

“More dynamic, more engaged”: Faculty perspectives on instructing students with intellectual disability in inclusive courses

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Abstract

The knowledge and attitudes of faculty and instructors greatly influence the experiences of all college students, including college students with intellectual disability (ID). As the number of institutions of higher education enrolling students with ID grows, faculty and staff must be prepared to support the learning needs of all of these college students. We conducted qualitative interviews with 10 college faculty teaching inclusive courses at seven colleges and universities across the U.S. to solicit their perspectives on a) the benefits and challenges of instructing students with ID, and b) what they need to provide the best instructional experiences. This paper summarizes the study findings and offers implications for practice and research.

Keywords: postsecondary education, inclusion, intellectual disability, faculty, students with intellectual disability

Plain Language Summary

- The knowledge and attitudes of instructors affect the experiences of all college students, including college students with intellectual disability (ID). As more students with ID enroll in college, faculty and staff must be prepared to support their learning needs.
- We interviewed 10 instructors teaching inclusive courses at seven colleges and universities across the U.S. We wanted to learn their perspectives on:
 - a) the benefits and challenges of instructing students with ID, and
 - b) what they need to give students the best experiences.
- Some things we found are:
 - a) Instructors said that teaching students with ID was a positive experience and all people in the study saw the benefits of inclusion in classes. There were benefits to students with ID, to other students and the classroom environment, and to faculty.
 - b) Professors said that they also faced challenges like understanding how students were enrolled and what their responsibilities were. Instructors wished they had more

information and some worried about their own capabilities for teaching all students.

- c) Some suggestions are to prepare faculty before they teach, give them ongoing support, and remove barriers at the college.

Today, approximately one in five students in postsecondary education report having a disability (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Students with attention deficit disorder, depression, or other mental, emotional, or psychiatric conditions constitute half of undergraduates with disabilities (Hinz et al., 2017), and the preponderance of existing research reflects knowledge gathered about the college experiences of these students (Madaus et al., 2018). However, recent federal legislation and funding initiatives have spurred growth in the enrollment in higher education of students with intellectual disability (ID) in the past decade (Grigal et al., 2018). In the context of higher education, the term intellectual disability is defined as a student “with a cognitive impairment, characterized by significant limitations in (i) intellectual and cognitive functioning and (ii) adaptive behavior as expressed in conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills” (Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2008). One common attribute shared by all students with disabilities is that their experiences in college will be impacted by the attitudes and beliefs of the faculty who teach them. Thus, faculty and staff must be prepared to support the learning needs of all of these college students.

The rights of students with disabilities to access postsecondary education are protected by federal law, which also requires the provision of auxiliary aids and services that allow an individual with a disability to fully participate (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990; Rehabilitation Act, 1973). For students with ID, the HEOA (Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2008) contained several provisions specifically targeting college access. The HEOA created a new category of Title IV-eligible higher-education program, called a Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary (CTP) program, designed to support students with ID to receive academic, career and technical, and independent living instruction at an institute for higher education (IHE) to prepare for competitive employment. The HEOA also waived certain qualification requirements for federal student aid for students with ID attending an approved CTP, such as the need to have a high school diploma or equivalent and the requirement to be matriculating toward a standard degree. There are about 298 programs in the U.S. that serve students with ID in 49 states (Think College, 2020), with an estimated 6,440 students enrolled (Grigal et al., in press).

Out of the 298 known programs serving students with ID, 44 are federally funded Transition and Postsecondary Education Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability (TPSID). The TPSID initiative aims to create, expand, or enhance high-quality, inclusive higher-education experiences to support employment outcomes for individuals with ID (<https://thinkcollege.net/tpsid>). Students attending TPSIDs and other inclusive college programs take college courses with their peers with and without disabilities; thus, faculty may encounter students with a wide range of disabilities, including ID, in their classrooms. A fair number of students with ID audit courses, meaning they may not receive a grade in the standard course registration system (Grigal et al., 2019). Auditing also allows the

possibility of modifications to the course content to meet students' individual learning goals, while still completing program requirements (Kleinert et al., 2012).

Research has demonstrated that the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of university faculty directly shape the educational experiences and success of college students with disabilities, yet may vary by disability type (Cook et al., 2009). In a survey of university faculty, 90% of respondents agreed that faculty members understood that students with physical disabilities must have access to campus buildings, but fewer than a third thought faculty knew the characteristics and needs of students with learning disabilities (LD), attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or psychiatric disabilities (Cook et al., 2009). Faculty members' expectations for success and their willingness to provide accommodations may also be impacted by a student's specific disability label. Sniatecki et al. (2015) found that faculty held more negative attitudes toward students with mental health disabilities and LD than toward students with physical disabilities.

Despite this, studies have also shown that faculty members have mostly positive attitudes toward students with disabilities (Lipka et al., 2019; Sniatecki et al., 2015) and, in general, are willing to provide students with disabilities with supports and accommodations (Vogel et al., 2008). But because college students are less likely to request accommodations than high school students (Newman & Madaus, 2015), college faculty may not be as accustomed to providing all students with needed accommodations. Faculty with limited knowledge of and experience with accommodations may be ill-prepared to effectively implement those accommodations for students. Despite these gaps in knowledge and beliefs, there is evidence to suggest that students with various disabilities, including ID, access similar accommodations (i.e., alternative test conditions, additional time to complete assignments, audiobooks) and modifications (i.e., alternative tests, shorter assignments, modified grading standards) (Grigal et al., 2016; Newman & Madaus, 2015).

Although the bulk of studies related to faculty attitudes and beliefs focus on students with disabilities that are more prevalent in colleges and universities, some studies have begun to explore the attitudes of faculty about students with less common disabilities such as ID and autism (Bonati et al., 2019; Burgin et al., 2017; Gibbons et al., 2015; Gilson et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2016; O'Connor et al., 2012). During the development of a college program for students with ID and autism, a campus-wide survey revealed that faculty were generally positive about the idea of offering inclusive coursework but held mixed beliefs about the potential impact students with ID and autism might have on classroom instruction and on their own time and attention (Gibbons et al., 2015). A similar study found that a majority of the faculty surveyed felt people with ID could succeed in a four-year college or university; they further indicated a willingness to offer enrollment in their courses to a student with ID (Gilson et al., 2020). Factors predicting higher degrees of acceptance included familiarity with the term "intellectual and developmental disabilities,"¹ as well as lower faculty rank (Gilson et al., 2020). These results are consistent with findings from Lombardi and Murray (2011) who found prior disability-related training, as well as lower faculty rank, were associated with more positive attitudes towards and

¹ Some studies cited in this paper use the term IDD ("intellectual and developmental disabilities"), an umbrella term that includes intellectual disability.

greater willingness to make accommodations for students with any disability (Lombardi & Murray, 2011).

While these studies provide some insights about faculty attitudes towards students with all disabilities and students with ID specifically, they do not address attitudes and experiences of faculty who have provided direct instruction to college students with ID. However, research on this topic is emerging. Jones et al. (2016) and Burgin et al. (2017) used a survey and interviews, respectively, to explore the perspectives of faculty teaching courses that included both typical students and students with ID attending college programs designed to support inclusion. In all three studies, students with ID audited their courses. O'Connor et al. (2012) interviewed faculty who taught students in a similar program at an Irish university. A range of supports were provided by these programs, including peer mentors, whose roles vary but may include accompanying students with ID to class, clarifying class instructions, helping with notetaking, and socializing (Jones et al., 2016; O'Connor et al., 2012; Ryan et al., 2017). Faculty across the studies had positive attitudes about inclusive courses and saw benefits for all students and for themselves (Burgin et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2016; O'Connor et al., 2012). Those surveyed by Jones et al. (2016) felt faculty developed greater capacity to use effective instructional strategies for diverse learners. Respondents also observed academic, social, and personal gains among students with and without disability (Jones et al., 2016). In the study by O'Connor et al. (2012), lecturers observed that students with ID positively impacted class dynamics and that all students benefitted from the "relevant and very insightful questions" they posed. Burgin et al. (2017) also highlighted the positive aspects of inclusive courses, with faculty members emphasizing the impact of auditing students' "enthusiasm and engagement in the course" (p. 363).

At the same time, some faculty in these studies expressed apprehension about their capability to successfully support students with ID in their courses and balance their needs with those of other students (Burgin et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2016; O'Connor et al., 2012). One concern was that course content and pacing would be too difficult for students with ID (Jones et al., 2016). Faculty were also concerned about maintaining rigor and not "watering down" the material, but overall, faculty in these studies discovered ways to keep all students engaged while making course material accessible (Burgin et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2016; O'Connor et al., 2012). Another theme common across the studies was a desire from faculty for more guidance and information about program goals, student needs and objectives, and effective teaching strategies for inclusive courses (Burgin et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2016; O'Connor et al., 2012). Suggestions were also offered about peer mentors, including better clarity about their roles, improved communication, and more active recruitment (Jones et al., 2016; O'Connor et al., 2012).

These studies found faculty participants were generally supportive of students with ID and observed benefits for themselves and their other students. However, each of these studies were conducted at a single college or university and thus reflect only the perspectives of each unique postsecondary context. The current study seeks to reflect a broader array of perspectives by seeking input from higher-education faculty across various institutions who have had multiple experiences offering instruction to students with ID enrolled in college courses. The goal of this study was to seek the firsthand

experiences and perspectives of faculty teaching inclusive courses across multiple higher-education programs in differing states. We sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the benefits and challenges of instructing students with ID in college courses, and do they differ from other instructional experiences?
2. What do faculty want and need to provide the best instructional experiences to students with ID?

Method

Site Selection and Recruitment

Participants were selected from colleges and universities that had received federal funds to create or expand a higher-education program for students with ID (for more information about the TPSID model demonstration projects, see <https://thinkcollege.net/tpsid>). One of the central tenets of this grant-funded program was to support the inclusion of college students with ID in typical college classes. Researchers contacted principal investigators of these projects, requesting contact information of full-time or adjunct college faculty instructing inclusive courses. To ensure participant perspectives were informed by experiences with multiple students with ID, we sought to identify instructors who had provided instruction to a minimum of three students.

Our outreach yielded 75 faculty names and email addresses. In two successive waves, a total of 73 were sent invitations to participate in an online screening survey to determine eligibility and obtain consent. Through this process, two individuals were not contacted because sufficient participants from their IHE and course area had already been recruited. To be eligible, faculty had to teach at least three students with ID in inclusive courses (courses that enrolled both students with and without ID) during the 2015-16 and/or 2016-17 academic years. Nineteen individuals responded to the screening survey, three of whom were deemed ineligible. Of the remaining 16 respondents, 15 were invited to participate in interviews. One was excluded because they were staff for the inclusive program. A final 10 faculty members responded positively to requests for interviews.

Participant Characteristics

We interviewed 10 faculty (four part-time, five full-time, 1 recently retired) from seven colleges and universities in five states, with an average of 13 years' experience teaching (range 1.5-35 years). Those 10 faculty taught 16 different courses in which students with ID were enrolled. These included courses in art, physical education (such as yoga or basketball), and a range of academic subjects including business, health, religion, science, and writing. See Table 1 for the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Procedures

Data Collection

We conducted semi-structured interviews with these 10 faculty, using the telephone or an online conference call, during the summer and fall of 2018. The interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the interviewees and professionally transcribed. Interviews lasted from 35 minutes to just over an hour, and participants received a \$50 giftcard as an incentive. We constructed an interview guide comprised of six main questions, each with follow-up questions. The first two questions sought information about the inclusive courses the interviewees taught and about their experiences teaching those courses. The next question dealt with the recruitment process and the participants' expectations prior to teaching their first inclusive course. The fourth question asked how they had been impacted by teaching inclusive courses. The final two questions asked for respondents' advice to faculty and to program staff, respectively.

A flexible approach allowed each interview to be adapted in small ways to maintain a natural flow, for example, by changing the order or phrasing of questions. This approach also allowed interviewers to probe for examples, clarifications, and other relevant content, depending on faculty responses. The first two interviews were conducted by two researchers, one leading the questions and the other providing support and offering occasional follow-up questions. All subsequent interviews were conducted by an individual researcher.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were entered into ATLAS.ti qualitative analysis software for thematic coding and memoing. An initial list of codes was developed reflecting major themes, both deductively from our research questions and inductively from what was said in the interviews. Two transcripts were selected and coded using ATLAS.ti software separately by two different researchers to test the codes. The ATLAS.ti software was used to combine the coded documents so we could compare, contrast, and discuss to reach consensus on how to use each code. The code list was also edited as a result of this process. The remaining transcripts were coded first by one researcher, then reviewed by a second researcher who added or edited coding as needed. When substantial conflicts arose, they were discussed, and consensus was reached. While coding, researchers also wrote memos expanding on themes, posing questions, and brainstorming ideas for analysis. Output files were produced for memos and key themes and used to summarize the findings and draw connections. The key themes and subthemes identified via this process are presented here.

Findings

Benefits

Faculty indicated that teaching students with ID was a generally positive experience, and all participants saw multiple benefits in having students with ID in their classes. Faculty

observed that the inclusion of college students with ID benefited the students themselves, but also benefited other college students, the classroom environment, and the instructors.

Benefits to Students with ID

Benefits to students with ID, identified by faculty, included the chance for students with ID to interact socially with college peers and have opportunities to pursue topics of interest. For example, Participant 8 stated that taking inclusive classes was “really incredible for the student’s confidence level,” which they attributed, in part, to having classmates listen to and value their opinions. Participant 4, who came to know students with ID over multiple semesters, observed similar positive impacts, such as the development of greater independence and leadership in students with ID. This faculty member provided a specific example of a student with ID who became president of a student club and was planning to go on to a four-year college.

Benefits to Typical Students and the Classroom Environment

While the benefits to the students with ID were acknowledged, participants tended to focus more on the benefits experienced by typical students, the classroom environment, and the faculty.

So often my sense is that in these inclusive situations, we’re looking at how it benefits the students with intellectual disabilities. And my interest in research, and from experience, I just see it the other way around: that they are really—their presence is benefiting the undergraduate students in many, many ways.

(Participant 4)

Several participants perceived more student engagement in inclusive classrooms. This was characterized by a few as a greater level of “enthusiasm” and a more “positive attitude” on the part of students with ID, and that this “energy” was “contagious among the other students.” Participant 4 observed, “My daytime classes are inclusive, and then in the evenings, they’re not. So, it’s very obvious that the classes that are inclusive are...more dynamic, more engaged.” A common perception was that students with ID tended to be “more interested in talking” and asked more clarifying questions than typical students, who were often “reluctant to ask questions” even if they didn’t understand the material. All students, they observed, could learn from additional explanation, whether it provided new information or confirmed existing understanding. The willingness of students with ID to pose questions was seen as an advantage for the entire classroom.

Another common theme was that disability, as a dimension of diversity, improved the learning experience of all students by introducing a greater variety of experiences, perspectives, and ways of thinking into classroom discussions. For example, faculty noted that students with ID often bring up “really thoughtful questions” that typical students “just

wouldn't think to ask." Participant 3 recalled, "We've had some times where [students with ID] will bring up something or ask a question that really sparks a good discussion, which leads to the benefit to the traditional students."

In addition to being exposed to a wider range of ideas, faculty also saw typical students gain skills in collaboration and communication from interacting with classmates with ID. In one course emphasizing group projects, the professor observed integrating a student with ID made their typical peers more thoughtful and creative in dividing up tasks.

It caused the team to have to work a little bit more creatively on how to integrate the [student with ID] into their team to give them a meaningful task, not just a filler task or a remedial task. They have to really think about, "Well, how will I give this student a meaningful role ... on the team?" (Participant 1)

Another professor noticed that many other students became adept at drawing students with ID into conversations and eliciting their opinions. Participant 4 pointed out that having classmates with ID was a way for education majors "to see [an] inclusive environment that they could then model in their schools when they become teachers."

In addition to educational benefits, participants noticed positive social-emotional effects of inclusive courses, such as increasing typical students' "empathy and awareness" and "propensity for inclusion" (Participant 10). Participant 7 saw more "acts of kindness" in their inclusive courses, and Participant 1 said inclusive courses were more "service oriented" rather than having an "entitlement culture." Others observed that classmates with and without ID formed lasting bonds, and some typical students went on to volunteer for disability-focused organizations such as Best Buddies. As stated by Participant 8, "I get to see how the [typical] students in the class ... just embrace [students with ID] ... That, again, goes back to the dynamics of the classroom ... it's a really beautiful thing." Relatedly, some faculty commented on the impact of day-to-day interactions among students with and without ID, seeing typical students become "more accepting" of difference and viewing their classmates with ID as valued peers who are "not a whole lot different" from themselves.

Benefits to Faculty

Another recurring theme was the inclusion of students with ID in courses improving faculty teaching skills. For Participant 9, successfully managing a diverse classroom led to increased confidence: "It's allowed me to really impact a wider diverse population ... I was nervous. But it really gave myself confidence that I can work with any type of student."

Faculty spoke about improving their lectures by listening to the questions posed by students with ID. During preparation for an inclusive class, for example, Participant 1 said they had learned to "anticipate the question [a student with ID] is going to ask," prompting them to "think about breaking down a concept," pointing out that a clearer explanation

also “might benefit the rest of the class.” Another participant noted that professors can lose sight of how difficult their own area of expertise might be for someone learning about it for the first time. Having students with ID in their classes prompted them to change their approach.

It really has caused me to stop and think, man, a lot of times I've just made this material a lot more difficult than it needs to be. So, I think it's helped me make sure that the material that I'm covering in these classes is accessible to a wider audience than just a half a dozen people in my field. (Participant 3)

Similarly, a few participants noted that having students with ID in their classes was a reminder about the range of student learning styles, educational experiences, and capabilities. Participant 8, who had nearly 20 years of teaching experience, pointed out, “If you're teaching for a really long time ... you can ... forget that there are different levels in that classroom. And these students are individuals; it's not just one big classroom.” Participant 2 related a similar perspective, stating they “improved” over time in this regard and were able to “focus more on individual instruction” and “meet people where they are, rather than having people meet you where you are as a teacher.” Teaching students with ID appeared to serve as a reminder of the wide range of knowledge among students in any given course.

Challenges Faced by Faculty Related to Instructing Students with ID

Faculty members interviewed in this study also discussed challenges they faced in teaching inclusive courses. They were sometimes confused about the status of students with ID taking their courses and whether they could or should make modifications to the course requirements for those students. They also desired more information about individual students and how to teach students with ID, sometimes expressing doubt in their own capabilities.

Understanding the Status of Students and Faculty Responsibilities

Instructors were typically contacted at the start of the academic term by a staff member from the postsecondary education program indicating that a student with ID wished to take their course. Some faculty interpreted this communication as a request for approval, and others saw it simply as advance notification. For example, Participant 7 paraphrased an email they received prior to the term as “you’re going to have so-and-so student in your class,” whereas Participant 3 paraphrased a “no-pressure” approach this way: “look, if you aren't comfortable or if you don't feel that this is a class that would be suitable ... please don't feel obligated.”

Instructors were not always clear on the status of students with ID taking their courses, but because they were not expected to assign a letter grade in the standard system, it was apparent that most or all students were auditing or taking courses pass/fail. While

allowing for flexibility, this seemed to raise confusion about expectations, as faculty were not sure what they could ask of the students, as illustrated by the following two quotes.

I pretty much allow them to do whatever they want to do in my ... classes, because they don't get graded. I mean if someone turns in a paper, I will grade it and give it back to them. But I don't give them a—they don't get a grade on the computer.
(Participant 7)

I don't know if I'm supposed to be requiring them to do more, but ... what I took from the mentor was that ... it's not like grading for regular class. It's sort of allowing the students to participate in the level that they'd feel comfortable and able to participate to make it the most beneficial experience, but I don't know if that's the right philosophy, but that's—that was the philosophy that I took from it. (Participant 10)

These quotes reflect common themes expressed in many of our interviews. One theme was apprehension about an instructor's authority to require auditing students to take exams or complete any assignments at all, given that they were not required to enter a grade due to the student's audit status. It does not appear that program expectations regarding completion of assignment or grading practices were always made clear, nor was it apparent that instructors requested clarification from either program staff or from students themselves. Instead, faculty often based their approach on communication from the student's peer mentor, who was often another undergraduate student. In trying to provide students with the "the most beneficial experience," many faculty seemed to allow their students with ID to make their own decisions about how much to engage in their course. At times, it was unclear if the decision-makers were the students or their peer mentors. For example, one noted that peer mentors arranged for alternate testing sites when students with ID needed them, without the involvement of program staff or the institution's disability services office (DSO).

Without solid direction, faculty found identifying appropriate and needed accommodations and modifications to be a challenging task. Faculty were generally used to students making specific accommodations requests with documentation from the DSO, but some found that this was not always the case for students with ID. In addition to granting accommodations requests when they were made (such as alternate testing sites), some faculty made modifications (such as reducing wordcount requirements on papers), without knowing what, if any, modifications were expected or appropriate. In some cases, modifications were made in collaboration with the student and/or peer mentor, and a modified syllabus or list of assignments was established. One instructor, who oversaw

several sections of an inclusive course, created a standard modified syllabus for all students with ID. Yet others, as depicted in the quote above from Participant 10, who allowed students with ID “to participate in the level that they'd feel comfortable,” described a more hands-off approach.

Desire for More Student Information

Faculty frequently indicated that they did not know enough about students with ID to be able to effectively teach them. Some indicated that more information about the students would allow them to better understand their capabilities, and this might guide their expectations and their teaching. Participant 6 explained, “I wasn't quite clear—you don't have to tell me what the disability is, but what could I expect. That's what it is. What could I expect in terms of their capabilities? I wish I had known more.”

Some faculty wanted to know a student's disability or diagnosis, to help determine if the course was a good fit. Others sought this information, indicating that it would aid in making accommodations and course modifications. Some faculty seemed to understand that this was not information they could or should know; others appeared unsure and seemed to find it difficult to form their questions. For example, Participant 7 had inquired with the program staff about two students who were joining an upcoming class:

I've already said to them twice, “You wanted to give me information.” And I don't know what the line is. I don't know if it's politically correct or if they can or can't do it, I don't know any of that stuff either. (Participant 7)

This instructor, like others in the study, felt they not only received insufficient information about individual students, but also needed a better understanding of the type of information they should know.

Some faculty also expressed interest in better understanding their students' academic goals and needs, particularly in relation to the course topic. Participant 4 explained, “I would say that as faculty, at the moment, we don't have a lot of information about the students. So, I am never entirely clear what their goals are, what their needs are.” Also expressed were desires for information about “best practices” for teaching students with particular disabilities—“like, here are some things that work best as you try to engage with or interact with a student with these disabilities” (Participant 1). The way these questions were framed suggested that the information would be expected to come from professional program staff and not directly from the students themselves.

Faculty Perceptions of Their Own Capabilities

A few faculty expressed a higher comfort level in teaching students with ID, seeing the experience as similar to teaching students with other disabilities, such as “students who were speech impaired [or] who were sight impaired.” Others saw teaching students with ID as requiring a distinct skillset, one they did not possess at first. Most recalled some

level of apprehension before their first inclusive course and attributed this to lack of knowledge and experience. However, instructors described increasing comfort over time. Participant 3 explained, "It wasn't until the end of that first semester that I really started to understand, okay, I get what this program is trying to do now. But there's a pretty big learning curve there that first semester or two."

For some faculty who had formal training in teaching diverse learners, having a student with ID did not appear to cause as much trepidation. For example, Participant 8, who had worked in special education before teaching at the college level, emphasized that training and experience conferred confidence:

I probably taught my college classes with the idea that there are some students in there with disabilities ... I was so used to working with teachers so that they could differentiate for all different levels that even in the college classroom I did that just naturally because it's what I was trained to do, luckily. (Participant 8)

On the other hand, Participant 9 recalled being initially "nervous" at the idea of teaching an inclusive course, saying teaching students with ID "was not my training, and so, I didn't know what that meant." This participant, who later gained significant experience both in teaching students with ID and advising other instructors, reflected that even though faculty nearly always felt nervous at first, they did not necessarily need any special training:

The challenge for faculty, is for about 90 percent of them, if not higher, there is this misconception that they need specialty training or certification or they get scared, which is not necessarily the case. (Participant 9)

Improvements Sought by Faculty to Enhance the Experience for All

Faculty offered some suggestions on how to enhance future faculty recruitment practices. They also indicated that the experience of enrolling and instructing college students with ID could be improved with some changes in communication and engagement with postsecondary program staff before a course started and while the course was being offered.

Prepare Faculty Before They Begin Teaching

Participants suggested that highlighting and sharing the benefits of inclusive courses might reduce feelings of apprehension in potential future faculty.

What could convince me if I was on the edge or if I was considering it and wasn't open to it was, "What are the benefits to me as an instructor or to the students in

the class, in terms of learning experiences, and to the participants in the program, and what they will ultimately get out of it?" (Participant 9)

Another participant suggested that an instructor could observe a colleague's inclusive class, "to realize that it's not as difficult as you might think":

It doesn't disrupt your class. It doesn't change the material. It may change the ways in which you present some things, but it's not—you don't have to go back and reinvent the wheel should you decide to have [student with ID] in your class. (Participant 3)

Faculty suggested that program staff could provide instructors with clearer information about the inclusive postsecondary programs students were attending, such as their purpose, goals, and objectives. Additionally, better information could be offered regarding the time commitment, academic accommodations, course modifications, and grading.

Provide Ongoing Support to Faculty

Some participants expressed a desire for ongoing support, as well as information about the types of support they could request from program staff. One faculty suggested that a mid-semester check-in would be helpful. Another suggested that faculty should receive more guidance about the role of peer mentors and went so far as to suggest that when possible, programs could assign staff members as mentors. Several participants advocated for more guidance on "best practices" for teaching and assessing students with ID, some asking for opportunities to interact and ask questions with program staff.

I think a lot of times, especially younger faculty may feel a little bit intimidated not really knowing—this is a little bit different. They don't have a class, as far as I know, in graduate school about how to teach [students with ID]. And so, how do we do that? And so, having a system in place where people are allowed to ask questions is incredibly important. (Participant 3)

Suggested formats for this information included short videos, written "tips," and targeted trainings prior to and during the semester. Some participants also suggested that the programs facilitate opportunities for faculty to learn from each other, such as an "interest group" to "let professors share their experiences" (Participant 1).

Coordinate With the IHE to Address Structural Barriers

Faculty indicated an overall need to align the students' experience with existing systems within their college or university. As noted previously, in some cases, faculty were confused about the systems used to clarify the registration process and enrollment status. In other cases, faculty sought clarity about grading requirements, especially when students with ID were registered as auditing students. Additionally, participants also wanted to know what campus programs and resources were available to students attending inclusive postsecondary programs. For example, Participant 10 was confused about how to coordinate accommodations with the DSO: "My sense is that there needs to be ... better interaction between DSO and [the program] because DSO has the capacity to help facilitate ... at least some of the accommodations." Others recommended removing bureaucratic barriers, such as eliminating the need for approval from department heads before admitting a student with ID into a class. Overall, some faculty sought better integration of inclusive programs into the general campus structure.

Discussion

Our findings resonate with and add to prior research on faculty perspectives and experiences (Burgin et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2016; O'Connor et al., 2012) by presenting data from a broader range of higher-education programs across the U.S. This study contributes to the growing evidence of the array of benefits that inclusive courses offer to faculty, peers, and students with ID. The findings also suggest a need for more faculty support to enhance the experience for everyone involved. Faculty in this study were overwhelmingly positive about the experience of teaching inclusive courses but generally felt unprepared to teach students with ID, especially at first. Even professors with more experience teaching inclusive courses had gaps in knowledge and wished for more information and guidance. Many reported feeling anxious when first approached and unsure if they could be effective, but over time, their confidence grew. To maximize the benefits reported in this and previous studies (Burgin et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2016; O'Connor et al., 2012), faculty desire information, guidance, and support from program staff, to help them be effective instructors.

Faculty Understanding of Program Structure

Faculty interviewed for this study had gaps in their understanding of the inclusive postsecondary programs at their institutions, despite having taught multiple students who attended those programs. Faculty were often unclear about the enrollment status of students with ID, most of whom appeared to be auditing their courses. Some were unaware how the programs were structured or even what their goals and expectations were. Faculty did not tend to know what information or supports were available to them as faculty or to students, apart from the peer mentor.

Auditing

The students' auditing status seemed to add to faculty's confusion about the educational goals of individual students and the program overall. This raises a question for instructors

who want to offer access to inclusive courses they teach; what are the responsibilities of the student and professor when the student is not receiving credit or an official grade for a course? Auditing usually requires the permission of the instructor, and a student's role in an audited course may be limited, depending on arrangements between the student and instructor (Bonati et al., 2019; Mock & Love, 2012). In the context of inclusive courses for students with ID, auditing status may allow more flexibility in course assignments and assessments, so students can achieve their own learning goals and program expectations (Kleinert et al., 2012).

The faculty interviewed for this study had a range of responses to the audit arrangement. Approaches included offering a standard set of modifications for all students with ID, making individual agreements with students on expectations, and taking a completely "hands-off" approach. Faculty who took the latter approach explained that they were unsure whether they could impose any requirements on students who were not going to receive a grade or course credit. Most college courses are structured to assign scores or letter grades, and the instructor's authority rests, at least in part, in their power to assess students and to determine if they can receive course credit. Consequently, if no official grade or credit is issued, then it is less clear whether the professor can expect the same quality and quantity of work. This appeared to be one aspect of participants' confusion over their roles and responsibilities in teaching students with ID.

Another possible side effect of the auditing arrangement was confusion about students' educational goals and whether the instructor's course would contribute toward those goals. Accustomed to teaching students working towards an established degree program, some faculty were unsure whether their courses fit in the educational plans of students with ID. In the absence of clear communication about the objectives of the inclusive postsecondary programs, faculty may not have understood the important role of a variety of inclusive courses. However, the extent to which the faculty expectations were based on the auditing arrangement or lack of information, and how much was due to their perceptions of a student's disability, is unclear.

Peer Mentors

Peer mentors are an integral form of natural supports for students with ID on the college campus (Carter et al., 2019), offering social, academic, employment, independent living, and transportation supports (Grigal et al., 2019). In the 2018-2019 academic year, 86% of the grant-funded TPSID programs utilized peer supports for students with ID (Grigal et al., 2019). In our study, faculty reported that peer mentors had key roles not only in providing direct support to the student but also in bridging the communication gap between faculty, students, and the program. Faculty indicated that they relied on peer mentors quite a bit but were generally unclear about their training, experience, role, and responsibilities.

In some cases, faculty treated the peer mentor as their primary contact, relying on the peer mentor to convey information to and from the student with ID and program staff. In cases like these, instead of communicating directly with the student and expecting the student to participate, the faculty may have seen the peer mentor as more than a support

person, but instead also as a proxy for the student with ID. It is unclear whether reliance on peer mentors was due to the instructors' expectations of their students' capabilities, miscommunication or lack of communication with program staff, the actions of the peer mentors themselves, or other factors. However, without clear guidance about the role of the peer mentor and the expectations for the student's engagement, an instructor may not consider another option.

Faculty Preparation on Teaching and Accommodations

Faculty identified gaps in their knowledge, especially around how to teach diverse learners and better manage inclusive classrooms, and they indicated interest in addressing those gaps. College and university faculty often lack any formal pedagogical training, having focused their graduate education on research and developing content expertise (Gaff et al., 2003; Robinson & Hope, 2013). Despite increasing recognition of the need for more preparation for teaching in some graduate program disciplines, the emphasis tends to be on practice through teaching assistantships, rather than formal instruction in how to teach (Gaff et al., 2003). More specifically, faculty tend to lack formal training in accommodating disabilities, and faculty in this and other studies (Burgin et al., 2017; Hansen & Dawson, 2019; Jones et al., 2016; O'Connor et al., 2012) doubted their ability to effectively teach students with ID and other disabilities. Research has shown the value of professional development in helping faculty feel more competent in their overall pedagogical skills (Gaff et al., 2003; Wurgler et al., 2014) and in their disability inclusion strategies (Vaughan & Henderson, 2016). Training on accommodations and teaching practices to support students with disabilities has also been found to impact the attitudes and perceptions of faculty members towards students with disabilities in higher education (Dallas & Sprong, 2015; Li, 2020; Lombardi et al., 2011; Lombardi & Murray, 2011; Murray et al., 2009; Sniatecki et al., 2015).

Universal design (UD) is one approach recommended to improve teaching and learning for students with disabilities (Lipka et al., 2019). Based in an architectural principle for building inclusive environments, UD in education is used to make instruction as accessible to the widest range of learning styles and needs (Meyer et al., 2014; Scott et al., 2003). Using UD principles may reduce the need for individual accommodations because pre-planning for the course would take into consideration the learning styles and needs of all students (Scott et al., 2003). Findings from previous studies (Dallas et al., 2014; Li, 2020) suggest that faculty have generally positive attitudes toward UD instructional methods; however, they are not necessarily knowledgeable on how to implement these guidelines in their classes.

Faculty in our study did not discuss UD principles, nor did they indicate that UD was implemented in their classrooms. However, using a UD framework could serve to reframe faculty concerns and help address some of the challenges they faced. UD places an emphasis on the mastery of knowledge and skills and on flexibility in the methods of learning (Hartmann, 2015; Meyer et al., 2014). Traditional special education settings are often designed to accommodate people who have a particular disability label or a perceived level of impairment and thus may use a single educational approach based on the presumed needs of those people assigned those disability labels (Hartmann, 2015).

Some faculty wanted to know a student's diagnosis and extent of disability. This information was sought by them to help determine if the course was a good fit or to inform faculty of needed potential accommodations and course modifications. While likely demonstrating positive intentions, that some faculty asked for students' diagnoses suggests that faculty did not understand the legal framework of disability disclosure for college students. This kind of request is consistent with a special education model that emphasizes matching a category of student with type of teaching. Some faculty had a more skills-based framework and wanted to know what students were and were not able to do; indeed, when we drilled down on questions of "diagnosis," this was what instructors were seeking.

However, these approaches still establish a distinction between students with ID and students without ID. Following UD principles, an instructor would assume that all students come to the classroom as expert learners with skills and styles that vary from individual to individual. In this study, if an instructor determined that a student was unable to complete the work as assigned, they typically made or allowed modifications to the amount, rather than the modality, of the assignments. For example, a modification to a writing assignment could be to simply decrease the required length for the individual student. A UD approach might be to identify the knowledge or skills that the assignment was meant to demonstrate and accept a variety of methods to do so, such as a video or presentation, from all students in the class. Other students, with and without disabilities, can benefit from having a variety of options.

A few faculty noticed that changing their approaches to accommodate students with ID actually helped other students understand the material; in other words, they found that updating their teaching style resulted in a better match for the learning styles of more of their students. Most faculty, however, did not appear to recognize (in our interviews at least) that they might have hit on a teaching approach that fit more of their students' learning styles. Noticing these impacts could be an opportunity to observe that their students with ID may have more in common with their peers than the professor may have assumed. Indeed, if there had been a deficit or barrier, these moments of success indicate that it may have been a mismatch between teaching approach and learning styles, and that an overall shift could benefit more students.

Implications for Practice

This study offers several implications for practice, in particular for program staff and faculty in higher education, as well as for college students with ID. Program staff could assist faculty in better understanding their program goals through an orientation activity for faculty providing an overview of its goals as well as clarity around general expectations and grading practices. Programs could also establish clearer communication structures, ensuring that faculty and instructors are aware of available staff and know who to approach if there are questions or concerns. Due to the confusion around grading for students who are auditing courses, programs could consider developing a policy or offer considerations to faculty around their approach to grading students who are not receiving credit in an audited class. Programs could work with students to identify their personal goals related to courses and support them to share these goals with their instructors. This

may help to alleviate confusion held by faculty and lead to an improved student experience.

Faculty who are interested in better understanding how to support learners with ID can seek out training in a framework such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which can help broaden educational inclusion not just for students with intellectual and other disabilities, but for students with a wide range of learning styles and abilities, and linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Bassuk et al., 2017; Evmenova, 2018; Love et al., 2019). With this training in hand, faculty can create accessible course materials, minimizing the need for individual accommodations (Scott et al., 2003). Faculty may also connect with other faculty who teach inclusive courses. Faculty who had other contact with fellow instructors found that helpful, especially one professor who reflected on the advantages of team-teaching an inclusive course with a colleague. Program staff can help facilitate this by convening a working group, message board, or other way for faculty to communicate with each other, or perhaps assign an experienced faculty member as a mentor. As faculty gain confidence and gather ideas for improving their teaching, it could be beneficial to have other instructors and program staff to collaborate on problem-solving, share lessons learned, and provide new ideas.

Another implication from this study involves the level of faculty knowledge about disability disclosure. Disability services offices at IHEs may consider providing faculty further training about disability and disclosure (such as a “Disability 101”). This might include basic information about disability in general, and more specifically about intellectual disability, including language and etiquette, disability rights, self-disclosure, the ADA and IDEA, and self-advocacy. Studies have identified additional training needs such as students’ rights under various laws and faculty’s corresponding obligations to meet students’ needs (Bigaj et al., 1999; Murray et al., 2009). Program staff could contribute content or deidentified examples for these kinds of trainings and facilitate faculty access.

Another important implication of this study relates to students with ID and those who support them. Throughout the interviews, faculty spoke of wanting more information from the program about the students with ID enrolled in their classes. At times, this information was provided by a peer mentor, but there was little expectation that the student with ID would self-disclose and directly provide information to the faculty. For other college students with disabilities, self-disclosure and self-advocacy are expected. These students disclose their disability to the disability support office on campus and then request accommodations from the instructor for each of their classes. College students with ID can be offered the same opportunity to self-advocate, explaining their learning strengths and needs in the classroom. Program staff may need to empower and equip students with ID with skills for being able to speak directly to their instructors and to request accommodations, with support as needed. Program staff can also convey these expectation to faculty so that questions about a student’s needs are directed first to the student and not to others.

Implications for Research

A number of implications for future research are evident from our findings. First, the findings of this study were based on the experiences of a relatively small number of faculty from federally funded programs teaching students with ID who were auditing courses. Future studies may consider reaching out to a larger sample of experienced faculty from more programs, in particular those that have not received federal funding as a TPSID, and ensuring that faculty have provided instruction to students seeking credit. Future studies could extend their focus to include interviews with faculty, corresponding program staff, peer mentors, and students with ID to gain a richer understanding of the roles of each group and how the academic experience could be improved.

Second, a better understanding is needed about existing practices for orienting faculty to the structures and expectations of postsecondary programs for students with ID and the concepts and practices of effective instruction. Future research could gather and compare orientation approaches and determine effective instructional strategies.

Third, programs and faculty seemed to rely heavily on college students without ID in the role of peer mentors. Further examination of this role, and the experiences of those serving in this role, would provide important information about their duties, tasks, and responsibilities. It could also add to the body of research on the effectiveness of peer mentors as support systems for college students with ID. For example, are peer mentors effective in bridging the gap between student abilities and the demands of inclusive courses? This research would provide important information to help guide the supports provided by postsecondary education programs to students with ID.

Finally, there is a need for future research about and by students with ID themselves to gain a deeper understanding of their experience in college classes. More traditional research methods, both quantitative and qualitative, could be employed to examine the supports that students with ID need to advocate for accommodations in their classes, and what additional supports are useful for them within and outside the classroom. Such research would help to inform the training provided by program staff to faculty and would ultimately lead to a more effective academic experience for students with ID enrolled in college courses. Additionally, extending our learning from these traditional approaches, future research could employ a participatory action approach, allowing students to conduct and share research on their own college experiences, which could shed additional light on their perceptions of effective instruction and needed or unneeded supports.

Limitations

Some of the limitations of this study relate to the sample. First, the study included 10 faculty members, which is a small sample size. Additionally, the students being instructed by participating faculty were taking courses using an audit option, which, as described in the findings, creates additional considerations in terms of course expectations and grading. This may have skewed the perspectives of our participants. The faculty also were selected from IHE programs that had received grant funding from the Office of

Postsecondary Education, which could have influenced the practices used by the program to facilitate academic inclusion. Faculty teaching at programs without federal resources and oversight may have different experiences. However, our study findings aligned with findings from other studies on faculty working at non-TPSIDs; therefore, the challenges these programs face regarding faculty may be less about funding (or resources) and more programmatic and philosophical in nature.

Furthermore, most of the faculty included in the study had disability experience in their background, which may have influenced their perspectives on the experience of instructing college students with ID. The approach and attitudes of these instructors may not be representative of all higher-education faculty instructing college students with ID. Our study also did not include other relevant perspectives, including those of program staff, students with ID, peer mentors, or other college students without ID.

Conclusion

The knowledge and attitudes of faculty and instructors greatly influence the experiences of all college students, including college students with ID. As the number of institutions of higher education enrolling students with ID grows, ensuring that faculty understand the expectations and anticipated outcomes of these learning experiences is vital. Our study findings demonstrate a willingness on the part of faculty to welcome students with ID into their classrooms, but also an uncertainty about how to approach instruction, supports, grading and communication. Continued focus is needed to ensure that faculty have the necessary information to effectively teach students with ID and help them, like they do other college students, achieve their academic goals in higher education.

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Table 1*Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants*

Participant	Course Type	Employment Status at IHE	IHE Type	Years Teaching
1	Physical Education	Full-time	Private 4-year	9
2	Academic	Part-time	Public 4-year	1.5
3	Academic	Full-time	Private 4-year	19
4	Academic	Full-time	Community College	8
5	Academic, Physical Education	Part-time	Community College	35
6	Arts	Part-time	Public 4-year	10
7	Academic	Part-time	Public 4-year	7
8	Academic	Retired	Public 4-year	19
9	Academic	Full-time	Private 4-year	5
10	Physical Education	Full-time	Public 4-year	15