Navigating Risk? Enrollment in Inclusive Post-Secondary Education During COVID-19

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Abstract

This study explores challenges faced by young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) and their families enrolling in inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs during COVID-19. The benefits of attending IPSE programs are well-documented, but this group is disadvantaged accessing postsecondary education and employment. The heightened risk of COVID-19 for people with IDD further complicates decision-making. Through interviews with 11 students with IDD and 10 parents, the study explores decisions about enrolling in IPSE, highlighting the importance of access to alternative options, expectations during the pandemic, and the ability of IPSE programs to adapt to future challenges, notably online options.

Keywords: inclusive postsecondary education, students with disabilities, parents, COVID-19

Plain Language Summary

- Young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) and their parents have to think about if they want to attend college after high school.
- These programs to help students learn more and train to work are called inclusive post-secondary education (IPSE) programs.
- Sometimes this is a hard decision. During COVID-19, this choice was even harder.
- **What we did in this study:** We talked with 11 students and 10 parents about this choice. We found that they thought about three things:
    1) the health of the student,
    2) if there was something else the student could do is that they did not attend, and
    3) if IPSE would be a good experience if class and training was online
- Most people we talked to thought about more than one.
- **Findings:** Students that had something else to do, like another job or social group, often chose to wait another year to go to IPSE, when it might be safer and/or in-person.

- Students without something else to do attended IPSE even if it might not be the best time.
- **Conclusion:** We talked about why it's important to talk to students and families about these choices and how the programs could be better if they could move classes and job training online.

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted life for virtually everyone. One group that faced a unique challenge is young adults with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities (IDD) considering postsecondary education (PSE) opportunities (Agarwal et al., 2021; Lee & Taylor, 2022). For people with IDD, PSE opportunities ensure job prospects and increased earnings over a lifetime (Andresen & Nord, 2020; Whirley et al., 2020). Yet, postsecondary campuses are environments where viruses (like COVID-19) are transmitted at high rates (Bharti et al., 2022); people with IDD are at increased risk of contracting COVID-19 and may face worse outcomes from the virus (Courtenay & Perera, 2020; Hewitt et al., 2022). Thus, young adults with IDD faced higher levels of risk if they choose to pursue PSE (Aishworiya & Kang, 2021). The purpose of this study was to explore how young adults with IDD and their families made choices about enrollment in PSE during this unique moment in history, including the motivations for their choices. Centering the perspectives and experiences of young people with IDD and their families is crucial; their voices are underrepresented in PSE research (Agarwal et al., 2021; Lee & Taylor, 2022).

Literature Review

Education, Employment, and IDD

Postsecondary education is a driving factor for better employment rates, higher incomes, and overall health for most Americans (Council of Economic Advisors, 2022). According to the American Community Survey (ACS; 2019 data retrieved from Erickson et al., 2022), 66.3% of American adults without disabilities had taken at least one course at a college or university, while 33.7% had completed high school or less. People with disabilities have lower rates than people without disabilities; only 47.5% had taken some PSE courses, and 52.5% had completed high school or less. These numbers are even more bleak for people with IDD; according to the ACS, only 42.6% of people with cognitive disabilities had taken PSE educational courses. The lower education rates for people with disabilities and people with IDD are often due to a lack of educational opportunities (Newman et al., 2011).

In recent years, PSE options for young adults with IDDs have expanded (Lee & Taylor, 2022; Mazzotti et al., 2021; Whirley et al., 2020), especially in terms of the growth of Inclusive Postsecondary Education (IPSE) programs that provide postsecondary academic and transition experiences focused on independent living and employment skills. In 2021, over 300 of these programs existed across the United States (Think College, n.d.) in response to the 2008 Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA). The HEOA emphasized transition programs from high school for students with IDDs to IPSE through funding for Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSIDs) and inspiring similar programs across the country that did not

receive federal funding (Sanderson et al., 2022). Often, these are 2-year certificate programs rather than academic degrees.

The benefits for students with IDD enrolled in IPSE are well-documented, including higher employment rates, enriched academic experiences, and increased credential achievements (Grigal et al., 2021; Lee & Taylor, 2022). People with IDD have the highest rate of unemployment and underemployment in the United States (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021), and IPSE programs have the potential to improve these outcomes. In particular, people with IDD who attend some college or university have higher lifetime earnings (Andresen & Nord, 2020).

COVID-19 and College Enrollment

In the spring of 2020, nearly all (96.3%) colleges and universities transitioned to remote learning due to COVID-19 (College Crisis Initiative, 2020). Communities where institutes of higher education (IHEs) transitioned into remote learning had better outcomes, including fewer deaths related to COVID-19, as compared to communities where IHEs continued in person (Uelmen et al., 2023). While enrollment in PSE benefits people with and without disabilities, COVID-19 made attending PSE difficult. The changing conditions of PSE led to a decrease in overall enrollment in PSE. Nationwide, between 2019 and 2021, undergraduate enrollment rates decreased by 7.8%, with larger decreases for two-year colleges (-14.8%) than for four-year universities (-4.0%; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022). Women also disenrolled more frequently than men, which may be related to the "hands-on" (e.g., practicum and other placements with a high degree of in-person interaction) nature of their programs, which are more difficult to transition to remote learning (Schanzenbach & Turner, 2022). The pandemic magnified existing inequities by disability, race, and class (Abedi et al., 2021; Fish et al., 2022; Marotto et al., 2021).

People with IDD face higher risks than other populations regarding COVID-19, exacerbating the risk of transmitting COVID-19 on PSE campuses for people with IDD. Further, young adults with IDD are more susceptible to COVID-19 infection and face an increased likelihood of poor outcomes if they contract the disease (Hewitt et al., 2022; World Health Organization, 2020). The combination of risks on a PSE campus and the additional risks associated with IDD may impact the decision to enroll in PSE during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Families and PSE Enrollment

Family members play key roles in the transition to PSE for most young adults (Ong et al., 2020; Walsh et al., 2023), including students with IDD. Existing research on IPSE enrollment decision-making has focused on barriers and facilitators to this process. In particular, transition planning has been explored as key to the success of a student with IDD in PSE (Grigal et al., 2011). Some family members struggled in this transition, particularly as they “transition from a caregiver role to an advisor role” (Francis et al., 2016, p. 120). This means that families that previously made decisions for their young adults transitioned into more of a supporting role, encouraging independence, even if they made

decisions that the family may not completely agree with. Grigal and colleagues (2013) emphasized the role of family involvement for students with IDD and found that students with more involved families were more likely to enroll in PSE and be successful. Miller et al. (2018) interviewed parents of students in an IPSE who expressed difficulty "letting go" of their children; they learned to get over that fear as they watched students engage in those programs. They gained confidence in the students' capabilities and independence as the students gained experience.

Conceptual Framework: Dignity of Risk

Dignity of risk is a concept developed by Perske (1972) to protect against people with disabilities being overprotected or sheltered. They have the right to make their own decisions, even amid reasonable risks, in the same way that people without disabilities have that right. As shown above, there are some risks involved in IPSE enrollment during the pandemic, and we were interested in determining whether dignity of risk was extended to the students during the pandemic. Relevant key elements that were previously identified are: 1) PSE is strongly linked with improved outcomes for students with IDD in terms of employment and income; 2) enrollment in PSE may be associated with higher risks of COVID-19 transition because of risks on those campuses; 3) students with IDD face additional risks associated with COVID-19, and 4) the transition to PSE is a challenging time for families. Recently, but prior to the pandemic, authors have used this concept specifically within IPSE programs. Bumble et al. (2021) developed "The Model of Dignity of Risk in IPSE" which describes the continuum of risk afforded the students within those programs. This model describes programs as facilitating different types of risk (i.e., manufactured, programmed, managed, and authentic) depending on how inclusive the program and activities are. Rooney-Kron et al. (2022) described how this model could be applied within IPSE for program self-assessment. The authors suggest approaches to self-assessment that a program can use to understand their level of segregation or inclusiveness.

The current manuscript uses elements from this model, but instead of focusing on dignity of risk within a program, we look at whether the concept of dignity of risk applies to families as students consider enrolling in an IPSE (or returning for a second year during a pandemic (COVID-19). The research questions were: (1) How did students with IDD and their parents make decisions about enrolling in an IPSE during a pandemic? and (2) What factors were the most important when making that decision?

Data and Methods

We designed an exploratory qualitative study to answer the research questions. It was essential to include the voices of students with IDD and their parents in this research because they still remain underrepresented in studies of PSE (Hewitt et al., 2022; Lee & Taylor, 2022). The research design included independent semi-structured interviews with eight family dyads (e.g., a prospective student and a family member, interviewed independently) and three additional students whose parents we were not able to reach for interviews.

Research Site and Permissions

This research was conducted in one western state where only two IPSE programs existed statewide. Although housed at different institutions, each program was a two-year, non-degree postsecondary certificate for students with IDD, focused on academics, transition, and employment opportunities. Students who attend these programs are aged 18–28 and have graduated from high school with non-traditional or traditional diplomas. Some still have active individualized education programs (IEPs) through their school district, which qualifies them for financial assistance from school districts. At the time of the study, there were 25 total students enrolled between the two programs, and the majority of students and their families were White and middle-class.

The structure of each program is similar: students may take undergraduate college classes for credit or audit, depending on the required coursework and level of support required for the individual student. Students are supported by an academic coordinator who coordinates classroom supports for students, often through a network of educational coaches (peer undergraduate college students). Students also participated in employment training activities throughout their programs, rotating through paid or unpaid internships in a variety of university settings (e.g., library, student union).

Before we commenced the research study, the authors met with both programs' staff for approval to conduct research with their students and to explain the research in case staff received questions from students or parents. The authors also received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval before enrolling participants. The authors recruited students and their families by emailing program listservs with information about the study and an informational flyer. All information was provided in both English and Spanish, but all participants chose to be interviewed in English. Interested students and family members emailed the second author directly with questions or to schedule an interview.

Positionality

The first author is an associate professor of special education and disability studies at one of the institutions with an IPSE in this study. He identifies as a person with a disability, which provides insights into attending an institution of higher learning and the barriers that students may face. He directs the center that houses the IPSE, although he has no direct interaction with the students. To ensure that there were no conflicts with the students, the second author conducted all of the interviews. The second author is an assistant professor of special education and disability studies at the same institution. She is not affiliated with the IPSE. She is a non-disabled bilingual immigrant racialized as Latina and a woman of color in the U.S. Given her professional experiences, she found points of connection with participants throughout the study. For example, she could understand students' and parents' experiences in the university context.

Research Sample

We used a purposeful sample (Patton, 2015). All incoming or returning students (and their families) from each program were eligible to participate. There were 21 participants, including eight family dyads consisting of 10 parents and eight students with IDD. For two of the students, both parents participated in the family interview. The sample also included three additional students; family members were also scheduled for an interview, but these were unable to be completed. Sixty-two percent of all participants identified as White, 19% as Asian American or Asian, 10% as African American, and 10% as Latinx. Eighty-five percent self-identified as middle-class, 10% as low-income, and 5% as high-income. Table 1 includes the demographic characteristics of study participants.

Data Collection

We conducted individual semi-structured interviews with the students separately from interviews with their parents from May through June 2021. We asked about their decisions regarding attending postsecondary education in the fall semester, their experiences with college and employment opportunities during COVID-19, and their hopes and expectations for the future. All interviews were conducted by the second author, recorded via Zoom, and transcribed verbatim via Sonix (a transcription software).

Data Preparation and Analysis

As the interviewer, the second author wrote descriptive and reflective field notes after each interview (Bogdan & Biklen, 2012) in each individual interview protocol. For example, descriptive field notes recorded the interviewee's tone, while reflective field notes documented the insights of the interviewer immediately following the interview. The second author cleaned all transcripts by listening to each interview and reading the synchronized transcription. The authors coded these transcripts, descriptive field notes, and reflective field notes in Dedoose (2021), a qualitative software.

The authors used a hybrid approach to coding, incorporating both deductive (a priori codes from theory) and inductive coding (codes derived from the data; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This hybrid approach was based on the authors' knowledge of the field and the conceptual framework presented previously. Specifically, the deductive codes facilitated a focus on key themes that the interview protocol was designed to explore. The inductive codes offered the opportunity to listen more closely to the data. We generated the original codebook by independently reading five transcripts and listing/defining the codes that we felt should be included in the codebook. After reaching an initial agreement on the codes, each author coded a few transcripts at a time and met to discuss any discrepancies and decide on the appropriate code; occasionally, it was decided to add a new code, making the codebook was a living document, which was periodically updated and refined by consensus through an iterative process of coding, analysis, reflecting, and recoding (Reyes et al., 2021).

Credibility & Trustworthiness

The authors employed multiple credibility measure strategies during coding and analysis (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Tracy, 2010). We strove to ensure credibility by using triangulation, such as combining and contrasting interview reports from parents and students. After establishing preliminary themes/categories, we disconfirmed evidence and engaged in peer review and debriefings with colleagues during a presentation of our initial findings at a national conference. We strove to maintain reflexivity of our assumptions by discussing our interpretations and contemplating the influence of our personal and professional experiences on our analysis.

Results

Three themes emerged from the data: the health of the student, expectations for the IPSE programs, and alternatives to the IPSE programs. These were concerns for students and families before the COVID-19 pandemic, although the pandemic interacted with these themes to exacerbate each. Theme I (Health of the student) consists of three primary codes: a) individual health, b) risks for infection, and c) social and environmental factors related to health. Theme II (Expectations for the program) consists of four primary codes: a) expectations for the functioning of IPSE, b) expectations for in-person, on-campus experiences, c) expectations for employment/internship experiences, and d) the possibility of shifting to an online format. Theme III (Alternatives to the program) consists of three primary codes: a) social opportunities available (instead of IPSE), b) economic opportunities available (instead of IPSE), and c) economic considerations for delaying employment. The themes and primary codes are displayed in Table 2. Figure 1 is a visual representation of how these themes related to each other.

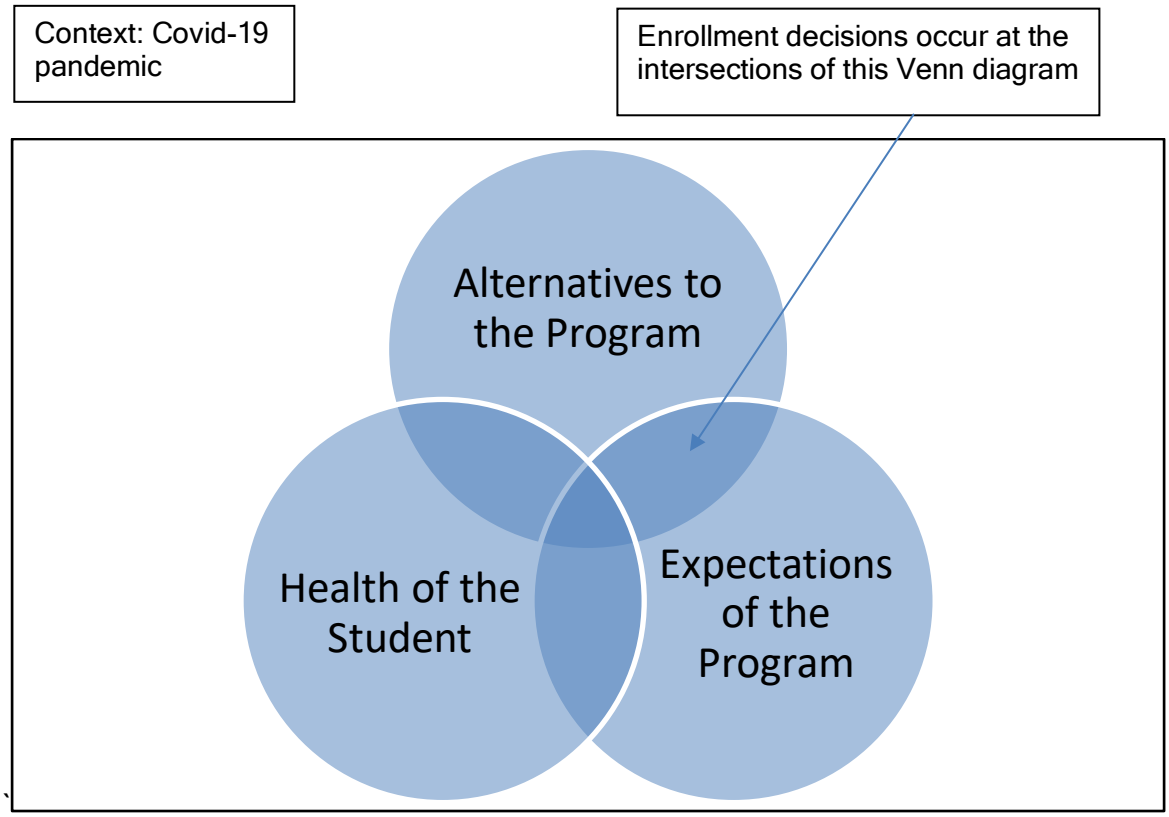
Of the 11 students that participated, 5 decided to defer enrollment in IPSE for the current academic year, and 6 decided to continue with their classes. Table 3 lists the primary themes mentioned in any of these concerning each of the students, as well as the secondary theme. In most cases, enrollment decisions were made because two of the themes overlapped to create a decision to defer or to continue enrollment for the following semester. Alternatives to the program, or the lack thereof, was a theme present in interviews surrounding each student.

Dignity of Risk

Throughout the discussions about whether to enroll in programs during the pandemic, all of the interviewees expressed respect for allowing the students to make decisions for themselves. By affording students that dignity of risk, parents showed trust in their students to make the best decisions. As one explained, “You have to trust your child... We create the environment of support, we give them a chance, and let them kind of grow into it” (Parent 209).

Figure 1

Conceptual Map of Themes and Their Relationships



Theme I: Health of the Student

During the interviews, family members and students discussed health, although that was not a primary factor in decision-making. Potential negative impacts on health were only a primary theme in the interviewees for one of the students (102). Typically, parents and students were comfortable attending the programs during the pandemic; the pandemic did not impact their decision process one way or the other. The families and students were used to the pandemic impacting their lives. For instance, one student said, "[I know] we need to social distance away from each other... Not worried about [COVID-19 and my health]. I like the mask" (Student 103). At the time of the interviews, public health interventions like vaccination availability, masking, and social distancing were generally accepted by the families and they did not give additional attention to risks to the health of the student on campus more than anywhere else.

Theme II: Expectations for the Programs

Many of the students and their families discussed their expectations for the programs they would be attending. As part of this theme, participants talked about their immediate expectations for the IPSE and concerns about the transition to postsecondary education in general. Parents looked forward to students having the chance to participate

in campus life. One parent wanted the student's experience to be as similar to their siblings' experiences as possible:

> "[M]y older kids had great experiences...they not only participated in the school part, but they did all the extracurricular stuff and everything it has to offer. I mean, it's a wonderful school. And so, for [my spouse and I], for [student]to be able to experience that, that's huge" (Parent 205).

For parents, IPSE was seen as a place that had high expectations for students, a place of belonging, and a place that offered opportunities for personal and professional growth. Parents also expected students to receive in-person practical experiences in employment. Their expectations were centered on building students' skills and independent living.

For students, IPSE offered social opportunities as well as preparation for employment. When asked about their expectations, they talked about going to the fitness center or local coffee shops and meeting with friends. Their most immediate fears were navigating campus, everyday routines, and social life. One student summed this up:

> [I think about] how to live with like roommates, how to live in a dorm for the first time… for the first time in college, first ever after high school, you know...I'm kind of stressed out right now, like how I'm going to like, you know, perform? How am I going to do, you know, there? (Student109).

During the interviews, most of the participants were aware of the likelihood of at least some aspects of the IPSE experience shifting online using remote technologies and not having a full on-campus experience. However, with one exception, this shift was not enough to impact enrollment decisions This surprised the student who elected to take a gap year because of concerns about health: "[I] thought that more of the students would [also take a year off] because you really lose the experience of being on-campus ... the college experience" (Student 102).

Theme III: Alternatives to the Programs

Another theme that emerged from the interviews were alternatives to the programs, or the lack of opportunities and alternatives in the community. For all of the students, the theme of the alternatives played a large role in their enrollment decisions.

Families with Alternatives

When students and families felt that they had alternatives to enrollment in IPSE, they chose to defer enrollment for a year, especially when they felt that IPSE should involve in-person activities and social opportunities. This was true for all of the five students that made the decision to defer. For example, student 106 took a gap year and made this decision because they wanted to wait until the program could operate more in person, which is how they originally expected it to be. A family member explained that the

student would not have access to employment and job training opportunities from enrolling in IPSE, which was important to the family:

> [Prior to the pandemic] we decided [to take a gap year] and [they] was going to be at work ... since [they] couldn't do any [employment-related activities at IPSE], it really didn't seem like it would be a beneficial year [to attend online classes] (Parent 206).

This student had an alternative in the form of another job, which made it easier to defer IPSE.

For one of these students, the theme around health also played a role. Health was the primary concern for the student's family: "[Student 102] has a medical condition that puts [them] at increased risk for infection. And so, I just thought it was going to be kind of hard [to enroll in the program this year]" (Parent 202). However, the parent continued, "[They] are just 20. [They] can do this program for a long time. So, it wasn't like [they were] getting too old to do it" (Parent 202). The student also agreed; they were quoted above as being surprised that more students did not take a gap year because of changes in the structure/format of the programs during the pandemic. Thus, all three themes (health, expectations, and alternatives) overlap to help make enrollment decisions for the student and family.

Families without Alternatives

Five students and their families explicitly noted that they did not have alternatives to IPSE. One parent noted: "Right now, there's not a lot of options because of what's been going on [e.g., the pandemic] that they have, they have… they cut the hiring" (Parent 203). In addition, the social activities that the students had been involved with previously were also canceled. IPSE was often the only available option for students and families. Therefore, these programs became an option of last resort because there were no other options in the community; even if social activities like video gaming were moved online, there was still educational value, as opposed to being home with little to do. One parent missed how in the IPSE prior to the pandemic, there were game nights, and during the pandemic, "they just played video games themselves… so it was a concern [they]'d be online almost all day" without being able to go out (Parent 203).

For some of these families, even if there were viable alternatives, families would not have taken advantage of them. They explained that this was consistent with their family values around perseverance. One student explained that their dad had instilled the approach of "we study hard [either way]," which left little doubt about not taking a gap year (Student 103). Student 108 added, "I knew I had to keep going; if I took a year off, it would really hurt me in the long run."

Discussion

This research sought to understand more about the decision-making processes for students with IDD and their families as they considered enrollment in IPSE programs

during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data for this research were obtained by listening to people with IDD and their families whose perspectives, feelings, and experiences tend to be overlooked in IPSE research (Hewitt et al., 2022; Lee & Taylor, 2022; Miller et al., 2018). Recent research has demonstrated the unequal impact of COVID-19 on people with IDD and their families in the context of education (Fish et al., 2022) and employment opportunities (Hewitt et al., 2022; Maroto et al., 2021); this study builds on that work to demonstrate how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted decisions about enrollment and access to different aspects of college life. Our work extends the research regarding dignity of risk in IPSE (e.g., Bumble et al., 2021).

Decision-Making Processes

A clear theme from the results is that students and their families were aware of the risks associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, but for the most part, those risks were not enough to outweigh the benefits of attending the programs (Lee & Taylor, 2022). Students were given the dignity of risk to make enrollment decisions in conjunction with family members, despite potential risky impacts of the pandemic. Those decisions were made after considering multiple factors. It's interesting to note that the students and their families did not make decisions based on any one of the themes identified in this research (e.g., health, expectations, or alternatives), but rather decisions were located at the intersections of two or more of these themes (refer to Figure 1). In other words, decisions are not made because of COVID-19 directly; rather, decisions were made with regard to social conditions created by the existence of the pandemic (e.g., remote learning and lack of opportunities).

Alternatives to IPSE

Five of the students did make the choice to defer enrollment/attendance for a year rather than attend during the pandemic. This includes all four of the students that had alternatives (e.g., employment and extra-curricular activities) to IPSE during the pandemic, which made the decision to differ easier. Most of the students and their families had expectations for IPSE (in terms of in-person classes, social opportunities, and employment or volunteering experiences), which they understood were not likely to be realized. Student 106 was an example of this. This student also had access to another job (i.e., an alternative), so the student was in a better position to defer. This competitive employment opportunity allowed them to be productive while waiting for the IPSE to be fully in-person. Similarly, another student (102) that deferred recognized that the implications for their health was greater than for others. That student's family also noted that they were young and had many years (i.e., an alternative) to attend the IPSE. The combination of two of these themes made it easier for the student/family to make the enrollment decision. These students and their families wanted their IPSEs to facilitate social interactions, employment, or internship opportunities. As their IPSEs were unable to provide such opportunities, these students and their families created their own.

Lack of Alternatives

On the other hand, when students did not have other opportunities available, they made the choice to continue attending IPSE, even if the structure of the programs did not meet their desired expectations. For example, the students were concerned about IPSE not being fully what they expected in terms of accessing on-campus social experiences, employment training opportunities, and internships, but they also recognized that it was better than nothing; they did not have alternatives to turn to. Similarly, students/families that were concerned with the pivot to online learning also ultimately ended up continuing with enrollment because they did not feel they had a choice. One parent noted that they might have ended up deferring, but their funding associated with the school district dual enrollment was ending (because the student was about to age out), and they did not have any alternate funding (Lee et al., 2022), so they decided to continue attending IPSE. This is an example of how flexible policies regarding funding during the pandemic, especially with regard to dual enrollment funding from school districts, could help provide alternatives so that students and families could have more options for attending an IPSE that best meets their expectations.

Meeting Expectations During a Pandemic: Pivot to Virtual

Regardless of whether students with IDD and their families chose to enroll in IPSE or defer, they communicated a set of expectations for the IPSE program experience and the students' futures regarding employment and independent living (Lee & Taylor, 2022; Miller et al., 2018). For parents, the program was a way to increase skills, especially around employment, and prepare students for the "real world." They typically understood the students' existing skills and gaps in those skills and were looking forward to their children having the opportunity to build on skills and work on areas where there might have been gaps (e.g., gaining work experience and becoming more comfortable interacting with others; Lee & Taylor, 2022; Mazzotti et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2018). Across the board, parents wanted their young adults with IDD to have the freedom to take some risks and have some freedom of choice relative to those of their peers or their other children (Bumble et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2018; Rehm et al., 2012). Students considered their IPSE programs as a place to further develop. However, they were especially focused on the social aspects of the program and learning how to be more independent. The distribution of these concepts was mirrored when participants were asked about their concerns for the future. Parents typically had a more long-term view and focused on how the children would be accepted in society and what the employment and independent living options would be for their kids (Heinrich, 2014; Miller et al., 2018). On the other hand, students were concerned with more immediate and social-related issues like making friends and navigating campus.

Students and their families were acutely aware that attending postsecondary education during the pandemic meant that there would be more components of online education than typical. As noted previously, online education may be more difficult for this population. Still, students who did not prefer online programming but still attended one of the programs typically did so because they did not feel that there were other options available to them. An exacerbating factor is that IPSE programs, including the ones in this

study, are focused on transition to the workforce, internship experiences, and programmatic activities geared towards interview skills and resume development. Many of the participants had a concern that these would not work well online. In particular, they did not feel that internship opportunities would be meaningful since sites were either not open during the pandemic or only offered reduced services. Even those students who still attended IPSE lamented that many aspects of the programs were online and resoundingly said that they preferred in-person classes in order to get the best experience.

An implication of this finding is a challenge for IPSE programs to be able to meaningfully provide their programs virtually. Both the job preparation and social aspects of IPSE are important. Stakeholders realized that IPSE was not currently set up to pivot to an online learning format, which was easier for students in other programs. As suggested by Schanzenbach and Turner (2022), programs with hands-on components (such as the socialization and internship experiences provided by IPSE) may be more difficult to transition to online formats, creating challenges for IPSE programs to consider moving forward. Nonetheless, this transition is essential. The pandemic has changed the workforce and, indeed, society as a whole, as there is more acceptance of remote options for employment and other forms of social engagement. IPSE should integrate this into programs, students with disabilities need to be prepared to meet expectations in the workforce and help students be more engaged in an online/remote environment. Failure to successfully make this transition may result in further limiting the job options available to these students, encouraging them into certain (often lower-paying) positions where remote work is not an option.

Dignity of Risk

While the pandemic did encourage more families to consider gap years, the decisions were made because of extenuating circumstances and practicalities, not disability alone. Students that took gap years did so because they had available alternatives. In addition, potential students were always part of the discussions and decision-making regarding enrollment in IPSE.

Limitations

The current study had a few limitations. First, the findings in this study may only be relevant to one state rather than the entire country. The two programs that were involved in this study are the only two programs that exist in that state. Additional research is needed to be able to confidently assert that the findings are representative of the country.

Secondly, interviews are often not seen as the best way to get information from people with IDD, and people with disabilities have historically been excluded from research (Goodley, 1996), which instead gathers data from proxies (Cummins, 2002). However, the authors feel that this potential limitation does not apply to the current study because the students had to apply to and be admitted to each program, and the application process included the assessments of how well they communicate. This is supported by Hollomotz (2018), who argues that interviews are effective for people with

ID with expressive language. Further, including parents in the study strengthens the data obtained; for the most part, parents and students gave similar answers.

Similarly, the use of interviews over remote connections may also be a limitation. Prior to the pandemic, researchers (e.g., Hicks et al., 2021) discussed limitations and strategies for conducting qualitative interviews virtually, especially in an international context. The current study had similar logistical barriers, and as long as those barriers were addressed, virtual interviews were appropriate. The use of technology was especially a concern for whether this influenced who responded to the call for participants in the study. Research has shown that access to technology can influence who chooses to enroll in a steady (Hamilton & Bowers, 2006). However, because the researchers were able to interview 11 of the 25 program enrollees, the data collected should be fairly representative of the program as a whole. Finally, the participants were students who had already been admitted to one of the programs. There may be a degree as selection bias in that parents who would not afford students the "dignity of risk" to enroll in one of the programs would not have been included because these parents would not have allowed the student to apply. Even if this changes the results slightly, the findings from the current study highlights issues that are important to current students.

Conclusions

This study explored enrollment decisions for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities in IPSEs during the pandemic. The students may be at increased risk to attend the program during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, participation in postsecondary education is the best way for students to invest in their future employment and earnings. This study used the concept of "dignity of risk" to guide the analysis. Interviews with potential students and their family members about enrolling during the pandemic showed that students were given the dignity of risk to attend these programs, even during the pandemic. Furthermore, for the students who chose to delay their attendance for a year, the decisions were not because of COVID-19 itself. Rather, reasons were associated with having other alternatives in the community in conjunction with concerns about health or expectations for the program. Those who did not delay attendance did not have other alternatives. Programs need to develop practices that can be effectively delivered in a virtual format, including meaningful employment and internship possibilities. Future studies should also take a more systematic look at how people with IDD and different disabilities managed being enrolled in IPSE and their experiences with job training and competitive employment opportunities during and following the COVID-19 pandemic, and how these intersect with race/ethnicity, class, and gender.

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Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants

Individual / Dyad	Gender/role	Disability	IPSE Year	Gap Year	Funding	Race / ethnicity	SES
Individual 1							
Student 101	Male	IDD	Entering 2nd	No	Own	White	Middle
Dyad 2							
Student 102	Pansexual, Male	IDD, HI, OHI	Entering 3rd	Yes	IEP	White	Middle
Parent 202	Mother	-	-	-	-	White	Middle
Dyad 3							
Student 103	Male	IDD, SLI	Entering 1st	No	IEP	Asian American	Middle
Parent 203	Mother	-	-	-	-	Asian	Middle
Individual 4							
Student 104	Male	Down Syndrome	Entering 2nd	No	Own	White	Middle
Dyad 5							
Student 105	Female	IDD	Entering 1st	Yes	Own	White	Middle
Parent 205	Mother		-	-	-	White	Middle
Dyad 6							
Student 106	Female	IDD	Entering 3rd	Yes	Own	White	Middle
Parent 206	Mother		-	-	-	White	Middle
Dyad 7							
Student 107	Female	IDD, SLI	Entering 1st	Yes	Own	Asian American	Middle
Parent 207a	Mother	-	-	-	-	Asian	Middle
Parent 207b	Father	-	-	-	-	White	Middle
Individual 8							
Student 108	Male	ASD	Entering 1st	No	Own	White	High
Dyad 9							
Student 109	Male	IDD	Entering 1st	No	Own	White, Eastern European	Middle

Individual / Dyad	Gender/role	Disability	IPSE Year	Gap Year	Funding	Race / ethnicity	SES
Parent 209	Father	-	-	-	-	White, Eastern European	Middle
Dyad 10							
Student 110	Male	ASD	Entering 1st	No	Own	African American	Middle
Parent 210a	Mother	-	-	-	-	African American	Middle
Parent 210b	Mother	-	-	-	-	White	Middle
Dyad 11							
Student 111	Female	IDD	Entering 2nd	Yes	FAFSA, BVR	Latina	Low
Parent 211	Mother	-	-	-	-	Latina	Low

* We reached out to parents via email but could not schedule an interview with them.
Note. ASD = Autism Spectrum Disorders; HI = Hearing Impairment; IDD = Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities; SLI = Speech Language Impairment; OHI = Other Health Impairments; FAFSA = Free Application for Federal Student Aid; BVR = Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation

Table 2

Themes and Primary Codes

Themes	Primary Codes
Health of the student	a) individual health
	b) risks for infection
	c) social and environmental factors related to health
Expectations for the program	a) expectations for the functioning of IPSE
	b) expectations for in-person, on-campus experiences
	c) expectations for employment/internship experiences
	d) the possibility of shifting to an online format
Alternatives to the program	a) social opportunities available (instead of IPSE)
	b) economic opportunities available (instead of IPSE)
	c) economic considerations for delaying employment

Table 3

Primary and Secondary Themes

Student	Gap Year	Primary Theme	Secondary Theme
101	No	Expectations	Alternatives (lack of)
102	Yes	Health	Alternatives
103	No	Expectations	Alternatives (lack of)
104	No	Expectations	NA
105	Yes	Expectations	Alternatives
106	Yes	Expectations	Alternatives
107	Yes	Expectations	Alternatives
108	No	Expectations	Alternatives (lack of)
109	No	Expectations	Alternatives (lack of)
110	No	Alternatives (lack of)	Health
111	Yes	Alternatives (lack of)	NA