Inclusive First-Year Orientation Programs Involving Undergraduates with Intellectual Disability: Exploring Barriers and Belonging

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Abstract

As increasing numbers of colleges establish inclusive postsecondary education programs, it is important to explore how students with intellectual disability are supported in all aspects of campus life. The present study focused on inclusive first-year orientation programs from the vantage point of 16 student group leaders, faculty group leaders, and students with intellectual disability. The researchers used individual interviews to examine how participants described, experienced, and supported the concept of belonging within the context of these semester-long, inclusive groups. Belonging was seen as a multi-dimensional concept that is neither automatically experienced nor fostered without challenges. However, efforts to support belonging were seen as having a reciprocal and sometimes substantial benefit. Implications for inclusive postsecondary education programs and disability services staff are discussed, as well as recommendations for future research.

Keywords: postsecondary education, inclusion, intellectual disability, college

The inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) movement has grown swiftly over the last decade. More than 280 colleges and universities across the United States now host programs designed to support the involvement of students with intellectual disability in various aspects of the college experience, such as academic courses, career development, social relationships, and service opportunities (Grigal & Papay, 2018). The Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 accelerated this expansion nationwide by establishing a new category of higher education program (i.e., a Comprehensive Transition Program), opening access to federal financial aid, and dedicating money to support model demonstration programs in numerous states. In addition, the Think College national coordinating center has outlined quality standards to guide program development (Grigal et al., 2012). Early longitudinal studies suggest these burgeoning IPSE programs may have a substantial impact on the later adult outcomes of graduates (e.g., Sheppard-Jones et al., 2018; Moore & Schelling, 2015).

Although students with intellectual disability are now present on a growing number of college campuses, and there is greater support and resources for them, attention must also focus on ensuring they have a meaningful presence in these learning communities (Björnsdóttir, 2017). IPSE programs vary widely in the degree to which students with intellectual disability participate in campus experiences alongside traditionally enrolled students without similar disabilities. Some programs are substantially segregated, while others reflect varied degrees of integration (Grigal & Papay, 2018). As a result, even in the midst of inclusive courses and campus activities, the extent to which students with intellectual disability experience a sense of belonging can be uneven or uncertain. Although attitudes toward IPSE tend to be positive (Griffin et al., 2012), being present in a particular community does not ensure someone will be seen as—or feel like—a valued member of that community (Prohn, 2014). Much more work is needed, then, to understand students' experiences of belonging as well

as the factors that contribute toward a deeper sense of membership.

Attention to belonging is not unique to conversations about the inclusion of college students with intellectual disability. Colleges and universities have long recognized the effect that belonging can have on the adjustment, achievement, and persistence of any undergraduate—within and beyond the classroom (Hoffman et al., 2002; O'Keefe, 2013; Strayhorn, 2019). Indeed, most campuses offer a range of programs and supports aimed at enhancing the sense of connectedness and community experienced by all of their students. First-year orientation programs are an especially common pathway for accomplishing this goal (Padgett & Keup, 2011). Although their specific functions can differ across campuses, most are aimed at smoothing the academic and social transitions of new students by introducing them to one another, the institution, and different aspects of college life (Chan, 2019). Programs can vary in their format (e.g., formal, informal), leadership (e.g., faculty, staff, and/ or students), length (e.g., week-long, semester-long), and accountability (e.g., credit-bearing, ungraded).

The inclusion of students with intellectual disability within first-year orientation programs provides a unique and important context within which to examine the concept of belonging. For example, little is known about how belonging is understood and experienced within these influential programs, the ways in which program leaders strive to promote this sense of belonging, and the challenges they experience along the way. Research addressing the IPSE movement is still relatively young. Although several studies have addressed the involvement of students with intellectual disability in academic courses, work experiences, service projects, and social relationships (see review by Whirley et al., 2020), none have addressed the first-year orientation seminar. Moreover, while many studies have addressed conceptions of belonging in college (see reviews by Slaten et al., 2016; Vivekananda-Schmidt & Sandars, 2018), very few studies have centered on students with disabilities (Hadley, 2018; Vaccaro et al. 2015) and none on students with intellectual disability.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the inclusion and belonging of students with intellectual disability involved in a semester-long first-year orientation program from the vantage point of these students and the individuals involved in leading their groups. The following research questions were addressed through individual interviews: How do participants conceptualize belonging within this context? What approaches were used by leaders to foster belonging for students with intellectual disability? What challenges did participants encounter? How did participants describe the impact of inclusion in this context?

Method

Participants

Participants were 16 individuals who participated in semester-long, inclusive first-year orientation groups at a southeastern university: six young adults with intellectual disability enrolled in the campus' program ("students with disabilities"), five student orientation leaders ("student leaders"), and five faculty orientation leaders ("faculty leaders"). Across participants, 62.5% were female and 37.5% were male. In addition, 68.8% ($n = 11$) of participants were White, 12.5% ($n = 2$) were Asian, 12.5% ($n = 2$) were multiracial, and 6.3% ($n = 1$) were Hispanic/Latino. Additional demographics are displayed in Table 1.

Students with disabilities were enrolled in a four-year, non-residential IPSE program. To participate in this program, students had to (a) be 18-26 years old, (b) have a diagnosis of an intellectual disability, (c) have completed high school and received a standard or alternate diploma (e.g., occupational or special education), (d) have not met eligibility requirements for admission into a standard college program, and (e) have a strong personal desire to attend college. All were first-year students (i.e., freshmen). In addition to having an intellectual disability, some students also self-identified as having autism spectrum disorder, speech/language impairment, or multiple disabilities. All 10 first-year students from the program were invited to participate in the study; six agreed to do so. For the two students who were not their own guardians, we also obtained parent consent.

Student leaders were juniors ($n = 2$) and seniors ($n = 3$). Faculty leaders represented a variety of undergraduate schools and departments (e.g., Theater, Spanish, Biomedical Engineering, Psychology). All student and faculty leaders had between one and three years of prior experience leading these orientation groups. To be included in the study, student and faculty leaders had to have responsibility for leading an orientation group in which students with intellectual disability participated. Six of the 93 first-year groups included students from the IPSE program. We distributed study information to potential participants by email. Five of the six student leaders and five of the six faculty leaders agreed to participate. All study procedures were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

Table 1

Study Participants by Orientation Group

Group	Pseudonym	Role	Gender	Race/ethnicity	Year
A	Kerri	Student	Female	Multiracial	First-year
	Dominique	Student leader	Female	White	Senior
	Brice	Faculty leader	Male	White	NA
B	Joel	Student	Male	Hispanic	First-year
	Theo	Student leader	Male	White	Senior
	Laurie	Faculty leader	Female	White	NA
C	Marcus	Student	Male	White	First-year
	Shannon	Student	Female	White	First-year
	Justin	Student leader	Male	Asian	Junior
	Nadia	Faculty leader	Female	White	NA
D	Cameron	Student	Male	White	First-year
	Gabby	Student leader	Female	Multiracial	Junior
E	Amy	Student	Female	White	First-year
	Aly	Student leader	Female	Asian	Senior
	Carly	Faculty leader	Female	White	NA
F	Simone	Faculty leader	Female	White	NA

Note. NA=Not Applicable

University and Inclusive Postsecondary Education Program

This study took place at a research-intensive, private university with almost 7,000 undergraduate students. At the time of the study, the freshman class was 51% female and 49% male. Almost half (43%) of the class were students of color, and 12% were international students. The university offers nearly 70 majors in its four undergraduate colleges.

Since 2010, the university has offered a non-residential, inclusive postsecondary program for students with intellectual disability. The program began as a two-year program and became a four-year Certified Transition Program (CTP) in 2017. The program supports student access to all aspects of campus life, including academic coursework, career development, student organizations, service-learning experiences, and campus events. Students audit one or two typical university classes each semester, take specialized seminar courses with other students with intellectual disability in the program, access student organizations and extracurriculars, participate in internships and other work experiences, and enjoy other campus activities based on their personal interests. In addition to the semester-long orientation program, students also participate in many other discrete orientation events held during the first week of the semester. Students graduate with a certificate of completion.

First-Year Orientation Program

All first-year students at the university are randomly assigned to one of 93 orientation groups. Each group is composed of about 18 students. The groups meet for 50 min each week for the first 10 weeks of the fall semester at various on-campus locations. Each group is jointly led by one faculty leader and one upper-level (i.e., sophomore, junior, or senior) student leader. Both faculty and student leaders go through an application and interview process, followed by nine hours of training on program goals, content, and mentorship skills. Throughout the fall semester, the two leaders are expected to come together weekly (for 30 minutes) to plan group meetings, co-lead weekly group meetings and debrief afterwards (for 65 minutes), and meet with each group member at least once during the semester outside of the weekly meetings.

Although group leadership is truly shared, faculty set the tone for what is expected, what is reasonable, and where the boundaries lie.

Although the program is ungraded and non-credit bearing, all groups share a required program syllabus. Weekly sessions use small-group discussions and activities addressing (a) what college life entails, both academically and socially; (b) the basic skills and available university resources that support students' academic and personal success; (c) the challenges of maintaining physical and mental health that confront new students living on their own for the first time; and (d) an awareness about issues related to equity, diversity, and inclusion, and the individual role each student plays in promoting an inclusive and supportive environment. Within this framework, group leaders have the autonomy to choose weekly activities and how to address these topics. Groups are intentionally designed to introduce students to a diverse group of peers who they might not meet otherwise.

Assignment of students with disabilities to particular orientation groups was not random. Faculty and student orientation leader pairs were asked to volunteer to lead an inclusive group that involved two students from the IPSE program. Interested leader pairs were assigned two students with intellectual disability as members of their group, and these leaders then received training by IPSE program staff prior to the start of the fall semester. This additional 90-minute training included information on the history and goals of the IPSE program, as well as general strategies for how to support the participation of students with intellectual disability. The training specifically addressed advice on creating an inclusive space and expectations for students enrolled in the IPSE program. The session also provided leaders the opportunity to practice interactive activities meant to promote inclusion and to ask questions of the IPSE staff.

Interview Procedures and Protocol

We conducted individual interviews with each participant. All interviews of students and student leaders were conducted by a graduate student majoring in special education and all faculty interviews were conducted by a professor with expertise in the areas of disability and inclusion. Fourteen interviews were held in person and three took place by video. The interviews took place at a location chosen by participants (e.g., campus meeting rooms, faculty offices, students' homes). Interviews averaged 41 minutes (range 21-65 minutes) in length. All interviews were audio-recorded. Each participant received a $25 gift card for his or her time. Interviews took place during the spring immediately following the fall semester's orientation program.

A research team, composed of a graduate student and two faculty members, developed two semi-structured interview protocols—one for students with intellectual disability and one for the student leaders and faculty leaders (full protocols are available by request). Although the questions on each of the two protocols were worded somewhat differently, each addressed similar topics: overview of their specific orientation group, their motivations for becoming involved, the ways in which students participated in the group, their own conceptions and experiences of belonging, how diversity and disability were addressed within their group, and their recommendations related to strengthening their group. However, we only asked student and faculty leaders about the approaches they used to foster belonging in their groups. We began by crafting questions aligned to each of our research questions and made adjustments to the wording and order through consensus. Before each interview, the interviewer told participants they could skip any question they did not want to answer or stop the interview at any time. The researchers also took field notes and completed a reflection sheet afterwards to capture any personal insights.

Data Analysis

All audio-recordings were professionally transcribed, reviewed for accuracy, and then de-identified with pseudonyms. We used thematic analysis to code all interviews (Patton, 2002). In addition, we adopted the constant comparison method, in which existing codes were frequently compared with previous uses to ensure consistency (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Finally, we used a team-based approach to strengthen the trustworthiness of our analyses. The team was composed of one graduate student who participated in the interviews (first author) and a faculty member affiliated with the program, but who was not involved in the interviews. We took steps to ensure that our approach aligned with recommended practices in qualitative research (Brantlinger et al., 2005). For example, we recruited individuals with diverse perspectives and roles from six different orientation groups, allowing multiple opportunities to triangulate findings within and across orientation groups. We debriefed at multiple points throughout the process as a way of checking our assumptions and conclusions. We also maintained an audit trail of raw data and products (i.e., iterations of the coding framework) documenting our analysis process.

Data analysis occurred in multiple stages. First, two members of the research team independently coded the same four initial interviews. We identified sections of participants' responses that were direct-

ly relevant to our four research questions and used open coding to assign a code to a relevant participant response. Coded responses ranged from one or two sentences to several paragraphs. Whenever appropriate, we created in vivo codes that reflected the participant's actual language (e.g., "network effect," "us vs. them mentality"). We used axial coding strategies to identify themes and develop a set of code names and tentative definitions addressing each of the research questions. We met to compare and discuss our preliminary codes and reach consensus on an initial coding scheme with overarching themes and categories.

Next, the first author used this initial framework to code the remaining 12 interviews independently. New codes were added as needed and each code was compared to existing codes to ensure consistency across the transcripts. We then met as a team to discuss the revised framework and make revisions for clarity. The first author then revisited all of the transcripts using the final framework to ensure all codes had been appropriately assigned. Once complete, the second team member reviewed the final coded transcripts.

Findings

A number of themes and categories emerged across the interviews with students (S), student leaders (SL), and faculty leaders (FL) related to conceptualizing belonging, strategies to promote belonging, challenges, and the impact of inclusion.

How Did Participants Conceptualize Belonging?

Four primary themes addressed the ways in which participants defined "belonging."

Shared space. When asked how they defined belonging, most participants spoke to the importance of a shared physical space within which they could interact with one another. The regular coming together at a common time and place provided context for interactions and encounters to take place. For example, Cameron (S) described belonging as "To be with people almost every single day. Never be alone, always be able to talk to someone." Likewise, Brice (FL) noted how being all together shaped belonging: "It was good to have [IPSE students] there that first meeting, because we want them to see that they were a part of the group."

In contrast, physical distance was said to hinder belonging—even within group meetings. Justin (SL) described such a concern: "I always was struggling with this idea, did [Marcus] feel like he belonged? Because he kind of tended to sit like in the corner a little bit further away from people…it seemed like he

was obviously distanced." Aly (SL) echoed this sentiment when she noted that on the first day, "The entire [orientation group] sat on one side…Amy (S) sat on the other side because they'd already sat down. We can't, like, move people around at that point."

Shared experiences. Participants saw the opportunity to participate in common activities as vital for belonging, whether it took place during or outside of orientation activities. Involvement in small-group activities during weekly meetings together with others seemed to contribute to belonging. Theo (SL) illustrated this when talking about a craft the students were making together: "One group specifically invited Joel (S) over to help out and I could just see his face light up when they did that." Amy (S) echoed this idea: "I like talking to [other group members] and get to know them much better. And it's pretty fun like, doing some activities with them, and get to connect with them." In contrast, missed opportunities for shared experiences had the opposite effect. Brice (FL) explained, "There was an issue one day with the t-shirts or something. They [IPSE students] didn't get to make t-shirts with the rest of the group…we had to kind of divert into something else, which it wasn't a huge, huge deal, but they noticed it."

Students and leaders alike also addressed the effect of shared experiences outside of scheduled group meetings. Brice (FL) described an annual event in which all first-year students run the field at the start of a football game: "That was a big deal. It was really important to them [IPSE students] to be part of the student body and get to run out on the field with everybody." But he also emphasized the power of more informal times when students spontaneously decided to do something fun together, like heading to the cafeteria: "It was all them initiating that, it wasn't something we had to contrive or create." When asked how these out-of-meeting experiences made him feel, Joel (S) said, "Well, it made me feel excited."

Although the salience of shared experiences outside of the meeting were emphasized by everyone, they were not uniformly experienced by students with disabilities. For example, Kerri (S) described a lack of outside interactions: "Mostly I was hanging out by myself…I didn't want to bother them when they were doing homework and studying. I didn't want to bother them. So I kept to myself." One hindrance to shared experiences was the fact that IPSE students usually left campus in the evenings because the university lacked residential offerings. As Carly (FL) explained, "There were lots of times where on the group chat text it was like 'hey, we're gonna do this. Right? And we're gonna do that right now.' And then the [IPSE students] would often respond—because they were

probably some of the most eager ones to respond—but they couldn't come 'cause they weren't here."

Shared understanding. Participants talked about the importance of shared understanding to belonging in two distinct ways: the importance of shared understanding of the orientation content and mutual understanding of each other. Some participants implied that without both types of shared understanding, students might not feel like they truly belonged.

Because the university's orientation program had an explicit goal of addressing difficult topics (e.g., sexual assault, racism, mental health), participants explained that a shared understanding of this content helped everyone feel like they were a part of the group. Some participants elaborated that this understanding did not need to be exactly the same for everyone to be effective. As Laurie (FL) noted, "Not having the same experience, but in some ways having a parallel learning experience, I knew was, I think to me the ultimate goal." Many of the leaders, however, described difficulties associated with navigating this content when it was more difficult or particularly sensitive. When describing some of these times, Theo (SL) noted, "I don't know if [Joel] got as much out of it…maybe he just didn't understand what exactly was being involved." Such misunderstandings could have an inadvertent impact. As Nadia (FL) noted,

> I think it made [Marcus] feel more different and more isolated. 'Cause I think it's a funny thing, right? You can be in a group that's supposed to foster this sense of belongingness, but if you don't feel like you're hooked into it, it just makes it worse.

Participants were quick to note, however, that shared understanding of content was helpful, but not sufficient. Instead, a shared understanding of each other was more crucial. Sometimes, this meant a shared understanding of college life. For example, Justin (SL) described what happened when Shannon (S) shared with other group members how many assignments she had due a particular week: "People were like, 'Oh, I feel you. It's been a rough week for me too!'" He continued, "I think that was a good way to kind of establish belonging where you can share empathy, sympathy, or just mutual understanding of feelings and experiences." Shannon (S) explained the effect this foundation of mutual understanding had on her own sense of belonging and being herself within the group: "I usually don't talk about [my disability] with people . . . But since I've talked to my [orientation] group about it, I feel more comfortable about it to the point I don't have to hide myself all the time."

Shared interests. Participants frequently addressed the ways having shared interests contributes to belonging. For two student leaders, mutual interest *in the content* discussed by the group was helpful. However, almost everyone emphasized that students needed to have a genuine interest *in each other* in order to feel as though they belonged within the group. This shared interest could also be as simple as students informally being asked about their life or called on during discussions. Many students with disabilities described the effect this type of shared interest had on them. For example, Shannon (S) said, "It felt a lot better [to be asked about my disability] because like, I usually keep it inside of me a lot. I usually like hide it. I just don't want to like really express myself, really talk about it, really." Kerri (S) felt similarly when asked how she felt when people reached out to her during meetings, "So, I just felt comfortable…It's hard to put in words…I felt great. I felt really great, and comfortable." Joel (S) agreed as he expressed surprise that someone in the group would want his opinion. He said, "I kind of felt happy and amazed." Justin (SL) summarized this point well, "Once they start making friends in the group, I think that also adds a sense of belonging." Although the importance of shared interests was consistently emphasized, it was not universally experienced. For example, Marcus (S) indicated that other students never really asked his opinion; when asked whether he wished they did, Marcus replied, "Yeah."

What Approaches Were Used to Foster Belonging?

When student and faculty leaders were asked how to best facilitate belonging, they described using a variety of approaches to promote belonging within their groups.

Content. All of the leaders discussed how they approached covering information in their groups. Some decided to alter the information to ensure everyone could actively participate. For example, Carly (FL) substantially changed how she approached group discussions to facilitate equal involvement of students: "I had to find a way to be able to create curriculums to basically where it would meet the level of comfort that everybody in the classroom has without making it seem obvious that we were catering it towards certain people." Most leaders, however, worried that changing the content too much could be problematic. For example, Dominique (SL) explained that it was important to incorporate students with disabilities in all conversations: "I heard from other [leaders] that they got rid of some content because they felt uncomfortable discussing it in front of their [IPSE] students. But I think that's underestimating them."

Extra attention. Every student and faculty leader

mentioned giving extra attention to the IPSE student during meeting times, although this looked different in each group. Many faculty leaders found that tailoring their questioning to topics of interest to the students during group discussions helped engage the student in the rest of the group. Brice (FL) explained how she subtly drew everyone into conversation together, "We know that [one of the IPSE students] loves going to [school] football games, so let's talk about a [school] game when we start. That'll be our icebreaker. Did everybody go to the game?" Simone (FL) and Carly (FL) shared similar examples. Several student and faculty leaders also found that giving extra attention to grouping within meetings helped. Justin (SL) noted, "[We'd] break out into these smaller groups where I think Marcus (S) felt a little bit more comfortable sharing his thoughts on things." He then brought the groups back together so that "everybody felt comfortable saying whatever they felt about things." Carly (FL) agreed: "When we worked in smaller groups, there were some students who really took our [IPSE] students under their wings, and so that helped with their incorporation and the participation." Finally, some student leaders provided additional explanation or preparatory discussions just prior to meeting times to students in order for them to better participate in group discussions on difficult topics. Collectively, this directed attention was among the things that students like Joel (S) said "made me feel welcome."

Mindset. Most faculty leaders noted the importance of a specific mindset. For some, the crux of this approach was a new kind of flexibility. When asked about advice for future faculty, Nadia (FL) said, "I would hope that they would go into it with the understanding that they're going to have to change things up a little bit so that everybody can participate in discussions if they want." Brice (FL) agreed, "Just make sure you're aware that things could change, schedules could change…you just have to be willing to adapt to whatever the need is." For others, this mindset was centered on an open-mindedness and leading by example. Carly (FL) described the impact this open mindset had on her group: "[We as] facilitators have to have a level of comfort with [inclusivity] in order to demonstrate that—then encourage it in others."

Disclosure. Whether to disclose the fact that their groups would include students who had an intellectual disability was a topic of much debate amongst leaders. Some leaders chose not to inform the rest of the group in advance, as they feared it would inadvertently hinder belonging. Explaining why they took this approach, Justin (SL) said, "We didn't even introduce Shannon (S) and Marcus (S) as being part of the [IPSE] program. We just acted like they were students

at [the college], which they are." Others felt that disclosing the inclusion of IPSE students in their groups prior to the start of orientation was helpful. Carly (FL) described how she prepared her group: "We did talk about the fact that we were going to have two [IPSE] students who were just going to participate with everything that we did."

Group member support. Many leaders relied on group member support to enhance belonging. In describing the impact this had on her group, Aly (SL) said, "There were two or three students who were really nice, and me and my [faculty] partner definitely fell back on them sometimes, when we really needed help integrating [the IPSE students]." Nadia (FL) explained how peer-to-peer support was helpful to her group: "The other thing that happened that was pretty wonderful during the semester, is that Shannon (S), who is the other student, started looking out for Marcus (S). It wasn't just the neurotypical students in our group, it was the [IPSE] students who took care of each other."

Beyond the group. Although less common, a few leaders extended their strategies outside of group meetings. Some leaders discussed reaching out to IPSE staff as a means of increasing belonging of all students within their groups. For example, Nadia (FL) described this support as invaluable: "You know [the IPSE staff are] in the building, so I would literally see them in the halls. I'd walk by them and be like, 'You. Come talk to me. I need your help.' And they were very helpful." Other faculty, however, did not reach out this way and recommended integrating a scheduled checkpoint with staff. Likewise, many student leaders discussed relying on their faculty partners. This support was particularly helpful for Dominique (SL), whose faculty partner had a son with a disability: "I was really lucky in that I had Brice, who had a lot of experience."

What Challenges to Belonging Did Participants Report?

Three areas of challenges were raised: content, personal factors, and mentality.

Content. The issue of whether—if at all—to discuss disability as an aspect of diversity presented a challenge to many leaders. One of the goals of the orientation program is to expose students to issues of campus diversity and inclusion. Many, like Justin's (SL) group, chose to avoid the topic completely. He said, "I think we purposely didn't cover the topic of disability because of this idea that we didn't want to have them be treated any differently than anybody else." Those who did cover it described feeling uncomfortable. Aly (SL) explained, "Especially when we talked about disability, I felt…like I didn't have

authority to speak on it, especially when we have two people who immediately face invisible, or visible, disabilities." Expressing similar fears, Brice (FL) said, "We didn't want to have those micro-aggressions there, you know, and say, 'What do you guys think about disability?' And everyone would turn their chair, looking at our two [IPSE] students. So, we were trying to always balance that." Likewise, the students with intellectual disability were also mixed in their views. Some said that they would have been happy to talk about their disability and wished that people had asked more about it. As Shannon (S) explained: "You can trust them. Whatever you talk about…stays in that group and nobody will tell anybody what you really talked about." Others were more reluctant. When asked about this issue, Kerri said "I don't want to talk about that…Well it seems kind of like too personal."

Almost all of the student and faculty leaders noted ways in which the content they addressed from the syllabus impacted participation and belonging. Some leaders felt that more sensitive and/or weighty content sometimes posed a challenge for certain students. Carly (FL) explained, "Sometimes I think that the conversation went a little fast for them to fully grasp what was going on. And so sometimes, lack of participation was just because they missed it." Some students with intellectual disability also said they struggled with some content. For example, Kerri (S) described how she felt when her group discussed tough topics: "[I] needed more help. Sometimes I couldn't understand it, so I'd go to the teachers and she would explain it to me." Others felt that their initial fears regarding difficult content did not come to fruition. Nadia (FL) mentioned sessions when topics like sexual assault, drinking, and other difficult issues were addressed: "When topics like that did come up, the students seemed fine. So, I think my worries about things like that tended to be a little bit overblown."

In other a few cases, content addressed in the curriculum was perceived to be unrelatable to the students, such as when Nadia (FL) focused one session on the university's international programs, which were not available to students with intellectual disability: "I think while we were in the middle of a study abroad session, I was like, 'Why in the heck did we pick this one?'"

Personal factors. All three groups of participants discussed some challenging personal characteristics that they perceived negatively impacted belonging within orientation groups. Among student leaders, many said the challenges they faced in their inclusive groups were due to their own lack of prior experience or training. Dominique (SL) discussed her anxiety by saying, "I was also worried about my competen-

cy ability…I had never worked with students of either developmental or intellectual abilities before in a leadership way." Similarly, Gabby (SL) said, "I still felt like there were things that I lacked going into it, and that was maybe even something that I personally should have spent more time seeking out my own training or even taking a class to better understand how to accommodate students of different disabilities." Interestingly, none of the faculty leaders mentioned this concern.

Both student and faculty leaders indicated that some personal characteristics of students may have hindered belonging, such as anxiety, discomfort with the content, complexity of communication needs, or a tendency to "derail" conversations. Nadia (FL) described issues with student anxiety in her group, "Those attempts to rope [Marcus] into the group would sometimes just make him more anxious." Joel (S) also affirmed that getting called on "made me feel just a little nervous." Gabby (SL) described having the opposite problem for a student who often strayed to other topics: "For Cameron, I feel like he just took the conversation wherever he wanted it to go. I feel like I didn't anticipate how to guide all the groups a little bit better in those exercises." Aly (SL) agreed, describing how a derailed conversation affected the rest of the group: "Especially with [Amy], she would get really excited, and she would keep talking, and then fifteen minutes would go by and...no one had the heart to stop her."

Problems sometimes arose from other members of the group, who occasionally seemed to be uncomfortable with or disinterested in interacting with students with intellectual disability in their inclusive groups. Aly (SL) offered a possible explanation for this type of hesitation: "I feel like people think—this is horrible—but if people think they have to hang out with one of [the IPSE students during the group], then they always have to hang out with one of them."

Us vs. them mentality. Student leaders of two groups perceived that an "us vs. them" mindset created a barrier to participation—and subsequently to belonging—between traditional college students and students from the IPSE program within their groups. Aly (SL) postulated that this mindset might be inevitable due to the high ratio of students without disabilities to those with intellectual disability: "There is almost a stigma surrounding disability, and it's something that they've lived with all their lives…I just feel like sometimes [orientation] can make them feel even more alone." Dominique agreed, "There was a lot of us versus them going on." Other leaders, like Justin (SL), saw this as a "welcome challenge" in which they could work "to integrate them into a larger group

setting and be able to treat everybody equally. And make it seem like it's not two different experiences, but one in its entirety."

What Was the Impact of Inclusion?

Despite these obstacles, all participants described their inclusive groups as having a positive impact on the group, on them personally, and on their extended networks.

On the group. Several participants indicated that having students with intellectual disability in their group brought a cohesiveness to the group that was lacking when those students were gone. Gabby (SL) explained, "Whether people realize it or not, Cameron was a little bit a piece of the glue that held all of our sessions together, and made it flow better." Gabby went on to talk about the negative effect Cameron's occasional absence had on the group: "It wasn't just that he was absent, but his talking was also encouraging other people to talk, and then it just overall became like much more quiet in general…people weren't sharing as much." Laurie (FL) felt that involving students with intellectual disability "humanizes the process of education…it felt like the group came together and the mission became more than the individual and about the whole group being supportive of each other and working together as a team."

Every leader agreed that students with intellectual disability enhanced their groups by adding an additional dimension of diversity to the orientation experience. Justin (SL) said it simply: "The big benefit is just this idea of helping people understand that diversity goes in a lot of different ways." Gabby (SL) agreed with the enriching effect of this enhanced diversity: "It added a lot to our discussions and people's perspectives." Carly (FL) speculated that those group members who had no prior experience with individuals with disabilities gained the most: "My guess is that the ones who were uncomfortable probably got bigger benefits…By just having the opportunity to interact from watching other people interact with the [IPSE] students was probably very beneficial to them." This experience of diversity impacted students as well, though fewer participants discussed it. Shannon (S) explained how grateful she was to share her views and to hear the views of others: "I get to hear the other students and sometimes my professors— their own definition about [diversity]…to see, like, the difference of definitions they have for that word."

Many leaders agreed that students with intellectual disability brought unique and beneficial perspectives to group conversations. Justin (SL) spoke in detail about the impact of these distinctive viewpoints on discussion:

Whenever I would ask, "How has your week been?" their answers were always so unique and different. [Shannon's (S)] was always just like 100% positive and just like, 'Oh, I got to meet the [a capella group] today and so this has been the greatest week of my life.'" And then other people are like, "You know what, if that's the greatest week of her life, maybe my weeks aren't so bad."

Laurie (FL) saw a similar impact in her group conversations:

I feel like everybody relaxes. They recognize there are different ways to look at the material and I think everyone has a common goal of appreciating where this person is coming from. In a way, the classroom doesn't become just about the material, it becomes about an experience of accepting everyone for who they are and what level they're coming from.

Personal benefits. Most participants also described the impact on themselves personally. All but one student and faculty leader talked about how leading these groups changed their mindset around disability. Dominique (SL) attributed a significant change in her implicit biases to leading this group: "It was definitely a huge learning experience. I realized a lot of my own biases…I think being able to put yourself in situations where you're forced to recognize them does help lessen them." Even Laurie (FL), who had extensive experience with students with disabilities prior to leading this group, felt a change in her perspective. She said,

I came away from it as hearing: We have a disability, but we want to achieve on our own level. We want to be a part of what's going on, we want to be respected for who we are. We just want to participate in whatever ways we have the ability to participate, just like everyone else.

Many leaders also discussed the positive impact this experience had on their teaching. Reflecting upon the change she saw in her teaching, Nadia (FL) came to this conclusion: "I think it's it made me…a bit more sensitive about the audience that I face when I teach and during discussion sections, even though I don't have [IPSE] students in my class."

Several faculty described the impact of this experience on their future. Brice (FL) discussed how the experience has made him want to promote inclusion in the formal classes he taught. Nadia (FL) agreed, "I think one other thing it made me realize is how non-in-

clusive most of my classes are. So, working with the [IPSE] students in [orientation] made me think some about whether I would be able to have [IPSE] students in my classes that I teach for undergrad." Likewise, multiple student leaders addressed how leading this inclusive group would equip them for their future careers in areas like medicine and educational policy. Beyond this professional impact, most student and faculty leaders also talked about being moved to future action—whether it be future friendships or extracurricular involvement. For example, Gabby (SL), who was a residential adviser, planned to advocate for having IPSE students included in dormitories. She said, "I feel like having students from [the IPSE program] on those floors…would add another layer of diversity that a lot of students need to see."

Some leaders talked about their experience with others in their networks (i.e., fellow faculty members, roommates, family members, classmates). The way that they did so—and what they chose to share—impacted the way their networks viewed the inclusive orientation experience. Laurie (FL) said that this has become a positive, natural part of conversations, saying, "I certainly talk about it as part of my life now and part of my teaching. I actually will tell people whenever I get the chance." The same was true for Justin (SL), "I pretty much shared everything about it. I shared that I had [IPSE] students, that I was really excited about it. That was really the only sentiment I had about it, was really just that I was excited."

Finally, students with intellectual disability addressed a variety of ways in which they were personally impacted by their active involvement in an inclusive orientation group. The social benefits were among the most prominent. Cameron (S) emphasized how the weekly interactions "helped me with social skills…[with] the kind of friends that aren't in [my IPSE program]…and [learning] where to find friends." Other students described their growth in self-confidence around interpersonal relationships. As Kerri emphasized:

> At first, it made me feel a little bit uncomfortable. Because I didn't know what to say. So after doing it over and over—going to the [orientation] group—I got to learn how to speak up. It just had to take me a few times to get used to speaking up for myself . . . That's what they taught me!

Finally, the development of new friendships punctuated the comments of most of the students. Cameron (S) said the group enabled him to "meet people that I might talk to later in the school year and like know for the whole four years."

Discussion

The inclusive postsecondary education movement is expanding rapidly across the country. As more college campuses strive to welcome and weave students with intellectual disability into all aspects of campus life, it is important to understand the ways in which these inclusive campus experiences contribute to a sense of belonging and the challenges that students with intellectual disability may face along the way. In this study, we interviewed students with intellectual disability, student leaders, and faculty leaders involved in six inclusive, semester-long first-year orientation groups. Several overarching findings extend the literature in important ways.

First, this study suggests that belonging is shaped by multiple factors rather than a singular experience. Although individual participants each defined belonging differently, several themes coalesced around the ideas that belonging is made possible through shared space, shared experiences, shared understanding, and shared interests. Shared space and experiences that extended outside the weekly orientation meetings seemed particularly important, as they demonstrated a commitment to one another that spilled over to times when students were not explicitly asked to get together. Moreover, shared understanding of and interest in one another was emphasized more than the content of any particular orientation meetings. This is promising, as understanding of information was sometimes considered to be a barrier for some students with intellectual disability.

This multi-faceted portrait of belonging aligns with, but also extends, previous studies addressing belonging in other contexts. For example, a large-scale review by Mahar et al. (2013) described belonging as feelings of value and respect introduced through reciprocal relationships that are built upon a foundation of shared experiences, beliefs, or personal characteristics. In their discussion of belonging for individuals with intellectual disability in faith communities, Carter et al. (2016) identified the importance of being present, noticed, welcomed, cared for, supported, accepted, known, befriended, needed, and loved. Finally, in their qualitative study of college students with disabilities, Vacarro et al. (2015) found that belonging influenced the existence of supportive relationships. The present study extends these findings by showing their salience to college students with intellectual disability within the new context of their first-year campus experiences.

Second, these interviews suggested that belonging does not inevitably or automatically come simply because students are participating in integrated

campus experiences. Instead, belonging may require some intentionality or facilitation in order to be experienced by everyone. The strategies student and faculty leaders used to promote belonging were also multiple and varied. Most participants opted not to make substantial alterations to the orientation content. Instead, they provided additional support to students as a means of supporting their engagement in the material. As noted previously, even though student leaders expressed concern that the information covered posed difficulties for students with intellectual disability, understanding of the content was not as critical to belonging as shared understanding of and interest in each other. Most participants agreed that keeping the content the same (with supplementary support) allowed for a more genuine orientation experience in which all students could experience belonging. Leaders were split, however, on whether and how to disclose or discuss disability and its impact on belonging. This finding aligns with the conclusions of other studies addressing inclusive practices in K-12 schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods. A sense of belonging is not experienced simply because individuals with intellectual disability are present in the same classrooms, businesses, or community activities. Most researchers agree that intentional or additional strategies are needed to ensure belonging accompanies inclusion (Carter et al., 2016; Simplican et al., 2015). It is quite possible—and indeed quite common—for individuals with intellectual disability to be present in activities alongside individuals without disabilities and have few interactions or sustained relationships.

Third, fostering belonging can be difficult, even in intentionally inclusive contexts like first-year orientation programs. Although the student and faculty leaders agreed that keeping orientation content as written was a better way of promoting belonging than altering it substantially for students with intellectual disability, many still described challenges in addressing difficult topics in their groups. Most student leaders expressed a need for additional training on how to promote inclusive spaces. Some participants also noted that certain personal characteristics of some students had to be navigated. Interestingly, many of these characteristics were personality traits that could be exhibited by any student in their group. In other words, they were not all specific to having a disability.

Fourth, regardless of the obstacles that are intrinsic to fostering belonging in an inclusive group, this study indicates that the impact of doing so can be rewarding. All of the participants agreed that including students with intellectual disability benefited their groups. In other words, the increased diversity and the new perspectives enhanced the quality of their groups. Most student and faculty leaders described the impact it had on their mindset regarding individuals with disabilities. Several described the experience as so meaningful that it led them to change how they thought about their current or future work. Many leaders also advocated for inclusion elsewhere by sharing their experiences with others. These findings echo other research addressing the impact of well-supported inclusion on individuals with and without disabilities (e.g., Kalambouka et al., 2007).

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings from this study. First, the sample was relatively small and limited to a single university. First-year orientation experiences can differ substantially across higher education institutions. Future studies should examine whether similar themes emerge when looking across other types of campus first-year programs. Second, insights were not obtained from every member of these six orientation groups. The insights of other group members who did not have disabilities and were not leaders would add another important vantage point on the topics of inclusion and belonging. How did they view their group and the participation of students with intellectual disability? How did they conceptualize belonging? How did they experience belonging themselves? Future studies should address these questions. Third, interviews were conducted in the semester following orientation, which may have limited interviewee recall on specific moments from the experience. Lastly, although this study provides new perspectives on belonging, it took place at a single point in time. It is unclear whether the relationships that formed within these groups lasted throughout the academic year and beyond. Longitudinal study of these relationships would provide important insights into the longer-term impact of these experiences.

Implications for Practice

Our findings have important implications for universities committed to the inclusion of students with disabilities in all aspects of campus life. First, the expertise and support of disability services professionals could be invaluable in supporting the success of inclusive first-year orientation programs. Many student and faculty leaders struggled with whether and how to address issues of disability disclosure within their groups. Similarly, some students with intellectual disability wondered about the appropriateness and timing of self-disclosure. In each of these areas, disability support professionals could offer expertise and

guidance on navigating these challenging topics well. Likewise, disability support professionals could provide helpful guidance on accommodations and universal design strategies that could enhance the active participation of students with disabilities and give greater confidence to group leaders. Involving them somehow in the initial training provided to *all* orientation group leaders, as well as the additional training provided to leaders of inclusive groups, could provide one avenue for building the capacity and confidence of these group leaders. Indeed, the reach and relevance of disability services professionals should extend well beyond issues of coursework access (Association on Higher Education and Disability, n.d.). Finally, the significance of belonging evident across these groups might prompt disability services professionals to reflect on the ways in which access might lead to more than just academic learning or active participation. The sense of deep connection and full membership that comes through the experience of belonging may require something more than mere presence. As they promote awareness and advocate for greater access, disability services professionals can remind their institution that inclusion in the absence of belonging falls short of the goal of full participation.

Second, IPSE program staff play a critical role in supporting successful orientation programming. From the initial training they provide to group leaders to the ongoing support they make available throughout the semester, their familiarity with participating students with intellectual disability and expertise in individualized supports are essential. Across the interviews, student and faculty leaders emphasized the helpfulness of these staff while also addressing additional needs. For example, multiple leaders suggested additional training be provided to orientation leaders throughout the semester (rather than only at the outset). Others felt that it could be helpful for program staff to facilitate occasional meetings with all of the leaders of these groups to share ideas and brainstorm challenges. Many leaders said it would be helpful to receive more information on the strengths, interests, and needs of participating students with intellectual disability prior to their first group. Finally, IPSE program staff should meet with disability services professionals to define their collaborative relationship in this area and discuss how issues like the delivery of accommodations and campus access might best be addressed.

Third, this study highlights the promise and possibilities of inclusive first-year orientation programs for campus leaders. Presently, most IPSE programs offer orientation experiences for students with intellectual disability that are substantially separate from typical offerings. College and university administrators should commit to expanding and supporting access to the full range of available campus experiences for these students. This may involve casting a clear vision for campus-wide inclusion, ensuring sufficient resources and staffing are allocated to Orientation offices, and establishing clear policies related to equity and diversity. Here, too, the expertise of disability services professionals could help inform institutional decisions regarding how best to design and implement programming that is welcoming and inclusive (Thompson et al., 2010). Because orientation meetings and activities take place across many different campus spaces and places, efforts are needed to ensure all campus facilities are fully accessible.

Conclusion

Findings from this study emphasize the opportunities for belonging that exist within the context of first-year orientation programs. Although not without some challenges, student and faculty leaders affirmed that inclusive experiences can introduce reciprocal benefits for students with and without intellectual disability, as well as for faculty who lead these groups. Other colleges and universities with inclusive postsecondary programs should invest in strong supports for inclusion within orientation activities.

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