

## “Avenue and Access to Participate”: Constructing Inclusive Higher Education for Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

Carly Blustein Gilson, Ph.D.

Mary L. Whirley, M.Ed.

Kaitlin Foster  
*Texas A&M University*

The rapid growth of postsecondary education programs necessitates a comprehensive framework to define and evaluate inclusion on each campus. This study utilized a naturalistic paradigm on a large, public university during a new program’s development. We conducted focus groups with students and faculty members to solicit perspectives regarding their (a) definition of inclusion, (b) willingness to welcome students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, (c) vision for how to construct an inclusive program, and (d) recommendations for resources and training. We offer recommendations for program development and involving the voices of campus stakeholders.

*Keywords:* inclusion; postsecondary education; intellectual and developmental disabilities; naturalistic paradigm

Inclusive higher education is a relatively new phenomenon for young adults with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities (IDD), with the onset in the past decade with the passage of the Higher Education Opportunity Act in 2008. Currently, there are 271 postsecondary education (PSE) programs across the United States, with 105 offered at 4-year, public colleges or universities (Think College, 2019).

As opportunities to attain postsecondary education arise for individuals with IDD, so too does the growing urgency for a comprehensive framework for inclusive practices in higher education (Jones, Boyle, May, Prohn, Updike, & Wheeler, 2015). While inclusion is not specifically defined in the law, the concept is demonstrated in several legislative mandates for equal opportunities in placement, access to curriculum, and participation (academic and non-academic). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 discuss these mandates for equal opportunities in the context of education in K-12 settings. The Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) requires equal access in all public areas. Most recently, the Higher Education Opportunities Act of 2008 was passed to extend the mandate of equal opportunities at institutions of higher education.

Despite these legislative strides, little guidance exists regarding an inclusive framework that could be applied in a higher education context. In the nascent stages of PSE development nationwide, Think College proposed categorization of PSE programs across three models: substantially separate, inclusive individual support, and mixed/hybrid (Hart, Grigal, Sax, Martinez, & Will, 2006). In substantially separate models, students attend classes with other program participants and may have the opportunity to participate in some social activities across campus. In inclusive individual support models, students identify courses in the course catalog and take them for audit or credit with appropriate supports. Historically, the most prevalent have been mixed/hybrid models, which provide a blend of the other two models.

However, as new programs emerge, recent trends in program development and expansion have shifted toward the inclusive individual support model, necessitating participation from peer mentors on campus and faculty instructors who demonstrate a willingness to offer their courses to the certificate-seeking students in PSE programs. Thus, including campus stakeholder input (e.g., faculty and students) is integral to successful program development and implementation (Izzo & Shuman, 2013; Jones & Goble, 2012). Moreover, establishing a vision of inclusion at the outset is critical to shaping the program models, practices, and partnerships they pursue (Bumble, Carter, Bethune, Day, & McMillan, 2018).

Qualitative methodology allows for deeper examination of stakeholder perspectives that transcend other forms of soliciting opinions, such as surveys. Community conversations, based on the World Cafe (Brown & Isaacs, 2005), have been used to convene a diverse cross-section of community stakeholders to engage on issues related to inclusion for individuals with IDD. Bumble and colleagues (2018) applied the community conversation format to explore issues related to inclusive higher education for stakeholders affiliated with three university communities in Tennessee who expressed interest in developing a new PSE programs for individuals with intellectual disability. Attendees primarily included family members (41.6%), representatives from community organizations (18.2%), high school staff (11.7%), and college students (11.7%). They characterized inclusive higher education across seven dimensions: supports, program components, experiences, partnerships, skills, training, and attitudes. While this study is foundational to expanding the concept of inclusive higher education, the vision of inclusion in higher education for individuals with IDD remains unclear. Clarifying this vision will likely look different at each university, based on its current landscape of inclusion.

Therefore, it is critical to prioritize the perspectives of the campus stakeholders who demonstrate the greatest impact for understanding this vision and, ultimately, constructing an inclusive learning environment for prospective students with IDD: traditional college students and faculty (Hart, Grigal, & Weir, 2010). We sought to extend knowledge of inclusive higher education through discourse with participants directly involved in the social context of a university on the brink of launching a new inclusive PSE program. Social constructionism focuses on illuminating the processes in which people describe and derive meaning about the world and themselves (Gergen, 1985). In the

absence of a formal theory, grounded theory provides a mechanism through which new ideas can be generated from qualitative data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

In the present study, we involved university stakeholders to co-create a shared definition of inclusion, employing four distinctive aims. First, we sought to craft a comprehensive definition of inclusion in student life on campus. Second, we evaluated the extent to which students and faculty were willing to accept students with IDD on campus, along with the benefits and barriers presented by this possibility. Third, we invited participants to construct a shared vision of how they idealized characteristics of an inclusive PSE program. Finally, we identified recommendations for resources and training that might be helpful in supporting inclusion on campus. Using social constructionist inquiry, we sought to understand how these views were positioned in the current context and the unique tapestry of participant identities, backgrounds, and beliefs.

## Natural History of Methods

### Fit of Paradigm

We sought to answer our primary research question using a naturalistic paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). That is, we approached our research as a process of constructing knowledge from the views of the participants rather than seeking a single objective knowledge. Specifically, we wanted our participants to be the architects of defining the influential factors of inclusion with minimal shaping from researcher-produced ideas or concepts.

Despite this intention, the naturalistic paradigm recognizes that the researchers bring preconceived expectations, prior experiences, and potential biases to the study design. The first author is an assistant professor of special education who approached the focus group methodology as a pathway to assess the landscape of inclusion at her own university while leading the development of a new inclusive PSE program for students with IDD. The second author is an advanced doctoral student studying special education with prior experience working with individuals with IDD. She joined the team to aid in data analysis and was not a part of the data collection process. The third author is an undergraduate student with experience working with individuals with IDD. She assisted with recruiting participants, facilitating focus groups, and analyzing the data.

The host university currently offers a one-year, employment-based program for individuals with IDD to pursue one of three career options. However, no fully inclusive individual support model existed in the state at the time of the study.

### Participants and Recruitment

We recruited participants as part of a larger project focusing on a mixed methods approach to understanding campus inclusion and attitudes toward individuals with IDD. The larger study included dissemination of a campus-wide survey in which we asked respondents whether they would be interested in being contacted to participate in focus groups that explored similar topics at a deeper level. More than half of the survey

respondents indicated they would be interested in focus groups ( $n = 637$ ). We sent out targeted invitations to these respondents approximately one month after the survey window closed; 67 people responded indicating their continued interest and availability.

Focus group participants were 20 students and eight faculty members. At the time of the study, the university consisted of 68,603 students and 4,955 faculty members. To be included in the study, participants must have been affiliated with the university as a faculty member, undergraduate student, or graduate student during the 2018 spring semester. Eighty-five percent ( $n = 17$ ) of the students were involved in on-campus student organizations, and all of the students were involved on campus in some way (e.g., club, sports team, on-campus job). Students also lived relatively close to campus with 40% ( $n = 8$ ) living within walking distance. Most of the faculty members that participated in the focus groups were full professors ( $n = 5$ ). Fifty percent ( $n = 4$ ) of faculty had 0-3 years of experience at the university, while the other 50% ( $n = 4$ ) worked at the university for 11 or more years. See Table 1 for additional demographic information of participants.

### Data Collection

We hosted four focus groups across a two-week period at the beginning of the 2018 spring semester. All focus groups were held on a weekday evening in the student union on campus, facilitated by the first author and third author. Focus groups ranged from 76 minutes to 86 minutes ( $M = 81$  minutes). We provided light refreshments, such as snacks, pastries, and soft drinks. All participants received a \$15 Amazon gift card after attending the focus group. We began each focus group with introductions and a brief explanation of the purpose. All participants and facilitators used pseudonyms to promote confidentiality.

Additionally, to reduce personal bias and maintain consistency across facilitators, we developed two protocols, one for students and one for faculty. The protocol served as a guide to steer the conversation but still allowed participants flexibility to comment on any additional topics they considered relevant. These questions were developed as an extension of the larger campus-wide project that used survey methodology (Authors, in press). Both versions of our protocol focused on five sections: (a) building rapport, (b) understanding inclusion on campus, (c) views and experiences with individuals with disabilities, (d) support and resources for faculty and students, and (e) benefits/challenges and the perceived impact on students. Table 2 provides a full list of the questions in our protocol.

Each research team member completed reflection sheets immediately after each focus group, in which they recorded overall impressions from the event and noted salient themes of topics addressed by the group. The first two student focus groups, led by the first author, were less conversational, and students tended to take turns speaking rather than having a conversation. The last student group, led by the third author (an undergraduate student) was more conversational in which the students interacted more directly with each other. Overall, the student groups tended to be more positive, while the faculty group presented themes that mostly focused on barriers to inclusion at the university.

## Data Analysis

We transcribed all focus groups verbatim, de-identified all proper names and places with pseudonyms, and imported into Dedoose (2018), a web-based software program used for qualitative data storage and synthesis. Two of the focus group facilitators also participated in data analysis (first and third authors); the second author joined the team after the focus groups occurred. Our research team of three members coded using constant comparison, in which we compared existing codes at each iteration to ensure consistency across focus groups and team members (Strauss & Corbin, 2008).

First, we open coded the faculty focus group as a team to establish consistent procedures in coding. For example, we decided to generally code each participant's response in the focus group as a unit of data, unless it was part of a conversational thread in which other responses were needed for context. Coded responses ranged from one or two sentences to multiple paragraphs. Second, we independently open coded the three student focus group transcripts and met for consensus in dyads, wherein each team member participated in a coding dyad for two transcripts. We created *in vivo* codes using the language of the participants whenever possible. Third, we developed a set of preliminary code names organized within themes based on the initial structure of our research questions. We developed definition drafts for each theme and code based on the data coded across excerpts. We employed member checking and peer debriefing to finalize the themes.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend four measures to assess the "trustworthiness" of a qualitative study: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. We applied several strategies to ensure trustworthiness of the data analysis (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klinger, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). First, we recruited participants from across the university to take the survey and created focus groups based on personal preference and scheduling availability rather than college affiliation. With the exception of several faculty members, none of the participants knew each other prior to participating in the focus groups. Second, we developed an audit trail to document raw data (i.e., transcripts, field notes, facilitator reflections) and memos from each coding stage. Third, our research team sought to reduce bias by including a researcher in data analysis who did not attend the focus groups.

We conducted member checking in which we shared our initial framework with our focus group participants via email and asked for their feedback regarding *clarity* (i.e., Is the wording/language clear to a general audience?); *consistency* (i.e., Are these themes generally reflective of what you expressed and/or what you heard discussed at your focus group?); *cohesion* (i.e., Do these ideas flow well and relate to one another?); and *comprehensiveness* (i.e., Do these themes sufficiently address the scope of inclusion as you saw it when you attended this focus group?). Additionally, an advanced doctoral student in special education who helped facilitate two of the focus groups, served as a peer debriefer for the preliminary framework and reviewed the final framework. In addition to the four areas we asked participants to focus on for the member checks, we also asked them to critique any biases across our themes.

## Findings

### How do Faculty and Students Define Inclusion on their Campus?

We asked participants to describe the concept of inclusion and how they perceive the extent of inclusive opportunities on their campus. Participants generated 11 themes within three dimensions of inclusion: environment of inclusion ( $n = 6$ ), attitudes toward inclusion ( $n = 3$ ), and social characteristics of inclusion ( $n = 2$ ).

#### *Environment of inclusion.*

Participants envisioned an inclusive campus environment as one in which all community members had an “avenue and access to participate.” Specifically, participants discussed six themes related to defining an inclusive environment: *appropriate accommodations*, *accessibility*, *equal opportunities*, *welcoming culture*, *choice of participation*, and *reciprocal benefit*.

The most commonly discussed theme in this dimension across all groups was *appropriate accommodations*, which related to the need for students with disabilities to access inclusive experiences through individualized accommodations that are targeted appropriately based on their needs. Participants emphasized these accommodations would need to come from a “combined effort from professors and students.” Examples included modifying assignments, curriculum, or assessments; preferred seating in large classes; staggering class times so that students do not have to travel in masses, involving peer supports as tutors or notetakers, and integrating smaller class sizes first before moving to large lectures. Although there were some diverging viewpoints, most participants asserted these accommodations should have minimal impact on the typical college experience to maximize inclusion for all students involved while honoring different learning styles. As one student summarized, “People operate differently and learn differently. If you have to modify something for an individual, I don’t see a problem with that... There’s nothing wrong with modifying [a curriculum program]. Everybody should have the opportunity to feel included.”

Participants across all four groups discussed *accessibility on campus*, which emphasized the need for inclusion to be represented through physical access that is designed to be safe and compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), including buildings, walkways, and transportation. Participants also noted the importance of including people with disabilities in the conversations around designing inclusive equipment and spaces.

In addition to academic supports, student participants discussed how inclusion is represented through *equal opportunities*, which means that everyone has a chance to participate in desired activities, organizations, study abroad experiences, and cultural traditions at the university, and feels connected to the alumni network upon graduation. One student described the importance of “taking away that limit” by removing the barriers in higher education for people with disabilities. This theme also related to experiences beyond the college years, such as career opportunities and the lifelong connections that come from being part of a strong alumni network. One student said, “Once they leave the

campus and go out seeking a job, they can relate to other [alumni] who have been in their college life and be able to make a friend or understand more about what it feels like..." This theme was not discussed during the faculty focus group.

Participants across all groups envisioned inclusion to be facilitated by a *welcoming culture*, wherein all people are encouraged to participate in activities and feel comfortable joining new groups. Participants described the welcoming nature to be "active" and "passive." As one student summarized, "By active, I mean being welcoming, being encouraging, providing that place where somebody will feel comfortable and encouraged to come. Passive [means] just allowing someone to participate."

Participants across all groups also discussed that individuals in an inclusive environment should have the *choice of participation*, in which they have the option to determine the extent of involvement that best suits them. Similar to *welcoming culture*, participation could be considered "active" or "passive." Examples included choosing to attend football games, self-selecting in small groups in class, and opting in or out of student traditions. One faculty member distinguished lack of participation as still a form of inclusion if it is based on an individual's choice: "It's one thing to choose not to be part of [the campus culture], but it's something else to be excluded from it. That can be very hurtful."

Lastly, student participants described an environment of inclusion in which there were *reciprocal benefits*, in which all members of the community are impacted positively by being exposed to new relationships, diverse perspectives, research opportunities, and shared experiences. One student described the benefit of exposure to an important segment of society: "In the long term, it will induce more humanity in every student because they will realize that people with intellectual disability are also a part of our society. Currently, we don't see any of them." This theme was not mentioned in the faculty focus group.

#### *Attitudes toward inclusion.*

Participants described another dimension of inclusion as the prevailing mindsets and beliefs held by community members, whether positive, negative, or neutral. Participants discussed three themes within this dimension: *awareness*, *face of inclusion*, and *valuing differences*. At the broadest level, participants in all groups described *awareness* as an initial avenue to inclusion, in which all members feel a joint responsibility to "eliminate ignorance" through education and by interacting with people with disabilities. One student described the need to "open the eyes of the common man" by spreading awareness about the potential of people with disabilities. Another student envisioned awareness to be a beginning step toward normalization of people with disabilities in society:

I think it would definitely be positive in the sense of just normalizing having students with disabilities in [college] classrooms.... Imagine 10 years down the road, people thought this was weird? I think it definitely might be hard to start up. It might be uncomfortable, but I definitely think if we stopped putting a stigma on it and we kinda just let it happen over the course of the years, I think it would definitely have major benefits for everybody.

Participants in three focus groups described an attitude that one faculty member coined the *face of inclusion*, in which inclusion is only viewed as a means to an end wherein the external representation of diversity is the perceived goal. One student expanded this idea:

I feel like we try to do the more noticeable acts of inclusion in terms of race, religion, and color... but I feel like sometimes disabilities gets pushed to the background... because it's not a headline... It's kind of like if we have the time and money we can tackle those if we get to them.

Participants also discussed a deeper mindset that transcended beyond the face of inclusion and awareness. *Valuing differences* involves seeking to understand diversity of all kinds, including thoughts and personal characteristics, and being able to speak freely in a group regardless of these differences. One student asserted the importance of valuing differences: "I think [the new program] would be a great opportunity to diversify the campus that much more and for students to interact with different types of people... it's important to diversify yourself and have these different tools in your toolbox."

#### *Social characteristics.*

The final dimension represents the fullest expression of inclusion, in which all members find their specific group and build meaningful relationships. The two themes of this dimension are: *finding your group* and *building friendships*.

Participants across all groups described *finding your group* as obtaining membership of a group based on shared identities, goals, or interests. Examples included joining student organizations, fraternities and sororities, and professional organizations. Participants emphasized the need to identify a smaller group within their large campus. One student commented:

I'm in a few [groups] myself, and I feel that's the best way to feel included in stuff... to involve yourself in as much... and find your group. There's so many things to join here, so I feel like everyone can feel included in some way if they join a group on campus.

A faculty member expressed a similar sentiment about the importance of organizations in constructing inclusive student life:

I think there should be that encouragement of finding their place. I hear students talk across the board all the time, '[this university] is so huge, I have to find my place. So I think it would be important for that place to not be just the [new program].

A small subset of participants across two groups extended social inclusion deeper by describing the importance of *building friendships*. This theme related to feeling important, comfortable, and belonging with others in the community and being able to relate to peers on a personal level. One student described the importance of meeting others in college: "In general, everyone that comes to a college like this meets a lot of people, so they will



have more of an opportunity to meet people like them... you meet friends that way.” A faculty member put it simply: “Inclusion means that you belong here.”

### **How Do Faculty and Students Report their Willingness to Accept Students with IDD on their Campus?**

#### *Campus stakeholder acceptance.*

Participants across all four groups emphasized the importance of stakeholder willingness across the university as *campus stakeholder acceptance*, in which they viewed acceptance from across all members of the campus community to be critical for inclusion to be realized in a meaningful, sustainable way. This includes faculty, staff, undergraduate students, graduate students, and alumni. One student proposed the need for “full-fledged support from a lot of different offices around the university.” He expressed the need for buy-in from faculty and students alike, but especially students: “Students are the drivers of the culture on campus... If we have a campus climate of acceptance and willingness and openness to different demographics, especially students with disabilities, I think that’ll definitely help this program succeed.” Another student echoed the importance of student buy-in, adding that there might be a mixed reaction from the student body: “Some will probably be interested in helping. Others might say they’re not really too fond of it. Others might not care, as long as it’s not interrupting what they’re trying to do academically.”

### **What are the Proposed Characteristics of an Inclusive PSE program?**

Participants shared their ideal characteristics of an inclusive PSE program. They identified four themes when defining features of an inclusive PSE programs: *inclusive with peer supports*, *strategic goal alignment*, *consideration of student well-being*, and *sustainable funding*.

#### *Inclusive with peer supports.*

Participants from all four focus groups identified this as an important attribute of an inclusive PSE program and provided examples of how this may look on a college campus. Participants stressed the importance of the program being fully inclusive, in which PSE students are given full “student status” and are supported continuously in academic and social settings by peer supports. Peer supports serve in their natural academic settings without changing the rigor of the course expectations or quality of the educational experience. Students suggested this may be “pair[ing] up two students that are already in that class” or identifying “people that volunteer to go to class” with students in the program. Faculty specifically stressed the importance of program participants “having the rights and privileges of other [university] students” to ensure full access to student opportunities.

#### *Strategic goal alignment.*

Another theme generated across all focus groups is providing *strategic goal alignment*, which refers to the extent to which program goals are aligned with the target student

population from period of recruitment, individualized supports during the program, and clear outcomes for after the program. Both students and faculty mentioned the explicit need to ensure the outcomes align with student goals, and participation encourages learning skills that directly support post-program success in employment and independent living skills.

One faculty member suggested “a thorough assessment of their talents, their strengths, their abilities, their desires, and trying to match that” to program outcomes. One student summarized this theme:

[This program] is not just about admission of people but also actually educating them in a way that allows them to perform well, rather than bringing them in and giving them an education that will not serve the purpose of an education, which is to prepare one for work. Then, having gone through that education, [they find] it not to be as useful as the program promised.

#### *Consideration of student well-being.*

The theme of *consideration of student well-being* appeared in two of the focus groups, a particularly strong focus among faculty. This theme reflects a desire for the inclusive PSE program activities and goals to be designed with safety considerations and overall well-being of students. Along with providing supports and strategies to maintain physical safety and well-being on the college campus, emotional and mental well-being is important to consider. This includes designing activities that complement student strengths and support needs. Although some students may make their own poor choices, one faculty member emphasized that it is important to not “set [students] up to fail”, but rather create the program in a manner in which the students can flourish academically and socially.

#### *Sustainable funding.*

The final theme, which appeared in two focus groups, proposed the notion that the funding mechanism for the program should be secure, sustainable, and independent of other funding streams. Students expressed concern that this program could “raise already high tuition.” Ensuring the program maintains a separate source of revenue would ease concerns about a financial impact on funding in other areas of the university. One student suggested identifying scholarships or grants to facilitate separate funding streams in efforts to reduce the cost of tuition and program fees down for participants.

### **What Training and Supports do Faculty and Students Recommend to Increase Inclusive Opportunities on their Campus for Students With and Without IDD?**

#### *Faculty training and supports.*

Faculty emphasized the need for trainings and supports when starting this program. Faculty training should comprise targeted workshops related to modification of course objectives, assessment, and instructional strategies, potentially as a certificate-based

professional development opportunity. Additionally, program staff should consult with faculty frequently to incorporate inclusive practices into their classes.

### *Balancing faculty responsibilities.*

In a related theme, participants across three groups discussed the importance of managing faculty expectations appropriately. Balancing faculty responsibilities means faculty members at a research-intensive university need to strategically divide their time between teaching and research. Participants raised concerns that many professors already commit much of their time to research and less on teaching, which may impact their willingness to offer their courses to students in the PSE program. One faculty member commented: “There are some faculty who don’t really have the time, or the inclination, or the patience to deal with undergraduates who are not intellectually challenged.”

### *Student training and supports.*

Students also emphasized the need for trainings for the entire student body. Student training should encompass an overview of how to support students with IDD as well as a more detailed training for those who want to become peer supports for students in the PSE program. One student stated that working with students with disabilities is “something that some students wouldn’t be very familiar with” and “not only just to teach you how to converse with someone who has a disability, but really make students familiar with how to work with and help these students.”

## **What are the Contextual Influences Shaping These Views of Faculty and Students?**

During our data analysis, we noted several distinct contextual influences that shaped participant views and the ways in which they discussed issues related to inclusion on campus and perspectives of individuals with IDD, whether knowingly or unknowingly. Specifically, these contextual influences are *identity composition*, *perceptions of disability*, and *personal experiences with people with IDD*.

### *Identity composition.*

Even though we did not ask participants explicitly about their identity, the role of *identity composition* emerged across all four focus groups. This theme related to how the realization of inclusion is informed by the extent to which one’s identity composition aligns with that of the majority in the community. Components of identity composition included ideological beliefs, race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, age, or disability status. A faculty member who was a female African American summarized the impact of identity: “The sense of inclusion that you feel maybe varies depending on who you are. The [university] experience, the one that is ideal... is a wonderful ideal to shoot towards, but it is not universal.” An international student participant offered a more positive view of inclusion on the campus in the United States compared with his home country:

Coming from a different part of the world, it feels very different to sit on [a] campus like this, because back in my country when I used to go to class, it used to be the same, everywhere, but in here you see people of different cultures, different backgrounds...

Several participants spoke about the role of identity in another way and how their intersectional identities may impact their experience of inclusion on campus. As one graduate student commented, “It might not just be that they have an intellectual disability, it could be that they have a language barrier or [identify as] LGBT... it could create challenges for people teaching these courses.” Another student echoed this concern:

Individuals with disabilities already have a stigma presented against them. From a racial standpoint, what would be the perception of an African American who has autism who goes to a campus like [university]? How would they interact with the student body? ... That just comes to mind. How does inclusivity look from their point of view?

### *Perceptions of disability.*

Participants across all groups arrived with preconceived notions and images of people with disabilities, including the interplay of visible vs. invisible disabilities. Participants acknowledged the implications this has for furthering stigma or perpetuating stereotypes of this population. One student commented: “Society believes that persons with intellectual disability should be given [a] chance, but in their separate environment. The society is not ready to include them in the functions involving with general people.” Students talked about the presence of stereotypes and stigmas associated with people with disabilities. Another student shared: “Society views these individuals as a ... not necessarily a problem, but there’s a stigma attached to these individuals.”

### *Personal experiences with people with IDD.*

Participants in all the focus groups contributed to the conversation around defining inclusion and opportunities for individuals with IDD through the lens of their own personal experiences. Participants shared personal experiences with individuals with IDD, as family members, friends, colleagues, or community members. One graduate student shared his experience as the son of a father with autism, and how that has shaped and increased his expectations for inclusive opportunities with this population. He realized how preconceived notions were limiting, commenting: “Even though they might not do it as fast as [others] can do it, they can still do it and it can be done effectively.” Faculty members drew on their experience over the years working with various students and how they felt “individuals who have some of these intellectual disabilities, sometimes just need somebody to talk to, and to help them kind of work through some issues.”

## **Discussion**

The purpose of the present study was to examine stakeholder perspectives from a cross-section of a large research-intensive university on the precipice of launching an inclusive

PSE program. Our findings provide several important insights to the growing field of inclusive higher education about the intricate ways in which people understand inclusion and externalize acceptance of prospective students with IDD on campus. First, inclusion remains a complex, multifaceted concept that is impossible to distill into a singular experience ignoring contextual factors. Second, inclusive higher education is widely seen as a natural extension of the inclusive environments that many of today's college students experienced in K-12 settings. Third, students participating in the focus groups considered the impact of inclusive higher education across all stakeholders, while faculty focused more on the impact it would have on them.

Our findings revealed three interrelated dimensions of inclusive higher education that cannot be streamlined into a singular experience that omits how contextual factors shape the inclusive experience, such as identity composition, perceptions of disability, and personal experiences with individuals with IDD. These dimensions of inclusion provide a response to the field's call for "a comprehensive approach to inclusion with the goal of fully integrating [students with IDD] into academic and social life on campus" (Hafner, Moffatt, & Kisa, 2011, p. 19). In the companion study in this mixed-methods project, Authors (in press) conducted a campus-wide survey in which they applied a new framework for inclusion proffered by Think College to respond to this call (Jones et al., 2015). Survey respondents indicated their agreement with statements derived from the framework, including a comprehensive definition of inclusive higher education. In an open-ended response, participants could propose changes to the definition based on their views of inclusion. Of the nine overall patterns of inclusion revealed in Authors (in press), seven substantially similar concepts appear in the present study: *group membership*, *reciprocal engagement*, *recognition of unique identity*, *equal access to opportunity*, *choice of involvement*, *diverse perspective*, and *sense of belonging*. Utilizing social constructionist inquiry in this context (Gergen, 1985), the overlap offers a promising prospect toward a comprehensive inclusive framework emerging from stakeholders organically without the provision of a predetermined definition by external representatives. Furthermore, patterns in data collection and analysis affirm the validity of these findings as triangulated by survey methodology and focus groups.

Another important insight of this study is how student participants, particularly those who experienced all or most of their elementary and secondary schooling after the reauthorization of IDEA (2004), seemed to view inclusive higher education as the natural next step of inclusive K-12 education. This was evidenced by how they described their personal experiences in classes with individuals with IDD and how they envisioned inclusion at institutions of higher education. Furthermore, even the suggestions they generated paralleled inclusive practices, accommodations, and modifications in K-12 settings. Though the current collegiate population represents the pioneers of widespread inclusive general education, this promising finding may be indicative of a nascent trend in which inclusive higher education will become available for people with IDD who aspire to attend college as the *norm* rather than the exception.

Finally, the students' consideration of all potential stakeholders (e.g., traditional university students, PSE students, faculty, staff, administration, community members, university alumni). Faculty focused more on the impact an inclusive PSE program would have on

them and their job duties. This illustrates the paradigm shift toward a more inclusive society in the younger generations and confirms the importance of considering all stakeholders when launching a PSE program (Izzo & Shuman, 2013; Jones & Goble, 2012).

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study has several limitations which present pathways for future research. First, this data is a cross-sectional analysis of perspectives at a university over the course of one academic year. Another limitation of the study stems from the lack of views from staff at the university or individuals with IDD. Although we intentionally targeted faculty and students because we aimed to look at inclusion specifically in academic settings, the omission of these integral stakeholders limits the extent to which we can provide a complete portrait of inclusion for our campus. Additionally, our faculty sample was not representative of the university, as half of the participants were from one department. Another inherent limitation of focus groups is that participants self-select to participate. Those with personal connections or passion for this topic are more likely to participate and may not be representative of the general population on campus. Future research could include a replication of this study with a more systematic approach to focus group recruitment that encouraged more widespread participation across campus.

### **Implications for Research and Practice**

Researchers may be able to use this study as a starting point to construct inclusive higher education informed by these findings. Specifically, they may consider developing disability trainings, including general disability awareness for students, how to mentor and work with students with IDD for faculty, and supporting students with IDD throughout college life for staff.

As the university develops its new PSE program, researchers intend to continue to evaluate these perspectives and report changes over time. Additionally, a replication including PSE participants will provide a more complete portrait of inclusive higher education. Since the insights from this study were instrumental in obtaining administrative approval of the new program, we recommend faculty and staff at peer institutions considering PSE program development conduct a similar exploratory study during the preapproval process.

In addition to the direct stakeholders included in this study, this work has implications for other campus personnel who play pivotal roles in co-creating the inclusive environment on a college campus, including staff members in student affairs, disability services, residence life, athletics, and student organizations. The realization of inclusion is truly not possible without providing a platform for the voices of *all* campus stakeholders.

Educators and families may use this study for more information on PSE programs and how students with IDD might be accepted at a large, public university. Employers can learn more about PSE programs and how they create employable workers. In the future,

a standard may be created for the value and consistency of these types of certificates, so that the value of these programs is known to employers.

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Table 1. *Participant Demographics*

Participant Demographics	Student n (%)	Faculty n (%)
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>		
White	9 (45.0)	6 (75.0)
Black/African American	3 (15.0)	1 (12.5)
Asian	4 (20.0)	1 (12.5)
Native American or Alaskan	2 (10.0)	0 (0.0)
Multiracial	2 (10.0)	0 (0.0)
<b>Hispanic Origin</b>		
Yes	5 (25.0)	0 (0.0)
No	15 (75.0)	8 (100.0)
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	10 (50.0)	1 (12.5)
Female	10 (50.0)	7 (87.5)
<b>Age</b>		
18-29	17 (85.0)	1 (12.5)
30-39	2 (10.0)	3 (37.5)
40-49	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
50-59	1 (5.0)	1 (12.5)
60 or over	0 (0.0)	3 (37.5)
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Married	2 (10.0)	7 (87.5)
Single	18 (90.0)	1 (12.5)
<b>College</b>		
Agriculture & Life Sciences	3 (15.0)	1 (12.5)
Architecture	1 (5.0)	0 (0.0)
Business School	1 (1.0)	0 (0.0)
Education & Human Development	4 (20.0)	0 (0.0)
Engineering	4 (20.0)	0 (0.0)
Liberal Arts	3 (15.0)	1 (12.5)



Public Health	0 (0.0)	1 (12.5)
Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences	1 (5.0)	1 (12.5)
University Libraries	0 (0.0)	4 (50.0)

Table 2. *Interview Protocol*


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### Understanding Inclusivity on Campus

When you hear the word “inclusion” related to a college campus, what images come to mind?

What efforts, activities, or events have you participated in on campus that contribute to promoting inclusion among ALL students?

In what ways (if ever) have you directly supported a student, colleague, or staff member in helping them feel more included? (F)

In what ways (if ever) have you directly supported a classmate, roommate, or friend in helping them feel more included? (S)

### Views of and Experiences with Individuals with Disabilities

Please describe your previous or current relationship(s) to someone with a disability, specifically an intellectual or developmental disability (e.g., autism).

What do you believe society’s views are of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities? (S)

To what extent do you believe that young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (ages 18-30) can or should participate in higher education?

What do you think it would mean to include this new program’s participants in campus life at [university]?

What reservations, if any, do you have with respect to the development of a new program like this on campus?

### Support and Resources for Faculty

What role, if any, should campus-wide faculty play in supporting students in this program?

What resources would you need in order to help students in this program succeed? (F)

What ongoing professional development would help you become more effective in supporting students in this program? (F)

What role, if any, should fellow students play in supporting students in this program? (S)

### Benefits/Challenges and the Perceived Impact on Students

What kind of impact (positive or negative) do you think the development of this new program would have on existing [university] students?

### Wrap-up Questions and Closing Comments

Are there things that you did not have the opportunity to share related to your experience or views on inclusivity on campus?

If you are interested in learning more about the program and becoming a faculty

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advocate, in what ways would you like to stay informed and involved?

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*Note:* Questions identified by (F) at the end were asked only in the faculty focus group, and those with (S) denote those asked in student only focus groups

Table 3. *Summary of Themes and Definitions*

Category/Theme	Definition
<b>Dimensions of Inclusion</b>	
<b>Attitudes Toward Inclusion</b>	
Awareness	Inclusion is realized when all members of a community feel a joint responsibility to "eliminate ignorance" through education and by interacting with people with disabilities.
Face of inclusion	Inclusion is seen as a means to an end, wherein the external representation of diversity is the perceived goal (e.g., in photographs, on committees, etc.)
Valuing differences	Inclusion means seeking to understand differences of all kinds, including thoughts and personal characteristics, and being able to speak freely in a group regardless of these differences.
<b>Environment of Inclusion</b>	
Choice of participation	Inclusion means having the option to determine the extent of involvement that best suits the individual; participation can be "active" or "passive."
Appropriate accommodations	Students with disabilities should be able to access inclusive experiences through individualized accommodations that are targeted appropriately based on their needs. Examples include: modifying assignments, curriculum, or assessments; staggering class times so that students do not have to travel in masses, involving peer supports, and starting off classes in smaller groups.
Accessibility on campus	Inclusion is represented through physical access that is safe and compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), including buildings, walkways, and transportation.
Equal opportunities	Inclusion means ensuring that everyone has a chance to participate in desired activities, organizations, and cultural traditions at the university and feel connected to the alumni network upon graduation.
Reciprocal benefit	Inclusion consists of a community in which all members are impacted positively from being exposed to new relationships, diverse perspectives, research opportunities, and shared experiences.

Table 3. *Summary of Themes and Definitions*

Welcoming culture	Inclusion is represented when all people are encouraged to participate in activities and feel comfortable joining new groups.
Social Characteristics of Inclusion Building friendships	Inclusion means feeling important, comfortable, and belonging with others in the community and being able to relate to peers on a personal level.
Finding your group	Inclusion involves obtaining membership of a group based on shared identities and interests.
<b>Campus Stakeholder Acceptance</b>	<b>Acceptance across all members of the campus community is critical for inclusion to be realized in a meaningful, sustainable way. This includes faculty, staff, undergraduate students, graduate students, and alumni.</b>
<b>PSE Program Characteristics</b> Student well-being	Program activities and goals are designed with safety considerations and overall well-being of students.
Strategic goal alignment	Program goals align with target student population from period of recruitment, individualized supports during the program, and clear employment outcomes for after the program.
Inclusive with peer supports	The program should be fully inclusive, in which PSE students are given full "student status" and are supported continuously in academic and social settings by peer supports. Peer supports serve in their natural academic settings without changing the rigor of the course expectations or quality of the educational experience.
Sustainable funding	The funding mechanism for the program should be secure, sustainable, and independent of other funding streams.
<b>Training and Support</b> Balancing faculty responsibilities	Faculty members should strategically divide their time between teaching and research.
Faculty training	Faculty training should comprise targeted workshops related to modification of course objectives, assessment, and instructional strategies, potentially as a certificate-based professional development opportunity. Additionally, program staff should consult with faculty frequently to incorporate inclusive practices into their classes.

Table 3. *Summary of Themes and Definitions*

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Student training	Student training should encompass an overview of how to support students with IDD, and a more detailed training for those wanting to become peer supports for students in the PSE.
Perceptions of Disability	Participants arrived with preconceived notions and images of people with disabilities, including the interplay of visible vs. invisible disabilities. Participants acknowledged the implications this has for furthering stigma or perpetuating stereotypes of this population.
Identity Composition	<p>The realization of inclusion is informed how one's individual identity composition aligns with that of the community.</p> <p>Components of identity composition may include ideological beliefs, race, ethnicity, gender, age, or disability status.</p>
Personal Experiences with IDD	Participants have had personal experiences with individuals with IDD, as family members, friends, colleagues, or community members. These experiences inform how participants view and interact with this population, whether knowingly or unknowingly.

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