, which denotes a marginalization of the program and its students by the university community. Every project director interviewed for this project described his or her struggles working with university staff to determine the status of students accepted into the program. Most were seeking ways to include these students within the day to day life of the university. Are they considered

students of the university or do they have a different status altogether? Perhaps more importantly, are these university programs that will be sustained over time or are they programs run by certain individuals that will disappear if that person moved on? Do they qualify for services that every student can access or not? One of the first steps of the process is in convincing university administrators and faculty that this program makes sense pedagogically. As the project director from University G described:

It took a lot of convincing people that this makes sense; that it is possible...Our response was we think special education actually works and what we're going to try to do is to apply what we've learned about inclusion in K-12, and the kinds of things that we think should be happening in K-12. We're going to build those seamlessly into the support that these students get...attending the typical college courses, participating in typical college social activities. I think at that point we couldn't have anticipated how much work it would take to make it happen.

Despite common struggles in negotiating the application process and university designation of student status, many program directors found that once administration understood the intent of the program and clear parameters were identified, it then became easier to ensure that program students had access to the range of supports and services available to any other university student. In some instances, students paid fees such as recreation fees and technology fees so they were able to access these services on campus just as any traditionally admitted student would be able to do through existing fee structures. In other instances, the designation between university students and PSE program students was very different and seemed to be impossible for program directors and staff to bridge the gap. Non-participatory observational visits by the researcher (Creswell, 2009) to campuses provided an opportunity to observe students accessing a range of services, participating in campus activities, working and/or interning in campus admissions offices, libraries, and with athletic teams. Students blended into the campus settings and routines, "hanging out" in the student unions, cafeterias, libraries, computer labs, and lounges between classes. This was expressed by another project director who said:

Our students are paying full fees, so any of the fees that are required of full-time students they're paying. So they have access to activities on campus like the bowling alley, the services there, they have meal plans available, they have an ID [identification card] of course, because everything's connected to their ID. The library, the gym, the bus system is part of that, their computer systems, they have an email and a login just like other students.

While students with ID were typically able to receive generic services available to regularly admitted and enrolled students, most programs identified separate services they provided directly to students with ID in their program. Even programs that identified themselves as "inclusive" could identify one or more examples of services and/or supports that they provide directly to students with ID. Some of these supplemented generic services such as additional academic supports to students to adapt assignments or academic materials. Other services were developed specifically for students with ID even if examples of these services were available for others on campus. For example, one university program worked with the psychology department to provide counseling for their students with ID rather than have them use the university's counseling services when the Counseling Services Director expressed uncertainty about her staff's ability to address the needs of students with ID. Still other services were created for students with ID but did not have a parallel on campus for other university students. For example, Universities D, E, F, and G created special courses on independent living skills for students with ID, and enrollment was limited to the students in the program only. Another university's program director spoke of the ways that they provided services even if students in the program could access similar services through the university:

We access pretty much everything on campus except, let me say, there are a few exceptions. We provide some in-house services versus having our students go over to over to the campus center. We do a better job...

Working with school districts and/or other community partners. Not only did programs struggle with understanding and navigating university policies and

procedures, those that were designed in partnership with local school districts or other community agencies found there were additional layers of complexity to their program design and implementation processes. Programs designed as dual enrollment programs by their nature faced additional challenges as they not only needed to follow the university system and policies, they had to do so while also implementing policies and procedures of the local school district. At times these policies and procedures were in conflict with one another. For example, students with disabilities can request appropriate accommodations at the university level, but these accommodations may not be implemented if they conflict with the general expectations for a specific class or program. Conversely, students with disabilities in educational programs at the secondary level are entitled to receive modifications and individualized supports and services that would not be typical at the PSE level. Yet directors of programs designed with a dual enrollment model must find a way to bridge these different expectations and requirements in a way that meets the needs of students with ID without compromising the benefits to students with ID in being included on the university campus.

This struggle was further compounded when the PSE program served the needs of more than one school district. When conflicts between the university-based program and the school district occurred, it was typically the school district's policies and procedures that prevailed. At times this was because the school district provided the majority of the funding for the program staff and services. Key staff in dual enrollment programs included a special education teacher, job coach, and/or paraprofessional assistants, who provided instructional supports and services for students with ID. However, this additional assistance created further challenges such as having students accepted into their programs recognized as university students with access to all university services. A teacher working with students in one of the dual enrollment programs at University A described this additional complex layer:

...they're not in the class, we just call it auditing. Right, that means they don't have access to computers, to blackboard website for class, to library or other campus services. In the last year we have been pretty lucky to get the computer teacher to help me get a guest connection to my port site but it's inconsistent: sometimes it works, sometimes

it doesn't. I have a blackboard site there so at least I can get in to get the work for them and then we print it out.

Dual enrollment programs had an even greater degree of complexity to them than the others: not only do the components of the program need to address K-12 requirements, they also need to be a good fit with the university itself. Program directors, and to a lesser degree, program staff discussed this challenge at length. One program director whose program changed from a dual enrollment program to a university-based one at University E described the rationale in terms of complexity:

...this really shouldn't be, from our point of view, a secondary program. It should be a post-secondary program. If it's really about being on a college campus, it needs to be about being on a college campus on a college schedule. Since we were experiencing these conflicts and they just became exacerbated when we had multiple school districts...The school day starts very differently than the college day. The school day ends much earlier than college day.

The principal of a school who had students participating in a PSE program at University B also described this struggle meeting the different priorities for students through this model:

[We are] still finding the right balance between the rigors of the academic requirements from the university and making sure the students are getting the functional skills that they need with the life skills that they are going to need to move forward. It's...a little bit of a challenge as well, so we are always trying to form that balance.

Another complex layer was negotiating the requirements of offering a residential component of the PSE program. Residential ("dorm") life has been described as an important part of what colleges offer in terms of learning. The residential component provides an opportunity to teach some of the functional and independent living skills that young adults with ID require to achieve their goals for adult life. Although a residential component was required for each of the programs funded under TPSID, this was an aspect of

PSE that was often described as difficult to implement. One program director spoke about how they navigated challenges inherent in addressing this component of PSE programs at University E:

So I would [like to] have a residential component, but the University wants us to wait...to implement a residential component for an extra year while they build the dorm. To be honest with you, after talking to other TPSIDs, the residential piece [requires] a huge logistical coordination [effort], and I frankly don't think we have our day program grounded out yet enough where it's moving smoothly.

Continual program improvements. Most program directors discussed the complexity of making continual improvements to their programs. That was true whether the program was still in its planning phase, newly implemented, or had been around for many years. The oldest program participating in this study was over ten years old. One program took a slow and steady approach to making program changes, as described by a parent of a student at University D:

And one of the things that I liked about the Program Director's approach was that [the director] would take an important area each year and work to develop it, so one year it might be curriculum, another year it might be developing more inclusive class opportunities, another year it would be getting into the dorms, but really very carefully and thoughtfully moving forward and making progress in developing a program.

Another program described a process of program change and development that was more spontaneous:

That first year, we were literally, probably the first three years we were literally building the plane while we were flying it. It was very stimulating, we were learning a lot. At the same time we were changing the college community in ways that I think we couldn't have anticipated, and the college just reacted very positively in some ways, very bureaucratically in others.

Some of the programs described how access to academic classes on campus had grown over the years. Even programs that described themselves as

“inclusive” described a gradual process of identifying classes that students in their program could take at University B:

Then we did a lot of outreach to individual faculty, we explained to them who the students were, what our expectations were and what kinds of support we could provide. We got more and more faculty who were willing to include students. Now we've got somewhere around 80 undergraduate offerings that we [can advise students to take]. Then if students have new interests or aren't interested in those then we go out, we do outreach to other faculty. So the course offerings grow, and grow, and grow.

This idea of the various layers of complexity encountered in developing and implementing a PSE program for students with ID was summarized by the following statement from a project coordinator at University I:

I think that in the early stages the developing of a quality inclusive post-secondary program takes so much work. That at least for a small college like ours, where we don't have tremendous resources to work with, that it's difficult to find the time to share what's working with others. We have done a fair amount given just how busy we've been on developing our program, and running it day to day, and then showing that students get their right amount and type of support, so that this experience truly does help them to realize their gifts and to be able to use them as adults. It's an ambitious undertaking.

Discussion

The literature on PSE programs for students with ID categorizes programs into three different types or models: inclusive, hybrid, or substantially separate. Program directors and staff in the present study described other components as being more important to understanding the overall goals and mission of their programs. In fact, the programs designed to be fully inclusive often ended up offering supports and services that were developed exclusively for students with ID while the programs designated as substantially separate were making steps to include students with ID in campus courses and activities open to all. With the

programs that participated in this study, the designation of inclusivity which has been widely used in the field to categorize PSE programs for students with ID is losing its ability to clearly differentiate between programs. While the sample size of this study was small, there were a number of implications for policy, practice, and future research that emerged from these findings.

Implications for Policy and Practice

This study supports the findings from the review of existing literature that the term “PSE programs for students with ID” is an umbrella term for a range of programs with often very different goals, components, participants, and funding sources. In fact, the term “postsecondary” might be a misleading description as students participating in some of these programs may still be receiving secondary-level services from their LEAs through IDEA, including educational supports and services from special education teachers and paraprofessionals. Their participation in typical university classes mirrors students with ID who are not receiving services in “dual enrollment” programs, but with instructional modifications provided by the LEA.

Other than participation in college/university courses and having the program staff physically located on the college campus, there were other ways that these dual enrollment PSE programs for students with ID differed from other secondary/transition programs. Program staff of PSE programs for students with ID had greater expectations for student independence, especially when compared to the expectations for students who received educational services from other high school/transition programs. Students admitted to PSE programs were required to demonstrate greater independence and motivation through interviews, personal statements, and on-campus orientation meetings. In addition, most programs required less involvement of parents in the daily activities of program participants, making parental involvement similar to that of typically enrolled students at the university. This decrease in expectation for parental involvement coupled with an increase in expectation for independence on the part of the student may result in improved outcomes for youth enrolled in these PSE programs.

It was clear that students enrolled in PSE programs were exposed to opportunities that were not typically part of most school-run transition programs, although opportunities varied greatly between programs. Students in PSE programs learned to ride the bus to travel

around their university. In some cases, they also learned to ride public transportation in their city to travel to campus as well as to increase their independence in their home communities. Students learned job skills through participation in a range of internship opportunities, on campus employment, and specific transition program components linked to best practices for improving employment outcomes (Test, 2012).

Discussions with program staff and observations of program activities revealed a range of social activities on campus in which PSE students with ID participated. Students attended sporting events, participated as managers of sports teams, joined sororities or fraternities, and “hung out” with peers with and without disabilities. Many programs had peer mentors, who spoke about the growing friendships that resulted from these interactions. While the complexity of managing large peer mentor components could be challenging, programs found that they grew quickly and provided more opportunities for students with ID to participate in a greater range of social activities.

The complexity of conceptualizing and implementing PSE programs for students with ID requires an understanding of the university program development process as well as the various rules and regulations of the university based on law and common practice. Public universities can have a mission to serve the broader communities and those program directors who used this rationale found it was easier to convince administrators to “welcome” the programs to be run on campus. In fact, the majority of the programs funded through TPSID were located on public university campuses (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). However, they are also typically larger in size, which can create additional challenges in understanding and addressing campus policies and procedures and identifying appropriate personnel to provide access to available supports and services. Program directors with a longer tenure at the university or identified university-level administrators who were supportive of the development of PSE programs for students with ID reported less difficulty in unraveling the complex layers of program development. Those program directors interested in beginning similar PSE programs at their universities would benefit from the time it may take to identify supportive administrators.

Most programs identified that they changed over time; finding a way to deal with change made that process manageable. Program staff who were unable

to describe a clearly defined mechanism or procedure for responding to change were more likely to describe their program implementation process as “building the plane while flying it.” Alternatively, when programs identified a process for responding to change, they felt that changes were manageable even when they were dramatic or unpredictable.

Implications for Future Research

This phenomenological research study provided an in-depth analysis of a range of PSE programs in an attempt to gain a better understanding of the nature of postsecondary education for students with ID. Until this study, most published research focused on one program or one type of program, so this study offers new information across program types that can be useful to guide future research. Additional programs may need to be recruited to expand this study to be sure that programs included the full range of program types and services provided to students to accurately describe the phenomenon of PSE programs for students with ID.

Much remains to be learned about the outcomes that participation in PSE programs for individuals with ID can influence. First, longitudinal studies are essential to examine the range of experiences that students with ID have over the course of their PSE participation and the impact this participation has on their long-range employment, community living, and overall quality of life experiences. It is important to understand whether participation in PSE improves employment outcomes immediately after completion, but it is also important to know whether those differences maintain over time.

It will also be important to know whether specific PSE program components improve outcomes for individuals with ID, particularly those components that improve postschool outcomes for youth with disabilities transitioning from high school to adult life such as parent involvement, student self-determination, and employment experiences. Some program directors are incorporating many of these components into their PSE programs specifically because of their impact on improving transition planning in general. Consequently, it will be important to investigate whether or not incorporating these components into PSE programs has the intended result.

Lastly, future research should focus on the qualifications, experience, and backgrounds that program staff need to successfully implement PSE programs.

This has implications for those programs that are dual enrollment programs where licensed teachers are working with students but may be relying on university faculty members to deliver academic content.

Limitations

Phenomenological investigations seek to understand a process from the point of view of those who are involved in the experience. To that end, this study focused on those who developed and implement nine postsecondary education programs for youth with ID. This researcher identified participants using a purposeful selection process, identifying a sample that represented a range of PSE programs based on categories based on their degree of inclusiveness (Neubert et al., 2001). These categories, however, may not be sufficient to assure that a complete range of programs were included in this study, as there were significant differences between programs within categories and similarities across program categories. For example, one inclusive program had students attending a range of academic classes while another inclusive program had students included on campus but not always attending academic classes.

This study was part of a one year research fellowship funded through NIDRR and this time delimitation was further complicated by the programs' college schedules. A few of the programs ended their spring semester in early April and did not offer any summer programming. Since approval through the author's university's IRB process was not obtained until December and then interviews were conducted, most on-campus observations did not begin until February. Spring break weeks also made scheduling difficult as did travel by program directors and/or the researcher for conferences or other meetings. These scheduling challenges resulted in an inability of the researcher to visit each university and conduct observations to further validate the information provided through interviews and document analyses. Although this researcher conducted interviews with multiple participants associated with each university program and further validated information collected through an analysis of program documents, it can be considered a limitation of the study that observations were not conducted for each participating program. Observations can provide validation of self-reported data as well as another viewpoint to clarify the reports of participants. Therefore, the fact that some programs did not participate in all components

of the data collection process and, in particular, that four programs did not participate in observations, is another limitation of this study. Despite these limitations, there are some implications for further research as well as practice/policy development that emerge from the findings.

Conclusion

Postsecondary programs for students with ID have the potential to offer students a number of positive adult outcomes if they can be designed to have the same impact that postsecondary education has for the general population. However, the fact remains that these programs are often very different from the two- or four-year postsecondary experiences of students enrolled in degree-seeking programs. Limited research has demonstrated a number of positive outcomes for students with ID who have participated in these PSE programs, but the degree to which those outcomes are the result of this participation rather than being the result of other concurrent factors has yet to be determined. The complexity of the PSE experience will make it difficult to conduct this research, but the field as a whole is making some progress in understanding the nature of PSE experiences for students with ID. However, the fact that so many of the components of the program are built on evidence-based practices that improve transition outcomes should provide a rationale for continuing to provide funding to support demonstration projects, such as the TPSID competition, while continuing to fund research efforts to document what is and is not working. The research is essential to support further programming, to enhance programmatic efficacy, and to guide additional research that can influence positive life outcomes individuals with ID.

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