Exploring Florida's Inclusive Postsecondary Education Programs

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Abstract

Inclusive Postsecondary Education (IPSE) programs offer students with intellectual disabilities (ID) the opportunity to enhance academic, career, and independent living skills, with the ultimate goal of preparing them for meaningful employment. Given the significance of such programs and their rapid growth across the country and in Florida, an ongoing examination of the progress, challenges, and support needs of IPSE programs is crucial. To extend current research efforts at the state level, two focus groups (n = 12) were conducted representing 11 of Florida's IPSE programs and one state agency to explore the experiences of IPSE programs in Florida. Four major themes were generated following thematic analysis of data: the need for preparing students and families for postsecondary education environments, the types of support Florida's IPSE programs have received, the major barriers IPSE programs are currently facing, and finally, what IPSE programs need in the future to continue to support students with ID. Findings from this study offer significant insights into the current status and needs of Florida's IPSE programs and serve to inform the work of disability resource providers, and the creation, expansion, and sustainability of IPSE programs across the state.

Keywords: inclusive postsecondary education, intellectual disability, focus group, qualitative

Federal legislation, such as the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA, 2008) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), has increased opportunities for young adults with intellectual disabilities (ID) to pursue higher education through inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs. IPSE programs offer students with ID the opportunity to enhance academic, career, and independent living skills, with the ultimate goal of preparing them for meaningful employment (Becht et al., 2020). These programs represent an "emblem of possibility, not only demonstrating that students with ID can be college students who benefit from higher education but also contributing to the continuing evolution of higher education on a path toward equity and diversity for all Americans" (Grigal, Hart, & Weir, 2013, p. 2).

Given the barriers and limited opportunities individuals with ID often encounter in society (Luecking, 2016) and within education systems (National Council on Disability, 2018), attending an IPSE program can result in a better quality of life (Grigal et al., 2019). For example, participation in higher education represents a key pathway to employment for people with ID, which is important as individuals with ID are the least likely disability group to attend college (Thoma et al., 2011) and, as a result, have much higher rates of unemployment in comparison to people without disabilities. Prior to the pandemic, only 19% of individuals with developmental disabilities, including ID, were employed (National Core Indicators, 2019). While more recent employment data on people with ID is lacking, the latest employment rate from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (U.S. Department of Labor, 2021) indicates that 19.1% of people with disabilities, in general, were employed in 2021, compared to 63.7% for people without a disability. Although these statistics likely reflect the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on industries commonly occupied by people with disabilities (Brooks, 2020; Maroto & Pettinichio, 2020), the fact remains that a significant employment gap exists between people with disabilities, particularly those with ID, and people without disabilities.

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Being employed provides people with more than financial stability. Belonging to an organization helps to form an individual's identity, creates social connections, and ultimately positively impacts wellbeing and quality of life outcomes (Jahoda, Kemp, Riddell, & Banks, 2008). According to the Declaration of Human Rights (Article 23), every person, no matter their background, status, gender, ability, or any other characteristics or identity, deserves to have opportunities for meaningful employment with equal pay for equal work (United Nations, 2015). Therefore, young adults with ID deserve the same choices as their neurotypical peers: attending college, and increasing the knowledge and skills needed to obtain meaningful employment and live independently.

There is a wealth of research demonstrating the many benefits young adults with ID gain from participating in an IPSE program. For example, as evidenced by the National Coordinating Center's 2018-2019 annual report of federally funded Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) model demonstration projects, Grigal and colleagues (2019) noted that 37% of enrolled students were engaged in paid employment, 35% had jobs paying at least minimum wage, and 21% of students with a paid job were employed in more than one job. Further, while the majority of students (57%) had never had a job before enrolling in the TPSID programs, 52% of graduating students were working within 90 days after graduating.

Over the course of two years, Bacon and Baglieri (2021) gathered the perspectives of students with ID (as well as their family members, peers, and school staff) in an IPSE program using observations, audio or video clips, focus groups, and interviews. Two clear themes demonstrated how powerful the IPSE experience was for the students in building social connections and gaining independence. Specifically, this study highlighted that the benefits of attending an IPSE program extend beyond the obvious skill and knowledge development that prepare them for employment and independent living. Students expressed that their experience was defined largely by being socially active on campus, their sense of personal achievement, and the autonomy and opportunity to take classes of interest.

Despite the many benefits of attending IPSE programs, only 23% of high-school students with ID attend a two- or four-year college (Grigal, et al., 2011), which may be attributed to the limited availability of IPSE programs in comparison to postsecondary programs in general. From 2016 to 2017, there were over 4,300 degree-granting postsecondary institutes in the United States, of which 208 were in Florida (U.S. Department of Education, 2017, 2019). Comparatively, the number of IPSE programs both nationally and statewide is small. As of November 2020, 66 institutes of higher education (IHE) had received TPSID grants (nine programs received two iterations of funding) involving over 133 IHEs. These funds contributed to the establishment of over 300 IPSE programs across 49 states (Think College, 2020), 22 of which are in the state of Florida (FCSUA, 2020).

From 2015 to 2020, the Florida Consortium on Inclusive Higher Education (FCIHE) received federal funding as a TPSID model demonstration site grant authorized by the HEOA. The FCIHE consisted of four Florida IHEs (the University of Central Florida, the University of South Florida St. Petersburg, Florida International University, and Florida State College Jacksonville) which engaged in supporting the development and enhancement of Florida's IPSE programs by providing grant funding and technical assistance (e.g., annual symposiums), program evaluation, and research. The closing evaluative grant activities provided an ideal opportunity to explore the needs of Florida's IPSE programs.

To date, only a few studies have sought to understand the experiences of IPSE programs. One study examining a TPSID-funded demonstration project in Hawaii (Folk et al., 2012) highlighted the challenges related to determining the eligibility of students based on the Department of Education's disability classifications and discussed how some students did not feel prepared for the expectations of college and needed IPSE program support to develop academic and independent living skills. Another study examining nine postsecondary programs for students with ID across the US demonstrated the "complexity of developing, implementing, and evaluating a PSE program for students with ID" (Thoma, 2013, p. 295). Specifically, program staff reported having to navigate multiple layers such as the university's policies and procedures, and partnerships and collaborations with other agencies to provide students with the support and resources needed to be successful.

Plotner and Marshall (2015) examined how various supports and barriers changed over time across 79 PSE programs from 30 states across the country. Findings demonstrated that most barriers (e.g., support from the various university partners and faculty, and student safety) were challenging at program inception, but lessened over time, whereas funding remained a persistent barrier impacting program sustainability. Finally, Mock and Love (2012) investigated how to increase access to higher education for young adults with ID at the state level by surveying community and state agency representatives, higher

education faculty and staff, family members of students with ID, and individuals with ID themselves. Findings from this study demonstrated the need for "improving access to information for families, enhancing collaborations with agencies and schools, and advocating for access to college courses and appropriate academic supports" (Mock & Love, 2012, p. 289).

Altogether, these findings demonstrate commonalities across IPSE programs regarding experiences and challenges and provide evidence for the usefulness of examining IPSE programs at the state level. Given the rapid growth of IPSE programs in states like Florida (Becht et al., 2020), it is necessary to build on existing research and conduct an ongoing assessment of progress, existing challenges, and support needs that can inform changes for IPSE programs and disability resource providers. As such, in this study, two focus groups were conducted with leaders from Florida's IPSE programs and state agency representatives, to better understand their experiences.

Method

Participants

The majority (75%) of focus group attendees (n = 12; 6 in each of the two focus groups) were female. Job titles included coordinators, program/project directors, educators/teachers, an administrator, assistant director, associate vice president, counselor, and director of student success services, from the 11 IPSE programs. A variety of program types were represented, including career technical colleges (n = 4), community and/or state colleges (n = 5), 4-year colleges/universities (n = 2), and a state agency representative (n = 1). The stage of program development varied with some IPSE programs in the development stage (n = 2), in year 1 (n = 3), years 2-3 (n = 3), years 4-6 (n = 2), and years 7-9 (n = 2).

Procedure

Researchers sent at least two emails to 21 Florida IPSE programs as well as 16 agency partners to recruit participants for the focus groups which took place during a 2020 Symposium in Orlando, Florida. Eleven IPSE program staff and one agency staff member agreed to participate and were reimbursed for travel, meals, and lodging as a part of the Consortium's technical assistance support.

Focus groups were utilized for this study as an appropriate technique for information gathering and involved facilitating discussions among two groups. An important consideration when conducting focus groups is reaching a balance between group homogeneity and heterogeneity as it relates to the most relevant participant characteristics for any given study (Acocella, 2012). This condition was met in the present study as all participants represented or worked with IPSE programs in Florida (i.e., providing a degree of homogeneity), but also represented a wide range of program types, roles, and years of program development (i.e., providing heterogeneity). Another important feature of focus groups is the moderator who leads the discussion and guides the conversation. The moderator for this study was an associate professor who led the research evaluation team for an IPSE program at a Southeastern University specifically not recruited for this study, thus avoiding bias. Two graduate research assistants on the moderator's evaluation team provided notetaking support.

To maintain small group sizes (Krueger & Casey, 2000), two 90-minute focus groups were conducted (n = 6 per group). The focus groups took place in a hotel conference room. All participants were physically present during the first focus group, while two participants were virtual attendees, via Zoom, during the second focus group. To begin each session, the moderator and the graduate research assistants introduced themselves and requested participants read and sign informed consents and complete a short demographic survey. The moderator then outlined the purpose of conducting the focus group and emphasized sharing their experiences and perspectives. Finally, the moderator shared the following information with the participants: (1) everyone is encouraged to participate, (2) information shared must be kept confidential, (3) avoid side conversations, and (4) turn off cell phones.

After checking for questions, the moderator asked participants to informally introduce themselves. Next, a semi-structured protocol was followed with each focus group, using the same questions. Flexibility and prompts were used as needed to encourage participants to expand upon their experiences (Vaughn et al., 1996). Focus group questions and corresponding probes were developed by subject matter experts (all five authors) and centered on four main topics: general IPSE program needs, the impact of the FCIHE, institutional initiatives or barriers, and broader community or statewide initiatives. Example questions included, "What are the needs of Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) that serve students with ID in IPSE programs?," "What internal initiatives (those within your IHE) have been the most supportive in developing your programs?," and "What community or statewide initiatives have been the most supportive in developing your programs?" All materials were approved via the responsible IHE's Institutional Review Board. Focus groups were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed.

Data Analysis

Data from both focus groups were de-identified and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) with an inductive approach where theme development is directed by the data, rather than an existing theoretical concept (Braun & Clarke, 2019). RTA is a flexible, organic approach to data analysis in which data coding is a subjective process where researchers actively engage with the data, make their own meaning, and come together to generate codes and themes based on their interpretation. This process involved six steps: the first two authors familiarized themselves with the data by reading through the transcripts (step 1), and then identified initial codes, separately, by re-reading through the first half of the first focus group transcript (step 2), and finally met to generate initial themes by grouping similar codes together (step 3). This process was repeated until all data were coded. The coding process was tracked using a spreadsheet which enabled the researchers to visually check that themes accurately represented the data (and was also useful when writing the analysis). At this point, all codes and initial themes were reviewed by the remaining three authors (step 4). Given that coding is a subjective and reflexive process, gathering the input of all authors with varying levels of expertise in the field of disability inclusion, served to deepen our understanding of the data. Doing so helped the first two authors to further refine themes before finalizing theme definitions (step 5) and helped to ensure that the coding process accurately reflected the meaning underpinning the data. The final step involved writing up the themes (step 6). Overall, following credibility measures of collaborative work (by having all authors review codes), the use of peer debriefers and the spreadsheet as an audit trail, and detailed descriptions of themes and subthemes in the following results section, all contribute to the trustworthiness of the research (Brantlinger et al., 2005).

Results

Four themes were generated from the thematic analysis: Preparation, IPSE Program Support, IPSE Challenges and Unmet Needs, and Future Goals. See Figure 1 for a visual representation of each theme and sub-theme. Each theme is described in the following sections, along with example data extracts and the focus group (FG) number.

Preparation

The theme of Preparation encompassed two subthemes; student life skills and family preparations, which highlight the need to prepare students and families for PSE environments.

Student Life Skills

Many participants reported that having a strong foundation of specific life skills helps students with ID navigate the transition to a postsecondary environment. Important skills and abilities for students to successfully transition from high school to college, including an awareness of relationship and sexuality boundaries, motivation (for both academics and future employment), and the ability to navigate environments independently. Participants also discussed the importance for students to possess certain personal life skills, such as the ability to manage time.

> The [students who] struggle are the ones that have no time management or ability to use a time management system. So, that's what—one of the things I'm really looking for as we screen applicants are that—you know, I can help you learn and help you improve, but you've gotta at least have some understanding of time management and the motivation to go to class, though we have some [students for whom]—it's not a priority. (FG 2)

The importance of skills development was also discussed. As many students are not enrolling in postsecondary programs with these necessary skills, IPSE programs spend extra time preparing students for college.

> Our students…are coming to us from a high school [where] they just go to PE [physical education]. [They are] not putting them into things to see about what career would be acceptable… because they're not ready, we spend so much [time] trying to get them ready. (FG 1)

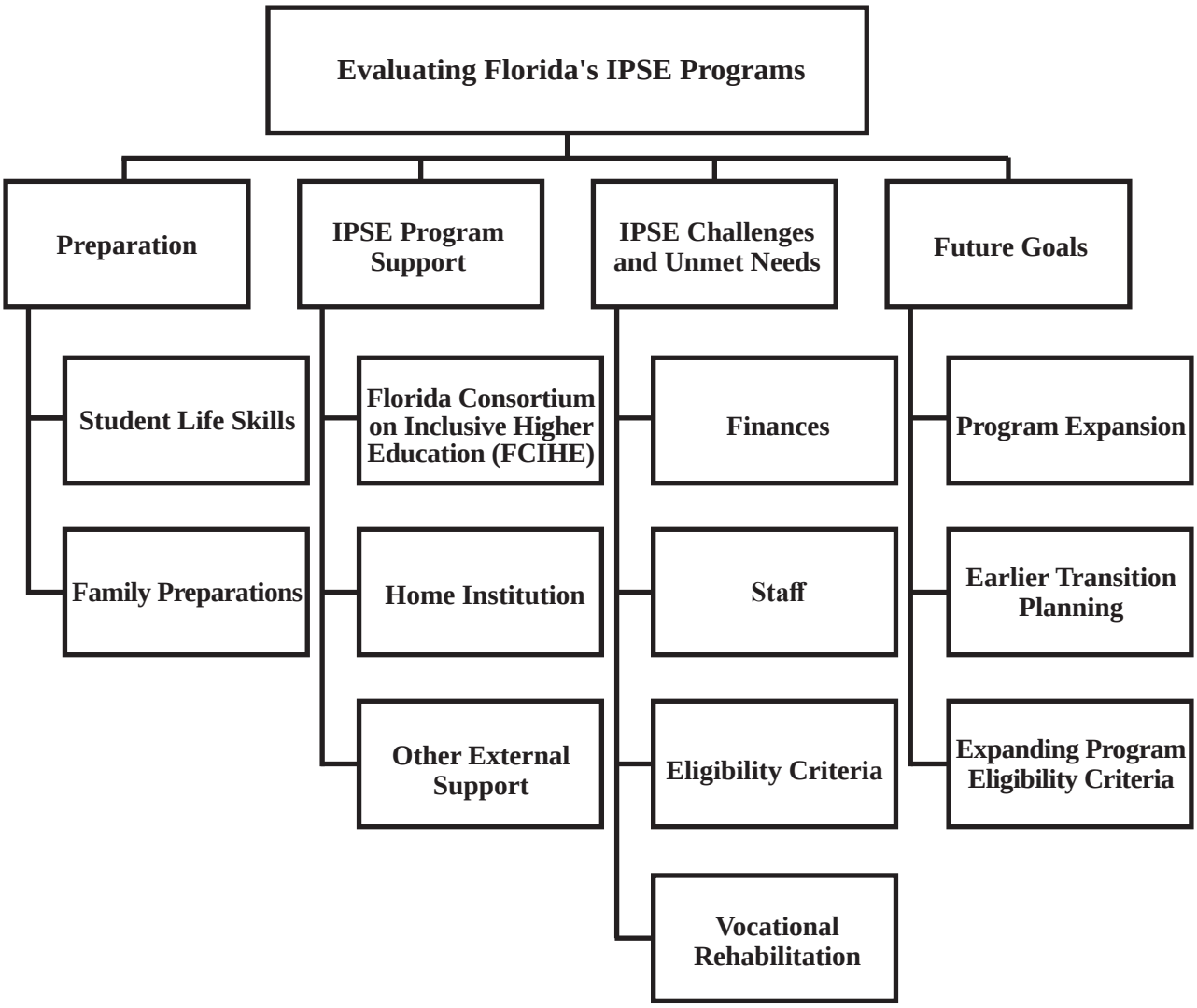
Family Preparations

In addition to increasing student life skills to facilitate a successful transition to college, participants also expressed the need to set boundaries for parental involvement, and expectations for both students and families about program requirements, policies, and rules. The following quote demonstrate the importance of setting the expectation that students in an IPSE program should be treated like any student on campus:

> Any college student has…obligations, and you're not excused from attending classes and attending your job and being here on time just because you have a disability. You still have to make efforts to attend just like any other college student. (FG 2)

Figure 1

Visual Representation of Qualitative Themes and Sub-Themes



This second quote emphasizes the importance of holding students to high standards to promote accountability:

> I think there needs to be really high expectations for student[s], like professional, presentation... one really big shift we made is a very high expectation and…accountability model for our students with their professional skills, and they all met it. And it really built their confidence, like genuine confidence from meeting that. I think that's really foundational to success with them. (FG 1)

Many participants discussed the varying degree and types of parental involvement, which resulted in ongoing efforts from the program staff.

> I know we've all experienced this - parent support that's hovery. You know…when it's too - too - too much, too protective. But then you have the parents that are so totally hands-off [and] I think there's a difference between parent support of professional growth and like employment obtainment and parent support for like, "this is gonna be a great place for you to go and have a great time, and we will have maybe a little bit more freedom as a family." (FG 1)

Finally, participants shared a number of ways in which their programs approached setting expecta-

tions for students and families, including the use of orientations and handbooks.

> We created a handbook, and it's something that's updated year to year, but really clearly outlines how [our IPSE program] would handle certain situations that might come up, our expectations, the program philosophy, the program structure, where families would be involved, where they might not be as involved. (FG 1)

IPSE Program Support

In the second theme, IPSE Program Support, participants discussed the support they received from three different sources: the FCIHE, each IPSE program's home institution, and external entities.

Florida Consortium on Inclusive Higher Education (FCIHE)

Participants described receiving several types of support from the FCIHE, including funding. The FCIHE offered mini-grants ranging from $10,000 to $60,000, and travel funding to attend consortium planned events such as IPSE forums, the Hartwick Symposium, and to visit other Florida IPSE sites for technical assistance. Participants reported using FCIHE grant funds for program development, hiring more staff, and the creation of parent orientations. For example, one participant mentioned:

> The mini-grant was developed so that students could learn how to do interview[s] for jobs. [This involved] videotaping [and] letting the kids critique themselves. (FG 1)

Participants mentioned other types of support received from FCIHE staff, events, the website [www.FCIHE.com], and the IPSE forums that targeted professional development specifically for Florida's IPSE administrators and leaders.

> We've had actually had [the FCIHE Director] come to the campus, and she talked to all of the faculty. So that, you know, they could understand about our students. (FG 1)

Finally, participants expressed how much they appreciated the annual Hartwick Symposium:

> My students love it, and they get so much out of it. The first time away from mom and dad, first time staying in a hotel. I mean on and on and on, the list, and they're so happy. They're so excited. So, we love that, and they [FCIHE] do such a good job. (FG 1)

Home Institution

IPSE leaders described how influential their home IHEs have been in providing support for their programs through increased access and resources, such as providing students with ID an opportunity to live in the dorms and engage in internships on campus.

> It's the inclusive philosophy. We are, from top-down, very supportive of having this program on campus and growing it and having students in the dorms. In the development stage having the administrative and college leadership and faculty support, across the board, is really important. (FG 1)

One institution also adopted other inclusive initiatives that positively impacted students with disabilities, such as implementing Universal Design, which enabled all students, and especially students with disabilities, to more easily access college content.

> They're trying to train everybody up on universal design. And so, because of that, the faculty are gonna be more ready and prepared to have our students included in their classes. (FG 1)

Other External Support

Leaders from IPSE programs shared a variety of additional sources from which they received support including Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), local businesses, other IPSE programs, and two state-funded resources. For example, one participant discussed the support they received from local businesses:.

> We are very fortunate that we have community business owners who are willing to hire people with disabilities…we know of several, community businesses that will hire our students once they're credentialed. That is a plus—most definitely a plus. There is somewhere for them to go once trained. (FG 2)

Another participant expressed how helpful other IPSE programs were in providing guidance and assistance:

> The people around the state who already have programs—I mean, [another focus group participant] has been amazing. Whenever I have a question, she's there and others around the state who have programs. It's just—it's an amazing network of people, who help one another, and that is a great—probably the best resource we have. (FG 2)

Finally, participants spoke about two state-funded resources that provided support: the Florida Center for Students with Unique Abilities (FCSUA) and Project10 (Transition Education Network). The FCSUA was established by the Florida Postsecondary Comprehensive Transition Program (FPCTP) Act in 2016 (The Florida Legislature, 2020). The Act further established student scholarships and substantial program startup and enhancement grants to support students with ID and IHE (FCSUA, 2020). One participant described how beneficial support from FCSUA was in terms of helping their program as well as their own development:

> Right now, I would say the [FCSUA] itself, as far as an external from our institution, it's not just the money. It's the amazing support that they provide and the network that they've developed across the country, and being able to work with all those individuals has just been—you know, prior to this initiative, I had very little experience in this area, and, and I got to a pretty good space pretty fast because of them. (FG 2)

Project 10 is a Florida Department of Education, Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services' discretionary project that assists school districts and other stakeholders statewide in providing transition services for improved high school outcomes for individuals with disabilities. One participant described how pilot funds from Project 10 helped to support a collaboration between the school district and the IHE, providing a concurrent college program for students 18-22 years of age:

> On our deferment program, [Project10] has been very helpful, along with our local public school system. You know, that's been a joint initiative, and, [Project10] was able to supply…some startup funding, and the school system is really funding that program, for the most part. (FG 2)

IPSE Challenges and Unmet Needs

In the third theme, IPSE Challenges and Unmet Needs, participants discussed the ongoing programmatic challenges and unmet needs faced by IPSE programs. This theme has four sub-themes relating to finances, staff, criteria for eligibility, and VR.

Finances

Finances were regarded as one of the most significant challenges faced by IPSE leaders, both from within the institutions themselves and obtaining timely grant funds from outside the institution. Participants reported difficulty in gaining broad support and fiscal sustainability of the IPSE program across the institution. Programs that were unable to garner initial financial support from their institutions relied on grant funds, hoping that at the end of the grant period, the institution would be more supportive:

> I think one of the biggest barriers is we have to rely, so much, at this point, on grant monies to develop [an IPSE program] and not a lot of money to go around to support that. (FG 2)

When grants were available and awarded, the delays in processing the grant contracts were significant, impacting both programs and students:

> The timeliness with which we receive the funds has been an issue for us. The [funds] sometimes come in a timely way, and sometimes in not at all a timely way. (FG 1)

An important component of the fiscal challenges was that of the internal fee structures. While students pay tuition and student fees, the IPSE programs are typically providing services and support beyond what the student fees pay for. For example, one participant explained their struggle:

> The current fee structure is the same as what the traditional students pay, but [our students] are getting more services. So, we're trying to evaluate whether or not we need to have— an additional program fee. But then, again, you're pricing yourself out of people that can't afford it. (FG 2)

Staff

Participants reported struggling with low staff numbers, high turnover, and a general lack of staff training, some of which were attributed to a lack of job security and a high-stress work environment.

> There's been a consistent: You have a job. You don't have a job. You have a job. You might not have a job…for two-plus years because of the lack of sustainability, and then along with [that] the workload on staff increases as folks leave, but there really isn't professional recognition or compensation… our team's really kind of feeling that. (FG 1)

Participants also described the need for more specialized staff training specifically on how to support their students with ID.

> The faculty at my school, they haven't—like I was saying, they're tradespeople, and they have

> worked in their industry, welding and auto service tech, cosmetology, culinary, digital signs, whatever it might be. And, generally speaking, they don't have the background experience of working with students with disabilities. So they're receptive to working together, and they come to me for support and ideas and strategies on how to work together, but they haven't been in a classroom setting, much less worked with individuals with disabilities and know how to attend to their needs. (FG 1)

Eligibility Criteria

Limitations on the eligibility criteria for students was a significant challenge for many IPSE leaders. The eligibility criteria for two important funding sources (the FCIHE mini-grant and FCSUA student scholarships), was limited to students with ID, and students who had autism spectrum disorder (ASD or autism) or other disabilities were only eligible for the scholarship if they also had a co-occurring ID diagnosis. Similarly, IPSE programs were only eligible for the mini-grant funding if they were serving students with ID. Participants also reported that parents of students with ASD want their child to be included, but the IPSE program's ability to accept students (who could be a good fit for an IPSE program) is constrained by the eligibility criteria.

> The scholarship…could not be used for anything but [students with ID], [this] limits who you're serving. Even though you may have students whose overall functioning level is…very much in the ID range, because they don't have that label or they don't have a set of test scores they can provide us, we can't serve them…it's been frustrating. (FG 2)

To find a way to enroll students who needed an IPSE program's level of support, more than one participant suggested the need to conduct reevaluations while the students were still in the public school system, and to have parents bring in all documentation from doctors and schools that might corroborate what the parents are telling them:

> I've told, over and over and over—I've told staffing specialists in [the local school district], "You may want to have a reevaluation." Okay, this student may be labeled ASD, but if we find out that his IQ is, indeed, 67, then that makes him qualified for my program because I will then have a school psychologist report—that indicates that. So, that means that he's eligible to get the scholarship. (FG 2)

Finally, a participant reported how difficult it was for parents to keep their child from being stigmatized by the label of ID when they were younger, but then having to switch to accepting the label to help their child get into college:

> It's a lot easier for a parent to say, "Well, my child is learning disabled or has autism," because autism is now becoming almost more accepted, than to say, "My child has an intellectual disability." So, parents told us straight out, "We had that wiped out from their records," and I'm like, "Well, I need it on their record…I need some verification for this to be in order because what you're sharing—you're sharing with us does not match." So, that's a huge concern. (FG 2)

Vocational Rehabilitation

While earlier in this article VR was cited as a support to IPSE programs, some participants report challenges in coordinating with VR counselors, VR restructuring, and inconsistent communication of policies from one office to another which can impact a student's ability to afford college. One participant shared how they try to prevent possible miscommunication:

> We're starting to make some headway with Voc Rehab [VR], but it's been tough because, from what we understand…the supervisors say, "Yes, our program is eligible if the student, you know, qualifies, to receive some reimbursement for tuition," but…it hasn't been communicated efficiently to all the branch offices. So, every time that a students going into their counselor, they're like, "No, it's not—you can't it's—" so, again, miscommunications within voc rehab organizations. So, we developed a worksheet or an info sheet that we can hand out to the students to—and to their counselors to say, "If you have any questions, call your [VR] supervisor in [City]." (FG 2)

Participants also reported that some students did not have completed or updated VR Individualized Plans for Employment (IPE). These plans should delineate the student's specific goal for employment, which the VR counselor uses to identify how the student may access funding to support (e.g., tuition, books, housing, etc.) their employment goals.

> I had two IPEs that were incomplete. They just started school. One student had an IPE that was old and was never redone to include [an IPSE program], and one was promised housing support, and her IPE wasn't redone. But I had a letter from

> her counselor, who then resigned, stating that VR would support her housing, but the new counselor said, "We don't support housing." (FG 1)

Finally, participants discussed challenges with VR's restructuring of their funding policy, which now takes into account financial status when determining the student's financial contributions and the costs that VR would cover:

> They restructured how they determine eligibility for VR, and so now they are taking their [parents of students with ID] financial status into account, and they're paying a percentage. So, it's an across the board change…so that's affecting our students heavily. (FG 1)

Future Goals

In the fourth and final theme, Future Goals, participants shared what they need to continue to develop and enhance their IPSE programs, and support more young adults with ID in college. Three sub-themes were identified: program expansion, earlier transition planning, and expanding program eligibility criteria.

Program Expansion

IPSE leaders sought to expand their programs by increasing program staff and courses offered to students with ID, providing professional development, expanding physical space, and increasing student numbers. One participant spoke of increasing staff capacity to better serve students and inform educators and families of college opportunities for students with ID:

> A dream situation, for me …is to grow the team… someone that's an expert in behavior and a psychologist to be able to review reports so that those decisions that we have to make about borderline IQs and everything else is addressed, to coordinate from the middle school level to the high school with parents and families consistently. (FG 2)

Others described the need to provide professional development and expand the career and technical college programs they could offer to students:

> Our goal is to open more programs. We can identify the programs that are very popular with students that have disabilities, and that includes the electrical that I heard somebody mention. For us, AC repair, and any one of the students, whether it be like an intro level to cosmetology or nail tech, those are programs that students are coming in with disabilities [where] we're not able to provide support. So, if we could have more staff and we could provide that support, then we would be very happy, and we wanna eliminate a waiting list. We don't want our students to be sitting at home. (FG 2)

Lastly, the physical space on campus was important to participants, in the intentionality of the location and in expanding their space:

> If you put us on the end of campus, that negates what we're tryin' to do…I'm really wanting to be where the center or close to where the center of action is for all of the students so that they can be involved with what's going on, on campus and not get lost in the college. (FG 2)

Earlier Transition Planning

IPSE leaders identified earlier transition planning processes as an important goal to increase student opportunity and increase success. A prominent focus of the discussion was on the need for college fairs, increased collaboration with VR, early family engagement around transition, and building pathways from K-12 to college. Not only did participants speak about increasing opportunities in career and technical education for students with ID, but they also supported earlier participation in Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs:

> …opportunities in CTE [Career and Technical Education] programs when they're in K-12 system, so they have the ability, like their non-disabled peers to attend those courses, gain that background knowledge, and come to the postsecondary setting ready, just like their non-disabled peers. (FG 1)

Delving deeper into the K-12 to college pathway, participants relayed the need to begin career awareness and development (i.e., the transition process) earlier, to communicate with students and families regarding the career opportunities available through IPSE programs:

> From our perspective, [it's] taking a step all the way back, probably to middle school and high school, and making sure that students and families are aware of what's coming ahead. You can't just develop these connections or these interests in specific career clusters when they're in high school or when they're about to leave high school…We provide supports in [culinary and digital imaging]. We have a lot of students who

> aren't aware that those programs exist at a technical college. (FG 2)

Expanding Program Eligibility Criteria

The last future goal of IPSE leaders was to expand the eligibility criteria to include individuals with other disabilities. For example, one participant reported the need to look at,

> the functioning level of the student—the overall functioning level and not necessarily be concerned about a specific label. (FG 2)

During this discussion, participants noted that this issue needs to be addressed at a higher level:

> Because of our funding and the way that's set up, it's aimed right at the [young adult with ID]. And so, it doesn't preclude us from including anybody else, but it's something that probably needs to be addressed at a much higher level than my level as far as including other disability conditions. (FG 2)

Discussion

Findings from this study offer significant insights into Florida's IPSE programs and increase our understanding of what is going well and what opportunities exist for improvement. It is encouraging that most participants were satisfied with the support they received from a variety of sources, including the FCIHE, their home institutions, VR, other Florida IPSE programs, Project10, and the FCSUA. While support from these entities during program infancy was particularly valuable in building the systems necessary for student success, it was evident that participants experienced challenges and concerns spanning from pre-enrollment through program creation, expansion, and sustainability.

Holistic and collaborative support across all levels is critical to promote the inclusion of individuals with ID in higher education and enhance program sustainability (Mock & Love, 2012). As such, the challenges identified in the present study must be addressed at the individual level (including individuals with ID themselves and their families), the community level (including disability resource providers), and the policy level. The following discussion draws from existing theory to contextualize the focus group findings and, latterly, explains how the findings can be used in application to address the identified challenges.

An Inclusive Approach to Higher Education

According to the social model of disability, disability is defined by societal structure and attitudes as opposed to a person's medical condition (Haegele & Hodge, 2016). In other words, barriers in society and not one's impairments limit opportunities for people with disabilities to live independently and contribute meaningfully to their community. IPSE institutions, in line with the social model, embody an inclusive approach to education where the focus is on the educational system and learning environment, as opposed to what is "wrong" with the student (Boxall et al., 2004). By using this perspective, we can examine the findings in terms of both the areas of progress and the social barriers that prevent meaningful inclusion in higher education.

Institutional support is an evident critical driver of IPSE program success and an inclusive campus. IPSE leaders in the present study, for example, reported valuing the support they received from upper-level administration, the IHE's authentic inclusive philosophy, and the ready access to needed resources. Similarly crucial, though only mentioned by one participant, was the proactive integration of Universal Design initiatives through campus-wide faculty professional development and the leveraging of inclusive instructional strategies across the institution (Black et al., 2015).

In addition to the support received by their institutions, participants expressed their reliance on the business community. For example, IPSE programs cultivated relationships with community employers for student internships and employment opportunities. How this relationship is cultivated, however, is important. As mentioned in the results section, one participant spoke of *feeling fortunate* to have the support of the local community businesses by hiring their credentialed students. Although such community support is invaluable, finding students long-term employment is a challenge for many IPSE programs (Scheef et al., 2018), and may therefore indicate the need for reflection and a shift in mindset regarding what an inclusive culture means. Employment opportunities at the culmination of completing a postsecondary program should be an *expectation or a norm*, rather a lucky outcome. Unfortunately, employer misconceptions about the readiness of individuals with developmental disabilities, in general, is a commonly cited barrier to their employment (Houtenville & Kalargyrou, 2012). We must, however, expect businesses to hire qualified applicants for a job and understand that IPSE programs are graduating hard-working qualified applicants, regardless of disability.

In addition to the lack of societal knowledge about disabilities limiting inclusion, participants shared other barriers they face in providing better, or more, services for students with ID. For example,

many programs relied on external grants for at least a few, if not many, of their staff positions. As indicated by one participant, this reliance on grants created the uncertainty of long-term job security and program longevity, which adversely impacted staff turnover. Additionally, many participants spoke of their desire to expand the IPSE program to have more space for technical and vocational skill-building opportunities that would benefit students with ID, but lacked the funding, or staff, to do so. These findings indicate that while IHEs are certainly integral in facilitating an inclusive campus for all their students, the need to provide internal funding for IPSE programs to expand and grow is perhaps not a current priority.

Examining the present findings through a social model lens provides an understanding of how societal attitudes and institutional structures can shape the development and sustainability of IPSE programs and impact academic, independent, career, and social outcomes for individuals with ID (Miller et al., 2016). Institutions of higher education should move towards creating systems and practices that follow an inclusive approach where young adults with disabilities, whether they are a part of an IPSE program or not, are fully engaged members on a college campus. This means going beyond creating practices that simply "check a legal box," but rather making an intentional effort to embed IPSE programs into the core fabric of IHEs (Burke, 2020).

Higher Education as an Open System

Every organization, IHEs included, operates as a system. A system is defined by the interrelation between various elements, including inputs (human, financial, physical, and informational resources), a transformation process (using resources to attain goals), and outputs (the attainment of goals), all of which are influenced by feedback and the environment (Lunenberg, 2010; Scott, 2008). From an open system perspective, IPSE programs essentially operate as a sub-system within the broader IHE environment, with their own interrelated inputs, processes, and outputs. The focus group findings provide insight into the factors, including the inputs and environmental forces, that influence IPSE program processes and practices.

Specifically, the present findings demonstrate how IPSE programs rely on input from a variety of disability resource providers including the FCIHE, VR, FCSUA, and Project 10. For example, the FCIHE supported Florida's network of IPSE programs through opportunities for collaboration and sharing of resources and information, site visits, professional development opportunities, symposiums and forums, individualized technical assistance, website resources, and mini-grant development and expansion funding. Additionally, FCSUA and Project 10 provided both funding and a supportive network that helped with IPSE program development and sustainability. It was clear that without external input in the form of funding, developmental guidance, and collaborations from these entities, IPSE programs would struggle to maintain a high standard of support for students with ID.

In addition to identifying the critical inputs that support IPSE program development and sustainability, findings also demonstrated how political forces in the environment significantly shape how IPSE's function. This is unsurprising since public policy, including the reauthorization of the HOEA in 2008, instigated the provision of funding for the development of TPSID programs (Lee, 2009) to increase opportunities for youth with ID (VanBergeijk & Cavanagh, 2012). Given the evidence that individuals with ID are less likely to enroll in higher education compared to individuals with other disabilities (see Smith & Benito, 2013), there is strong evidence for the need to extend provisions specifically for this population. As a result, Florida's legislature currently funds scholarships for students with ID enrolled in Florida Postsecondary Comprehensive Transition (FPCTP) designated programs. Thus, eligible students must be identified with ID on an Individual Plan for Employment or documentation from a physician or psychologist to receive the FCSUA scholarship and enroll in many of Florida's FPCTP designated programs (The Florida Legislature, 2020).

However, IPSE leaders discussed how targeting one disability prevents programs from enrolling students who, through lack of an ID label, require the same intensity of support to succeed in an IPSE non-degree college program. As a result, students with ASD (who do not have ID) or IQ scores between 70 and 80, struggle to gain access to IPSE programs or PSE funding. Focusing more on the students' support needs than the given disability label, focus group participants were reluctant to turn away young adults who would greatly benefit from the IPSE programs. As well as demonstrating how political forces influence the running of IPSE programs, this finding also aligns with the social model of disability by highlighting the significant implications that can occur from how we view, or label, disability instead of the barriers in society.

Practical Implications for Key Stakeholder Groups

In addition to increasing the theoretical understanding of IPSEs, the present study also provides several practical implications for individuals with ID and their families, disability resource providers (including K-12 schools, IPSE programs, and IHEs, and

VR), and lastly, policy. The discussion below provides a clear picture of the identified challenges and action areas for each stakeholder group.

Individuals with ID and Their Families

The transition period for families of children with ID is often difficult (Cooney, 2002), particularly as most families have been major advocates for their child throughout their life (Taylor et al., 2017). This transition can make the expectation to "take on the role of coach on the sidelines and let your child become the decision-maker" (Roebuck & Coultes-MacLeod, 2010, p. 53) difficult for families. Participants in this study perceived some parents as hands-off, while others were too "hovery." While this finding is in line with prior research (Claytor et al., 2018; Thoma, 2013), it demonstrates the need for well-defined and disseminated IPSE program expectations that balance the need for students to gain independence while recognizing the difficulty some parents may have in being less involved in their child's life (Miller et al., 2018).

In addition, it is possible that the reported poor levels of student preparedness may be attributed to the lack of student self-determination or involvement in their transition planning (Shogren & Plotner, 2012). For example, the decision to apply to an IPSE program may be driven by the parent's desire for their child to attend college (Martinez et al., 2012). Hence, young adults with ID may not be involved in making decisions concerning transition activities, and the type of program and college they want to enroll in. If students are less involved in the transition process, they may be unaware of and unmotivated to learn the skills necessary to thrive in the college environment. It is thus critical to actively engage students in the transition planning process where they can voice their choices. These meetings would also allow school officials to offer alternative pathways to students and families if higher education was not a goal.

Considering these findings, preparing families for the shift in roles (i.e., from advocate to coach) inherent in the student's transition from high school to college and adulthood, should be an ongoing focus by the K-12 system and IPSE programs through information and workshops prior to and during the transition period (Martinez et al., 2012). To facilitate balanced family involvement and parental expectations, IPSE programs should conduct parent orientation sessions with detailed program handbooks and offer parent workshops that address such salient topics.

Disability Resource Providers

K-12 Schools. The present findings align with the field (Suk et al., 2020; Wisner-Carlson et al., 2020) in highlighting the need for improved transition services and supports. According to the IDEA of 2004, students with disabilities are entitled to receive transition services involving a coordinated effort between the student, family, and education and community agencies (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2017). In Florida, these transition services begin at age 14 or earlier (Florida Department of Education, 2020), with the aim of facilitating a student's successful transition from high school to post-school environments. However, the ongoing concerns expressed by focus group participants suggested that transition planning should begin sooner.

As with college-bound neurotypical students, the expectation to attend college should be a consistent focus for students with ID throughout their elementary, middle, and high school academic and social experience (Grigal & Hart, 2012). However, research suggests that it is the educator's preconceptions about a student's capability that may restrict their opportunities (Martinez et al., 2012; Yarbrough et al., 2014). Hence, preservice teacher education and in-service teacher professional development should be strengthened, and expectations raised by increasing their knowledge of the opportunities for students with ID to attend IPSE programs at colleges across the country (Martinez et al., 2012). With an increase in knowledge, educators of students with ID should teach with the expectation of college upon high school graduation (Grigal & Hart, 2012; Yarbrough et al., 2014), and help students develop college-ready life skills such as self-advocacy, problem-solving, social relationship skills, and technological and independent life-skill competencies (Kleinert et al., 2012).

Given that attending an IPSE program provides individuals with ID many benefits (Miller et al., 2016), setting high expectations and holding students with ID accountable to the same standards as their peers is an essential keystone upon which educators, administrators, and programs should continue to build and expand.

IPSE Programs and IHEs. The focus group findings identified key challenges that carry important implications for IPSE programs and their home institutions. First, participants expressed staffing concerns including high turnover, stress, and insufficient numbers. Unfortunately, these issues are complex and could be reflective of program financial instability, untenable sustainability, or other administrative reasons. However, for IPSE programs to continue to provide the support students need, more attention should be paid to addressing staffing concerns. Similarly, participants mentioned that a lack of funding created instability, and prevented them from improv-

ing supports for students with ID. The provision of funds from various disability resource providers such as FCIHE was a valuable resource, and while timely grant funding availability for mini-grant recipients remained a challenge, it is clear that in the absence of these federal funds, Florida's IPSE program network should actively work to maintain these connections and supports in the future.

Earlier we noted the need for a shift in mindset regarding how disability is viewed in society, and that employers in the community should hire qualified graduates regardless of disability. To ensure this message is loud and clear, when IPSE programs engage with employers in the community, it is critical that they reflect high expectations and standards for their students. For example, are staff holding students with ID to the same student and employee standards when speaking to faculty and employers in pursuit of community internships and employment? Are staff maintaining and reflecting high expectations for students with ID through their actions and their language on their campuses, in their communities, and when conducting disability awareness seminars?

Finally, in addition to educating employers in the community, it is the responsibility of the IHE to ensure that the IPSE program staff are represented in the IHE's staffing structure and the IHE's own hiring practices are inclusive of individuals with ID. For example, IPSE staff should be included in performance reviews and nominations for accomplishments and individuals with disabilities (including intellectual) should be clearly identified in the nearly ubiquitous IHE statements of diversity and inclusion to reflect them as valued participating members of the student population (Burke, 2020).

Vocational Rehabilitation. As another integral community member and disability resource provider, VR is a crucial partner in supporting student postsecondary education and employment outcomes. Findings highlighted the collaborative efforts of VR counselors and IPSE program staff, but also demonstrated the struggle of IPSE staff to understand the requirements and policies of VR's statewide organization, and navigating community agency regulations and cultures, which aligns with prior research (e.g., Thoma, 2013). Given the prominent role that VR plays in student outcomes, it is essential that local VR agency and IPSE program staff establish ongoing communication, to craft working relationships and reciprocal understanding.

Policy

The federal postsecondary education initiative for students with ID, defined in the HEOA (2008), was in part, a response to research identifying students with ID as those least likely to attend college among students with disabilities (Lipscomb et al., 2017; Wagner et al., 2005). As a result of the specificity of the disability of the students served in the HEOA, students without ID, but who may require similar intensive support needs to attend college are not eligible to attend the programs funded by the TPSID grants and cannot access the federal student aid funds if attending a non-TPSID program. The policies within the HOEA informed decision-making, and significantly impacted which students could enroll in the IPSE programs. This challenge of label specificity rather than support needs was resoundingly supported in our findings and existing research (Folk et al., 2012; Plotner & Marshall, 2015).

Participants expressed the need to expand the inclusion criteria for Florida's IPSE program eligibility. They shared their angst at turning individuals away who did not meet the requirements of an ID diagnosis, even though they would benefit from the level of supports IPSE programs have to offer. The reason why IPSE programs exist is to provide support to young adults who would otherwise not be given an opportunity to attend postsecondary education (Grigal et al. 2013). These findings highlight the difficulties of program staff: what happens to individuals without an ID diagnosis, who cannot attend university as a degree-seeking student due to their disabilities? Perhaps, as participants voiced, the focus should be on support needs rather than diagnoses. However, it is important to note that if programs begin to accept students with higher IQs or skill levels, young adults with ID could, once again, be excluded from opportunities to attend IHE programs. It is clear that this issue raised by the focus group participants is a sensitive and complex topic that needs to be carefully considered by stakeholders with an in-depth understanding of the impact that any changes to eligibility criteria could have. Ultimately, expanding the eligibility criteria for enrollment and funding is an area of concern that needs to be addressed at the state and federal policy levels to further promote positive outcomes and diminish disparities among individuals with disabilities.

Study Limitations

A few study limitations should be noted. First, although the semi-structured format of the focus groups allowed the moderator to ask follow-up questions, once the focus groups were completed, the researchers were not able to reach out to participants for clarification. This may have allowed the introduction of bias when the transcripts were interpreted. For example, when a participant uses the acronym "PE," researchers had to draw on relevant literature and subject matter expertise to deduce and code the

data. Second, the use of group discussions may inhibit some dissenting opinions and without the use of individual interviews, these thoughts may have been missed. Third, the assignment of a member of a large Florida IPSE program as the moderator excluded that program's contributions. Further, the moderator (also a member of the FCIHE team) may have inhibited the participants' responses, thus limiting the breadth and depth of the data collected. Finally, these findings represent programs from a single state and while they present 11 diverse programs (universities, state, and technical colleges), the data may not be representative of other states with only one or two programs.

Conclusion

The four themes identified in this study demonstrate the need to further explore the complex components and stages of an IPSE program, from student preparation to program sustainability. Preparation for new and higher expectations for students with ID is complicated, while the expectations of secondary teachers, college-bound students with ID, and their families appear to be misaligned (Griffin et al., 2010), possibly limiting the practical college-ready life skills expected and/or taught in secondary schools. Additionally, parents may need to shift from caregiving and advocating roles to coaching (Francis et al., 2016); a shift that without the long-anticipated goal of college, may not occur. Students with ID deserve the opportunity and the dignity to choose enrolling in a college program. Program sustainability remains a critical issue for Florida IPSE programs, even though Florida has received two rounds of TPSID competitive federal grants and state funding. As such, the onus of sustainability for IPSE programs must lie within the IHEs to ensure that IPSE programs are embedded within the university community.

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We would also like to note that we have adopted the use of person-first language throughout this manuscript (e.g., "students with intellectual disabilities"), as we are referencing a large group of people, rather than an individual. However, we want to acknowledge that every person identifies differently, and it is always important to ask someone what their language preferences are, such as whether they prefer the use of person- or identity-first language.