Teaching College Students with Intellectual Disability: Faculty Experiences with Inclusive Higher Education

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Abstract

New opportunities for postsecondary education have emerged for young adults with intellectual disability. As a growing number of institutions establish inclusive higher education programs, it is important to understand the experiences of faculty who welcome students with intellectual disability into their courses. This qualitative study explored the views of 23 university professors who had recent experience teaching students with intellectual disability. Focus group interviews addressed the roles of faculty within their classrooms, the strategies they found helpful, and the issues they found challenging. We offer recommendations for supporting faculty in this new endeavor and suggest areas for future research.

Keywords: postsecondary education, disabilities, inclusion, faculty

Plain Language Summary

- Many adults with intellectual disability now go to college. They take college classes with other students who do not have disabilities.
- We talked with some of the professors who teach these college classes. They told us what it is like to teach classes where students with and without disabilities learn together. Most professors said they liked teaching these classes and that it was easy to do. But some things were also difficult.
- They also talked about what students with intellectual disability did in their classes. Some students worked very hard and learned a lot.
- Finally, the professors told us what helped them teach these classes well. For example, they liked having help from program staff and using peers to help students with disabilities.
- At the end of the article, we talk about how colleges can help professors include more students with disabilities in their classes.

The last decade has witnessed the rapid expansion of postsecondary education options for young adults with intellectual disability. Nearly 300 colleges and universities now offer formal programs designed to support the academic and social participation of students with intellectual disability (Grigal & Papay, 2018). Spurred by the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 and an active national technical assistance center, these new programs provide a college pathway for students who might not otherwise meet traditional admissions requirements. Students with intellectual disability receive a variety of formal and informal supports needed to participate in an array of collegiate experiences, including coursework, student organizations, part-time jobs, campus activities, volunteer opportunities, and residential life. Early research suggests these postsecondary programs can positively impact the skills, aspirations, and outcomes of participating students (e.g., Butler et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2021; Moore & Schelling, 2015).

Academic classes are at the core of the collegiate experience. A well-planned sequence of academic courses prepares students for their future professions. At the same time, a strong liberal arts education provides students with knowledge of the wider world and equips them to live a more fully examined life. In many of the current programs, students participate in a combination of specialized seminars (i.e., those designed for students with intellectual disability) and traditional courses (i.e., those available to any matriculating student). However, it is access to these traditional courses that remains the distinguishing feature of this movement (Grigal et al., 2012). This emphasis on academic inclusion highlights a key group of critical stakeholders—faculty who teach undergraduate courses. Yet only a handful of dissertations (e.g., Bauer & Harlin, 2016; Carey, 2019; Fisher, 2008; Pahilajani, 2020) and published studies (e.g., Burgin et al., 2017; Hamill, 2003; Jones et al., 2016; O'Connor et al., 2012) have focused on the experiences of faculty who have taught college students with intellectual disability. These faculty could provide valuable insights into several important aspects of their experiences.

First, the roles faculty assume within these courses are important to understand. Faculty may be reluctant to encourage the enrollment of students with intellectual disability if they anticipate the demands on their time will be too substantial. For example, Gilson et al. (2019) conducted focus groups with faculty in preparation for the future launch of an inclusive higher education (IHE) program at their university. Some participants raised concerns about whether faculty would have sufficient time to devote to this area in the midst of competing research and teaching demands. Likewise, Fisher (2008) interviewed some faculty who worried that supporting students with intellectual disability would be taxing and require too much time beyond their already established workload. In contrast, Hamill (2003) described the ways in which some faculty actually sought out more substantial roles when supporting a particular student with Down syndrome. Multiple factors could certainly influence the involvement faculty have in supporting students with intellectual disability, including the experience and expertise of faculty, the nature of their classes, and the particular students who enroll. Additional research is needed to understand the ways in which experienced faculty characterize their actual responsibilities and the factors that might impact their degree of involvement. Such

information could guide IHE program staff on how they might invite, guide, and support faculty involvement on their campus.

Second, faculty could speak to potential difficulties that might arise when teaching students with intellectual disability. Research within elementary and secondary schools has highlighted a number of challenges associated with supporting students with intellectual disability in inclusive classrooms, such as a student's skills or behaviors, the availability of support, the complexity of the curriculum, and the attitudes of others (e.g., Agran et al., 2020). The extent to which similar issues arise in the college context is equally important to understand. Understanding, navigating, and responding to any challenges are all essential to ensuring the academic inclusion of students with intellectual disability. Within the few studies exploring faculty experiences, challenges related to communication, delivering effective instruction, and clarity of expectations have been cited (Bauer & Harlin, 2016; Carey, 2019; Hamill, 2003; O'Connor et al., 2012).

Third, faculty may have valuable insights into strategies that are effective for supporting the inclusion of students with intellectual disability. Although numerous evidence-based strategies have been identified for supporting the inclusion of students with intellectual disability in K-12 schools (e.g., Kuntz & Carter, 2019), similar research is not yet available at the college level. With support from IHE program staff and disability services offices, faculty are often expected to figure out inclusion one student at a time. Strategies related to universal design for learning, peer-mediated supports, and access to accommodations are often advocated (e.g., Christopher-Allen et al., 2017; Smith & Lowrey, 2017). However, faculty have firsthand perspectives regarding the strategies they have found to be successful in teaching students with intellectual disability within their courses. For example, faculty in prior studies have highlighted the importance of adopting more student-centered instructional approaches, incorporating visual aids, accommodating multiple learning styles, learning more about participating students, and accessing support from IHE program staff (e.g., Burgin et al., 2017; O'Connor et al., 2012).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of diverse faculty who have prior experience teaching college students with intellectual disability. We addressed four research questions: How do faculty describe their roles within these classrooms? How do faculty describe the involvement of students with intellectual disability? What did faculty find challenging about including students with intellectual disability? What strategies do faculty say supported the inclusion of students with intellectual disability in their classrooms? This study extends prior research by involving a larger sample of faculty from a wider range of disciplines.

Method

Inclusive Higher Education Program

The four-year, non-residential inclusive higher education (IHE) program was housed at a private, research-intensive university in a southeastern state. Total undergraduate enrollment was almost 7,000 and nearly 1,000 faculty worked across the university's four colleges and 40 departments. At the time of the study, the IHE program was in its ninth

year and enrolled 35 students. To be admitted to the program, students must (a) be 18-26 years old; (b) have a diagnosis of an intellectual disability; (c) have completed high school and received a standard or alternate diploma (i.e., occupational or special education); (d) have not met eligibility requirements for admission into a standard college program; and (e) have a strong personal desire to attend college. The program culminates in a certificate of completion and is recognized as a Comprehensive Transition Program (CTP). The program had eight full-time staff and involved numerous undergraduate and graduate students serving as peer mentors, job coaches, and other sources of support.

Each semester, students with intellectual disability take a series of specialized course seminars, as well as audit one to two traditional university courses. The courses they audit are taught by university faculty and are taken alongside typically matriculated students. Course selection for students is based on (a) student's academic course preferences, (b) space in university courses, (c) academic prerequisites for a course, and (d) program staff input. Person-centered planning also drives course choices, along with consultation from students' advisors. Following a student's official enrollment in a university course, a modified syllabus (called a "learning agreement") is created. This document contains individualized modifications for the student with intellectual disability that are aligned with course topics and assignments. For example, a student might submit a video or PowerPoint report rather than writing a 10-page paper, craft a video review rather than giving a 5- to 10-minute speech, or create a digital visual poster rather than completing an exam. In each case, students are demonstrating their knowledge in a format that is most aligned to their strengths and abilities. The document also addresses academic and social expectations for the students (e.g., complete all modified assignments, arrive on time) and is approved by the student, the academic director of the IHE program, and the faculty member who teaches the course. The academic director maintains communication with these faculty and coordinates the development of each modified syllabus with input from faculty and support from graduate assistants or other program staff. Furthermore, at the start of each semester, the academic director and each faculty member discuss ways to ensure the classroom dynamic is inclusive and inviting for all.

Faculty Participants and Recruitment

At the time of the study, students with intellectual disability had enrolled in a total of 180 courses across all colleges and a large majority of departments. We worked with the IHE program's academic director to recruit eligible faculty for focus groups. Faculty could participate if they had taught a student with intellectual disability for one or more semesters. We sent study invitations to 112 eligible faculty members who were currently employed at the university. The email contained a description of the study, the inclusion criteria, the honorarium, and a survey link through which faculty could sign up to participate. Each participant was offered a $50 VISA gift card for their time. If the faculty were not available on any of the pre-scheduled focus group dates, they were asked to note their interest in any future dates that might be added or an individual interview. When at least four faculty members had signed up for a scheduled date, an email confirmation was sent. Of the 112 faculty we contacted, 38 responded with interest and 28 were available on one of the dates. A total of 23 faculty members ultimately attended one of the four focus groups (20.5% participation rate).

We obtained demographic information from all participants (see Table 1). Faculty varied widely in their years of total faculty experience (range: 4 to 39 years) and years at the current university (range: 2 to 29 years). Likewise, they taught across disciplines in three different colleges. Faculty had between 1 and 5 semesters of experience (*M* = 2.8) teaching students with intellectual disability in their courses. The average number of students with intellectual disability they had taught ranged from 1 to 10 students (*M* = 3.7).

Focus Groups and Data Collection

We used focus groups as our approach for data collection (Morgan, 2019). We held four focus groups—each involving three to seven faculty members—during the fall semester. All interviews took place in a private space within the university library. Each lasted 90 minutes. In addition to faculty, a facilitator and note-taker were also present. The interviews were facilitated by a university faculty member who was unaffiliated with the IHE program. The facilitator had extensive experience in the area of developmental disabilities and had worked at the university for nearly 40 years. The note-taker was responsible for tracking who was speaking and noting any nonverbal behaviors that could be paired with their statements (e.g., laughter, nods of agreement, gesture to another person). Each group was audio-recorded. We provided light snacks and beverages.

The facilitator used a semi-structured interview protocol to guide the discussion. A collaborative team consisting of three members—two graduate students and one faculty member, all within a special education department—developed the protocol (available from the correspondent author). It included questions addressing six core topics: faculty motivations for involvement, faculty experiences within their classroom, the impact on faculty, the impact on classmates, the impact on students with intellectual disability, and recommendations for the IHE program. In addition, follow-up prompts were listed to evoke additional detail or clarity. The protocol ensured consistency across focus groups, although participants were encouraged to elaborate on ideas as needed. The facilitator ensured the discussion moved along with ease and that each question was addressed by the group. All procedures were approved by the university's institutional review board (IRB).

Data Analysis

All focus groups were transcribed professionally, reviewed for accuracy, and de-identified. We used thematic analysis when coding all interviews (Patton, 2002). We also adopted a team-based approach for our analyses. The research team was comprised of two master's students and one faculty researcher—all working within the field of special education. All three had worked closely with the university's IHE program and were familiar with the supports it offered to students and faculty. Data analysis occurred in multiple stages and researchers used the constant comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The two graduate students began by independently coding the first focus group transcript. They identified sections of the transcript that were relevant to each of our overarching research questions and used open coding to create initial categories. Coded responses ranged from short phrases to several paragraphs and were identified throughout the transcripts. Whenever appropriate, they created codes that incorporated

the actual wording used by faculty. Before a new category was created, all existing categories were reviewed for relevance. If a new category was needed, it was added. Next, they used axial coding to identify initial themes and tentative definitions associated with each of the research questions. The two students then met to compare their preliminary coding and to reach consensus on an initial framework of categories. This first framework was shared with the faculty researcher for input and additional revisions were subsequently made. The students continued coding each of the remaining transcripts in a similar fashion. They held several consensus meetings in which they compared their independent coding, discussed their additions, and revised the coding framework through consensus. In other words, categories changed in content and definition as newly coded sections of the transcript were compared and categorized. Throughout the process, the two students met with the faculty researcher who provided peer debriefing, feedback, and a critique of assumptions. Triangulation occurred in two ways—across sources (i.e., faculty from different disciplines and focus groups) and across analysts (i.e., multiple coders who brought individual perspectives and experiences to the interpretive process).

Although our coding focused on seven research questions, the present article focuses on experiences of faculty in four areas: their roles within the classrooms that involved students with intellectual disability, the roles of students within their classrooms, the challenges they experienced, and the strategies they found to be supportive. A separate paper focuses on the perceptions of faculty related to the remaining three areas: their motivations for getting involved, the impact of the experience on faculty, and the impact of the experience on classmates. All names are pseudonyms.

Findings

How Do Faculty Describe Their Role in Courses Enrolling Students with Intellectual Disability?

The roles of faculty in directly supporting students with intellectual disability enrolled in their classes ranged widely—from fairly minimal to more substantial. Faculty described this involvement as (a) requiring somewhat less than what they provided to other students in the class, (b) requiring somewhat more than what they provided to others, or (c) being comparable to or the same as they provided to others. As several faculty members taught multiple courses with students with intellectual disability, they described different levels depending on the student and course.

Requiring Somewhat Less

Eleven participants described their support of the student with intellectual disability as involving somewhat less than what they had to do for students without disabilities enrolled in the same class. Among these professors, Alexandra (an English professor) and Joan (a music professor) indicated that including the student with an intellectual disability in their course took no additional time at all. Other faculty indicated their role was to simply provide a space in which the student with an intellectual disability could be welcomed. Laura, an ecology professor, succinctly described herself as a “vehicle to get them

[students with intellectual disability] to where they want to get." Three additional faculty members generally described their role as minimal or limited when compared to what they did for other students. Michael, a communication studies lecturer, stated, "It was just not something I had to spend a lot of extra time with… it was not a heavy time investment on my part at all."

When discussing their role, multiple faculty members described their general interactions with the student with intellectual disability as actually being less frequent. Laura suggested this was because some students with intellectual disability did not need additional assistance beyond what was provided already by IHE program staff. For Julia, an environmental sciences professor, this more limited interaction was actually a disappointment, as she frequently met with all of her students during her office hours. Although some faculty desired to have much more direct or ongoing involvement with the student with intellectual disability, other faculty were comfortable having a more limited role. When discussing academic work, Joan recalled that she was not involved in adapting the assignments, since they were developed by the IHE program. She stated, "there wasn't a lot that I personally had to do besides just sort of check over what the program had already created."

Across the four focus groups, several faculty members viewed themselves as having more limited involvement in assessing student progress, interacting directly with students, and adapting materials. For some faculty, the course proved not to be too time consuming. Indeed, faculty attributed this to the IHE program providing sufficient support to students with intellectual disability who took their course.

Requiring Somewhat More

Ten faculty members described themselves as fairly involved in the learning of students with intellectual disability and spent more time assisting them than they did other individual students in the same class. For these faculty, involvement meant allocating some additional time toward differentiating materials and preparing the student for class. For example, Gabriella, whose area was religious studies, allocated additional time to differentiating materials and preparing the student for class. Alexandra recalled, "we [faculty member and IHE program] came up with a set of expectations, a set of requirements, [and] assignments." Similarly, Meredith, a faculty member in English, would meet with the student ahead of class to prepare for class discussion:

> Each week I would prep them for what we were going to talk about next week. Here are questions that we're going to talk about so [the students] can think about [their] answers ahead of time and let me know if they were comfortable talking in class or being called on.

For some faculty, like Phillip (a music professor), the additional interactions were check-ins:

> He would come up at the end of class and just point at the songs that he wanted me to listen to. Whatever it was and I would go and listen and then talk to him about it and then he would listen. So, we had conversations, just you know, a different way of doing it.

Other faculty mentioned checking in on their students to discuss what they were learning or to ensure they were connecting socially with classmates in enjoyable or appropriate ways. Ruben, a professor of art and cinema, shared the importance of “making sure that they were physically in contact and communicating with other students on a regular basis.” In terms of time spent adapting material, building rapport, or checking in, faculty were involved somewhat more than for other students in the course. However, this was rarely raised as a concern.

Requiring the Same

Seven faculty members described instances where their level of involvement with students with intellectual disability did not vary substantially from any other student in the course. Phillip described, “I don’t think I spent any more time other than just a little time communicating with the student and working, talking–which I was doing with all students anyway.” Julia echoed this assessment: “I would say it was very similar between [IHE program] students and [non-program] students, the way in which we interacted.” Multiple faculty members did not perceive a substantial difference in how they supported, interacted, or communicated with students with and without intellectual disability. Martin, an astronomy professor, elaborated on this sentiment when describing the general posture of faculty: “We just do what we do. We provide content. We hope to have a positive interaction with these young people.”

How Did Faculty Describe the Involvement of Students with Intellectual Disability?

When asked about how involved students with intellectual disability were in their classes, faculty addressed situations when these students were (a) more involved, (b) similarly involved, or (c) less involved than their classmates without similar disabilities.

More Than Their Classmates

In all four focus groups, faculty described situations in which students with intellectual disability were far more involved in the class than were their classmates. Some faculty discussed how the student showed higher participation and interest than their classmates. For example, Phillip described a student who stimulated discussion in a music course when no other classmates were participating:

> I was asking a question about the love of artists and the hysteria that was surrounding them…So [the student] shares about his/her absolute love for Justin Bieber or examples of how that 'hysteria' was present in their experience and that got everybody else in the room talking and sharing their experience. And so that was one of the really cool moments of just watching how that ability to share is kind of what got the whole conversation even moving in the first place.

Meredith had a student with intellectual disability whose personal interests enhanced the rest of his classmate's knowledge of the subject:

> The two students that I've had were voracious readers and the one boy in particular was fascinated with all things vampires and werewolves and knew lots of literature, lots of culture. And one of the things that he really was able to do was bring the television and movie culture that a lot of our students didn't know. Like old, old movie culture.

A student in Alexandra's English class participated in a poetry project in which her work was so well done it was selected to be read on a local radio public program radio.

> The poem she wrote just blew everyone else's poem out of the water. So, it ended up being read on the air by the poet. None of the students were reading their own poems. That was really cool!

Alexandra emphasized that the student's engagement surpassed that of her classmates. The same was true for a student in Phillip's music class, who demonstrated his understanding in a different way:

> I had a student. He's actually taken four or five classes with me throughout the years and I've never heard him say a word. He doesn't speak at all. But in one class we had we were talking about Sun Records. And in the middle of class he walked down and started playing Jerry Lee Lewis on the piano. At first, I didn't know

> what to do. I'm just in the middle of talking and he just sits down, and I stepped back. But it was a great moment!

Many faculty members also emphasized that students with intellectual disability had better attendance or engagement. Carl, whose discipline was community engagement, offered an example from his service-learning class:

> Probably one of the things he took out of the class was learning how to be a student–sort of a sense of showing up, being on time, learning to be attentive. Some of our students never learn.

Natalie (African-American and diaspora studies professor) and Sabrina (astronomy professor) echoed this sentiment when commenting that students with intellectual disability "rarely miss class" and "always come." Natalie elaborated: "Some of those [IHE program] students sat in the front of the classroom and I think were the most attentive and excited about the material daily." Indeed, faculty shared numerous examples of how students with intellectual disability seemed more engaged, interested, and involved than others.

Same as Their Classmates

Faculty in all four focus groups also described times when students with intellectual disability had the same level of engagement in learning as other classmates. Joan commented, "I have my [IHE program] students who raise their hand and want to contribute something, and that experience for them is just like everybody else in there. So I would say, as far as the way the class runs, there's no difference in that setting." Julia found that certain activities allowed her student with intellectual disability to participate similarly to anyone else: "There have been a few times when my [IHE program] students, during those 'think-pair-share' or 'make a sketch of what we're talking about' kinds of activities, have done exactly what the other students were doing." Henry, a science professor, described a time when an assignment that had originally been modified evolved into the student with intellectual disability doing the same things as her classmates:

> I actually thought [the student with intellectual disability] wrote a paper that was as good as what many of the students in my class could have written. And I let her and the [IHE program] coordinator know that. And then she rewrote it several more times to improve it.

Faculty also described the feeling their students with intellectual disability may have had when able to participate the same ways as their classmates. As Julia explained, "they can

see what everyone around them is doing, and they wanted to show me, and were really excited and I could tell they felt empowered by having them do what everybody was doing." Faculty also described situations in which the student with intellectual disability participated in ways consistent with other classmates such that others in the class did not even know the student was enrolled through the IHE program. As Grace, a professor of western art history, explained:

> He was participating and contributing and furthering sort of our class discussion just as the rest of his peers were. Which was really nice to see! And I think for me, watching him develop . . . that skill into a really strong skill by the end of the semester that was right along what everyone else . . . that was what made it worthwhile for me.

Less Than Their Classmates

At least one faculty in each of three focus groups shared experiences in which students with intellectual disability were less involved in course activities relative to other classmates. Sabrina described how a student's physical placement in a large class of more than 100 students impacted participation: "They just kind of did [activities] on their own…and on the periphery or just not sitting and just not really doing much." Sabrina continued, "they're just sitting by themselves and not doing anything when everybody else is working on something." Some faculty also noted that students with intellectual disability contributed less often to class discussion than did their classmates. For example, Carl described how a student in his service-learning class, "didn't come in and have as many conversations or interactions as the other students in the class." When faculty provided opportunities to meet and discuss the class with students, as Henry did during his office hours, students with intellectual disability never met with him. Henry explained, "I've never had a [IHE program] student come to office hours, with a sort of exception, I have a requirement at the beginning of the semester that every student has to come to my office to find it." Sabrina commented: "I would say, [the students] would do maybe a fifth of what the other students would do."

What Did Faculty Find Challenging?

Across focus groups, faculty experienced a variety of challenges related to inclusion of a student with intellectual disability. These too ranged from fairly minimal to more substantial.

Disability Disclosure

One prominent challenge for faculty related to their roles in disability disclosure and maintaining confidentiality of students with intellectual disability. Across all focus groups, there were professors who reported feeling apprehension about how to best explain the

divergent expectations of the students enrolled through the IHE program. For example, because students with intellectual disability received accommodations and modifications related to course requirements that may have been noticeable to classmates, professors were concerned about fielding inquiries about fairness without addressing the nature of the students' disabilities. Henry shared that he personally felt uncomfortable sharing the student's disability status, yet he felt that classmates might benefit from knowing that the student was involved in the university's IHE program. In contrast, Ruben thought disclosure might not be necessary at all, stating that he was unsure about, "the extent to which [his] other students know or need to know that they're also differently-abled." He went on to describe an instance in which he was faced with questions from classmates about why the students with intellectual disability were not required to present projects in class, and he expressed discomfort with having to share that these students used a different rubric. When describing his experience, one faculty said,

> The [IHE program] student was then sort of forcibly outed in a way that felt uncomfortable. I mean, it worked out in the end and people understood what was happening and it was not a big deal. But in the moment, there's always that sort of moment of tension where you're like, "Actually they don't need to do that project because they have a different syllabus because they have a different set of learning criteria."

Although faculty felt hesitation navigating these issues of confidentiality, it appeared that students with intellectual disability also faced challenges with regard to the self-disclosure of their disabilities. Alice, a special education professor, worked with a student who grappled with the issue of sharing information about his disability. She said that this student, "very much did not want to be seen as an [IHE program participant]," but instead preferred to be recognized as a typical university student. This student's preference to not disclose his disability became challenging when the student perceived an in-class response about his accommodations to be a public discussion of his disability. In this scenario, the miscommunication between the student with intellectual disability and his professor was a source of tension within the classroom. This issue was raised by two additional faculty members who were not sure if a student's disability should ever be raised in class. Variations on questions such as, "How do I handle it? How do I act?" and "Should I tell the students? Should I not tell?" were common among faculty. Alice later reflected on navigating disability disclosure, "it's not always easy and I think that's okay." She said the topic was important to discuss with her class of future teachers.

Student Communication

The majority of faculty referenced at least one situation in which they found it difficult to communicate directly with the student with intellectual disability, often because of their difficulties with expressive or receptive communication. Robert, a professor in a first-year

seminar class, noted, “it was hard for us to understand what [the student] might be getting or what he might not be getting, just because there [was] such a lack of expression, and some communication barriers.” Laura spoke of a similar experience: “There have been times when I felt badly because I didn't think the student was really getting what I was talking about. And if the student wasn't particularly verbal, I couldn't really tell.” Alexandra added to this discussion of communication when stating her student, “had real communication difficulties, verbalizing, and it was very difficult to understand what she said.”

Although some students had issues communicating clearly, other faculty instead addressed the extent to which students communicated with them. Stephanie, whose discipline was human development, described one student who “communicated a lot, a lot, a lot! And so [faculty and support staff] had to work on stepping back . . . They were talking a lot in class and it was getting to the point of too much.” Ruben described the opposite challenge. When discussing his video production course, he said “For me, some of the challenges—in regards to sort of just being vocal and participating in class—come along the lines of whether or not my [student] is actually participating in the project presentation or not.”

Behavior

A small number of faculty described their difficulties addressing behaviors presented by some of their students with intellectual disability. The behaviors became barriers when they were distracting to other students in the course. For example, Henry noted in his course: “The only [behavior] of significance was a student who kept falling asleep. And I have lots of students who fall asleep. But it was noisy when he fell asleep and he finally fell out of his chair. And the problem was that it became disruptive in the classroom.” Elizabeth, a sociology professor, described a time when a student “followed some [classmates] around. There was one student who turned out to be a cheerleader and he attached himself to her and there had to be some intervention.” Other faculty, like Stephanie, mentioned instances where the student was “humming and making noises during class.” Behaviors discussed ranged from those typical of any college student (e.g., being unfocused, using laptops for non-academic purposes) to behaviors that required more intensive responses (e.g., following classmates around, attention-seeking behaviors such as vocalizations and excessive hand-raising).

Peer Interaction

The types of interactions that took place between students with intellectual disability and their classmates were sometimes framed as a challenge. Julia, whose course takes place in a large lecture hall, mentioned some students were more open to talking with the students with intellectual disability. However, she worried that students who sat next to a less receptive group could be isolated. She stated, “I did struggle with trying to make sure that people felt integrated into class. Students tend to always want to sit in the same place.” In Julia’s experience, sitting in the same space became a barrier when the program participant was not surrounded by more interactive classmates. A different issue came up when peer interaction started to resemble faculty interaction. Alice, whose class includes

pre-service teachers, noted, “It's a challenge because again, I have [education] majors in there and they all want to help.” Instead of interacting as classmates, these other students adopted a more instructional role.

Insufficient Support

The need for more assistance was described as a challenge by some faculty. Alice described times when she felt that she and her student with intellectual disability were on their own without sufficient support by program staff. She stated:

> I felt that I wasn't able to give him everything he needed and that he wanted. And so it made me angry at myself because I also didn't have the time to do it. I'll be totally honest. But that made me a little frustrated with the folks at [the program].

A few other faculty agreed, noting that help was not automatically offered. At the same time, faculty indicated they did not always actively reach out to staff for assistance when needed. Although some faculty had met in person with program staff, others had not. Laura, an environmental science professor, noted, “I never actually met any of the [program’s] people that we emailed. I mean there is the [peer mentor], and I think with one of the students, there was one [peer mentor] that came a few times and didn't continue to come.”

Program Awareness

Faculty members framed their limited knowledge about the IHE program as a potential challenge. Grace articulated this point:

> I don't know a lot about what the program is or what its mission is per se . . . I felt a disconnect about it in terms of what level of support they could offer if this situation hadn't been going as well as it was in that particular class.

Silvia, a clinical professor in psychology, added, “I think the idea that they're just hidden in a classroom and no one actually knows who they are is a negative. I think it's a more positive experience once the [university students] overall know, and understand, recognize, that we have these students in the classroom.”

Class Content

Faculty in two focus groups cited the accessibility of course content as a challenge. Natalie discussed the obstacle of enrolling a student with intellectual disability if the student had limited background or interest in the course topic. She described the issue in detail:

> If they choose some classes, it's very difficult–unless they're self-motivated–to incorporate them into the discussion . . . I would have to really work with the student and know where the student is to incorporate that student into that class.

Ruben described available materials as a potential barrier in more hands-on courses. In a course such as set production or "in the classes that have more power tools, [which] is the sort of shorthand of saying it, I would be a little bit more cautious in advising other faculty in integrating students into their classes." Depending on what is being taught, faculty may be reluctant to advocate for the inclusion of students in particular courses.

Faculty Resistance

Two faculty members heard concerns voiced among their colleagues about enrolling students with intellectual disability in courses on campus. As Natalie shared:

> You have to have structures changed so that the people fit into the institution in the same way that [the IHE program] tries to change the structure so that those with learning disabilities fit into it. And to do that, you're going to have to have the struggle with faculty who don't want to do that.

Natalie reported still encountering some faculty who "just don't really think it's a good idea. And these are good friends who know me well. And I just think [the IHE program] is so beneficial."

Class Size

Some challenges related to physical space rather than to the IHE program or its students. For example, issues related to room size or course enrollment were sometimes mentioned. When discussing her own course, Stephanie noted that, "In the large class, it was hard." She also mentioned larger course sizes being a barrier: "Especially in the lecture hall. And I would try and move [the students] around and stuff, but the thing is that they would end up sitting next to the same people all the time." Although large class sizes tended to accommodate students with intellectual disability better, this limited faculty interactions with those students.

What Strategies Did Faculty Say Supported the Inclusion of Students with Intellectual Disability?

Faculty used a variety of techniques and resources to support students.

Program Supports

The most popular strategy mentioned among groups involved collaboration with program staff. Joan explained her beneficial relationship with staff: “I felt like [IHE program staff] did a great job of taking care of things and saying ‘Okay, we took your syllabus and we came up with different assignments based on what you had already written.’” The initial work of the staff made the faculty feel comfortable with the potential workload of having an additional student. This sentiment was echoed by Martin, a professor of physics and astronomy, who said, “I think the [IHE program] folks and the coordinators do a good job of doing most of the heavy lifting. [IHE program staff] take most of the burden from us. So, it does make it very easy and painless.” The utilization of program staff was helpful when addressing initial questions about the program, as well as when faculty encountered more difficult situations (e.g., behaviors, coordinating support for students). Laura mentioned that program staff were helpful in explaining the program requirements and her role as faculty in teaching students—all of which caused her to feel more at ease with inclusion. Likewise, Stephanie said that program staff assisted her with addressing a student who talked excessively. As she described it, “the [IHE program] staff brought behavioral folk in and came up with a plan and we implemented it.” Across focus groups, faculty described being able to rely on program staff for resources, interventions, and answers to their questions.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Faculty who strove to design learning environments that were accessible said this fostered a more inclusive classroom for students with and without intellectual disability. Mention was made in all four focus groups of incorporating strategies that faculty felt aligned with a UDL framework (i.e., an approach to optimizing teaching and learning for all students; www.cast.org). Two faculty mentioned using films and videos to bring all of their students, including those with intellectual disability, more fully into academic conversations. Other strategies, such as checklists, were also used in order to support learning in these courses. Robert noted, “I now incorporate those [checklists] into some of my projects . . . Universal design practices that I didn’t know about before [having an inclusive classroom] have been useful for all the students.” Silvia described incorporating new teaching activities (e.g., think/pair/share, sketching, group-problem solving) as ways to help cultivate accessible learning. Ruben found that demonstrating to the student with intellectual disability how to handle classroom equipment was beneficial for all students in his video production class:

> I point to the things with the camera in hand so they get a sense of where things are, how things come apart, so they're actually holding it and doing it at the same time. And being deliberate with the equipment for my [student with intellectual disability] with the idea that that's actually really helpful for my other students.

Faculty described using scaffolds to support the students with intellectual disability and then discovering these tools proved helpful to all students in the course. Phillip explained that having an inclusive classroom motivated him to be more comprehensible when

teaching all students. He said, “I've had to be a bit clearer in the way that I get things across, which, I think is beneficial to everyone in the classroom. Including myself!” Jennifer, who teaches classes on business organization, discussed how her course design created embedded support for every student:

> Every class has an agenda with what we're going to do in class, which for some of the [students], that was a real relief for them. Because they could see where the class was going and so they weren't looking. And so for my other students, that's a [built in] support as well. And because I frequently have students who have dyslexia or who have other reading challenges, these are tools that help them.

Class Peer Supports

Five faculty described using in-class peer support as a way of helping students with intellectual disability access course content. Julia asked a couple of classmates to help explain the assignments to the student with intellectual disability when needed. Peers helped clarify academic assignments, but they also helped the student fit in and work with others. She indicated the peer support “actually helped a lot, I have to say.” Elizabeth described a time when a football player in her course worked with the student with intellectual disability and formed a close relationship. “This particular student had never been to a football game and he became a football fan after that because [the peer mentor] was a football player and brilliant student who helped him out.” Faculty described both social and academic benefits to involving classmates in the students’ learning.

Behavioral Supports

Three faculty members incorporated behavioral supports into their courses. Julia found the student with intellectual disability began to use self-regulation strategies to help manage his behavior of making noises and humming. Elizabeth described how one student who had difficulty recognizing boundaries benefitted when the faculty member would remind the student not to invade personal space by stating “stop” when he was too close. Prior to this, the faculty had found it difficult to get the student to give space. The faculty member shared this approach with peers. Meredith used a token system to support a student with intellectual disability who talked excessively during her course. She recalled:

> We used the “penny method.” I gave him pennies—two cents. He'd get to put in his “two cents.” And so every time he talked he'd spend a penny and then if he responded to another student thoughtfully, I gave him the penny back. And so it

> was kind of [like] we had a barter economy going for a while; because he could talk, and then go back and forth.

These strategies were said to improve targeted classroom behaviors.

Accommodations and Modifications

One faculty member ensured students had accommodations—supports and services which allowed them to access the curriculum. Sabrina mentioned, "if they had an assignment, they would just turn it in later or they would start working on it a lot earlier." In this way, students with intellectual disability were able to have additional time to complete similar assignments to their peers. Michael gave students with intellectual disability access to materials prior to each class session. He stated, "I remember I would share my PowerPoints in advance with the student [with intellectual disability] who was in the class." This way the student would be able to review the content in advance and participate more actively during the class.

Faculty also spoke about modifications in their inclusive classrooms. By altering the learning goal or assignment, faculty provided students a way to showcase their knowledge of course material. Silvia mentioned one assignment where she asked her students to interview a teenager and craft a report. Instead of writing an intensive report, the program participant summarized the interview they had and included questions they had asked. Stephanie asked her student to complete PowerPoints in lieu of a test or written report. Likewise, Henry said he had students "produce their own PowerPoint presentation with what they learned from that part of the semester." Alice recalled a time when she was able to modify a larger project on behavior intervention:

> The way that we've structured it is that my students are all doing behavior intervention projects with kids in schools and we structured it for the [student] to do a self-monitoring project which is extremely valuable and they can self-identify what they want to do and set goals and learn how to monitor and self-reinforce.

In modifying their materials, faculty were able to allow their students with intellectual disability opportunities to demonstrate what they had learned. Three faculty members said that creating adapted materials was helpful. Two faculty members rewrote assignments in an adjusted format so that the student would be able to work alongside their classmates. Sophia, in the theater department, recalled this experience, stating, "I've also rewritten assignments and sort of made accommodations every day just to have special activities for the [student]." Stephanie addressed adapting evaluation materials when saying, "if their syllabus said that they were going to take some quizzes then, of course, I would rewrite those quizzes for them." The strategy of altering materials helped the student access course materials in ways that supported their understanding.

Discussion

Faculty members are critical players in the education of all students on their campus. Increasingly, this includes students with intellectual disability who participate in the growing number of IHE programs. Yet few studies have focused on the experiences of these faculty committed to inclusive education. Our study addressed four dimensions of the faculty experience—the roles they play within classrooms that include students with intellectual disability, their views of the involvement of those students, the challenges faculty encounter, and the strategies faculty adopt. Several key findings have implications for the inclusive higher education movement.

First, faculty varied widely in their involvement in directly supporting the participation of individuals with intellectual disability in their courses. For some participants, teaching such a course required investing somewhat more effort for students with intellectual disability than might otherwise be required for a traditionally enrolled student (cf., Fisher, 2008; Gilson et al., 2019). Yet most faculty found the opposite to be true. Although it is important to acknowledge that additional expectations may be placed on professors, few faculty members considered the demands to be cumbersome. Both perspectives help faculty see the range of workloads that might be encountered when including students with intellectual disability in their courses. Multiple factors may have contributed to different levels of faculty involvement including the nature of the class, the needs of the student with intellectual disability, the availability of program staff, and the prior experiences faculty had with students with intellectual disability. More than one faculty member explained that their involvement looked different depending on the particular student who was enrolled in their course.

Second, including students with intellectual disability in university courses was not without some challenges. The two main challenges expressed by faculty related to disability disclosure and student communication. Disclosing information about a disability can be a delicate and difficult topic to navigate. Faculty described 16 different accounts of times when this became complex within their classrooms. Students with various disabilities on college campuses have cited discomfort discussing disability-related information or fear of stereotypes that may be brought up by peers or faculty members (Baker et al., 2012; Cook et al., 2009). Dealing with disability disclosure was an area of discomfort or uncertainty, as many faculty were unaware of how to address the student's disability and identify necessary supports. This became an issue when classmates asked about a student's work samples or when the student with a disability was unsure about how to handle self-disclosing their disability.

One way to mitigate any challenges prior to the class may involve arranging a time for the student with intellectual disability to share their academic preferences, interests, needs and strengths needed for success in the classroom with the faculty member. For example, the student with intellectual disability could prepare a visual profile addressing how they learn best in the classroom and discuss ways, if applicable, to disclose their disability. This action can help pave the way for a successful transition to the classroom and build rapport with the faculty member. For those students who choose not to disclose their disability to classmates, should tensions arise due to completion of coursework as

compared to other classmates, students with intellectual disability in the course can simply indicate they are auditing the course. Auditing a course is commonplace for many different learners in a university setting. This action would allow for classmates to understand more clearly why the student with intellectual disability follows different coursework and does not receive grades for assignments and/or course completion. As inclusive higher education programs continue to grow, it is important that faculty and students with disabilities are educated on how best to navigate this tension. Another major challenge involved communication with the student with intellectual disability. This theme was raised 13 times across the four focus groups. Jensen et al. (2004) found that students with learning disabilities seemed hesitant to communicate with faculty and that communication difficulties stemmed from both the faculty and students with disabilities. Therefore, both parties—students and faculty—may benefit from guidance on initiating conversations about important topics (e.g., course expectations, introductions, accommodations). One way to address a lack of communication between a student with intellectual disability and a faculty member is to provide ample opportunities for communication to occur throughout the semester. Facilitating these conversations is often done through the help of the student's advisor and/or the academic director and can take place in different ways. For example, at the start of the semester, the student with intellectual disability can arrange a meeting before class begins to meet the faculty member and share their interests and academic needs. Peer mentors can help facilitate this form of self-advocacy. During advising sessions, the student with intellectual disability with support from their advisor can write emails to the faculty member that include progress on assignments and any questions that arise. It is also encouraged for students to arrange a check-in meeting during the faculty member's office hours. In addition to communication from the student with intellectual disability, the academic director maintains frequent communication with the faculty member to help answer questions and problem-solve issues in the classroom.

Third, faculty said they benefited from using a variety of strategies for supporting their students with intellectual disability. Ten faculty members described approaches they used (e.g., videos, clear explanations, modeling) specifically for students with intellectual disability that they perceived benefitted all of their students. UDL is a framework found to advance inclusion by optimizing the opportunities all students have to learn (Rose et al., 2006; Smith & Lowrey, 2017). Although this framework has been successfully implemented in K-12 inclusive classrooms, less attention has focused on its application within college classrooms that include students with intellectual disability (Jones et al., 2016; Love et al., 2019). Some programs ensure all faculty involved with teaching students with disabilities are offered training on UDL as standard practice (e.g. Bauer & Harlin, 2016; Hafner et al., 2011). It was interesting that the faculty who used this approach apparently did so of their own accord; they were not all prompted by the IHE program to adjust their overall teaching in this way. At the same time, faculty across the university could benefit from learning how the UDL framework could be applied more fully to instructional materials and approaches to support the inclusion of students with intellectual and other disabilities—as well as other diverse learners—within their classrooms.

IHE program staff were invaluable in supporting the inclusion of students with intellectual disability in these classrooms. Eleven faculty members shared stories about times when they found it helpful to discuss the learning styles or behaviors of students with the IHE program staff. Many colleges already offer training and support to faculty on how to best support students with disabilities (e.g., Bauer & Harlin, 2016; Sniatecki et al., 2015). However, most IHE programs also have staff dedicated to supporting the participation of students with intellectual disability. When faculty in our study drew upon this source of assistance (e.g., to create behavior support plans, to alter assignments), they consistently described it as quite helpful. When faculty members address issues early on in the classroom with IHE program staff, issues can be resolved more quickly. For example, the academic director or other program staff dedicated to supporting the participation of students with intellectual disability should communicate frequently with each faculty member asking if they are in need of specific supports to make their classroom community more inclusive or of help for mitigating any behavioral issues that have arisen. Furthermore, IHE program staff could create a resource designed to facilitate a community of practice for faculty from different disciplines. This resource could house frequently asked questions, testimonies from other faculty members, and additional supports (e.g., guidance on adopting UDL principles into the classroom, disclosure of disability resources, best practices in inclusion).

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations to this study should be addressed in future research. First, our research study was conducted at a single university. The demographics, culture, and the relationship between the faculty and the IHE program were specific to this university. Faculty perspectives may differ across universities due to the variations in the ways a university works alongside its IHE programs, the population of program participants, choices in curriculum and academic structure, and other elements. Future studies should replicate this research across diverse universities in order to explore the similarities and differences in themes raised by faculty.

Second, despite a large number of faculty expressing interest in participating in the study, multiple faculty were not able to attend focus groups due to scheduling issues. Given the time constraints of the study, alternative times for focus groups were not provided as the research study was set to take place over the course of one year. Future studies should spread interviews over a larger period of time to enable more faculty to participate.

Third, not every academic discipline was represented in our study. For example, no one from the engineering school participated. Students with intellectual disability had taken courses from every college and 40 different departments at the university. Faculty perspectives are likely to vary based on discipline and course content. For example, education-related faculty may have more knowledge surrounding differentiated education or UDL, making them more inclined to teach a course that includes students with intellectual disability. Similarly, humanities faculty members who deal with more hands-on or accessible content (video production, art, film) may also be more willing to involve students with intellectual disability. Broader representation of disciplines would help

inform future practice related to the inclusion of students with disabilities across every corner of the university.

Implications for Practice

Findings from our study have implications for further practice in the area of inclusive higher education. First, navigating disability disclosure was an area of uncertainty for many faculty members and was raised as a challenge within their inclusive courses. IHE programs—in partnership with disability access offices—should offer workshops or informational meetings in order to educate faculty about disability disclosure and its importance. In addition, program staff should support students in self-disclosing their disability and/or in discussing with their professors the ways they learn best in the classroom. The way faculty navigate disability disclosure is important to creating a positive learning environment for students with disabilities.

Second, numerous faculty in our study addressed the benefits of drawing upon IHE program staff throughout the semester. As IHE staff are well-versed in program-specific information as well as successful interventions and strategies for specific students, it is important that they cultivate strong relationships with faculty. Faculty who are teaching courses that include students with intellectual disability should be reminded of the availability of this support, specifically when challenges arise. Inclusive higher education programs should emphasize the various times and spaces where program staff and faculty could discuss the challenges and successes of the student with a disability in the course.

Third, several faculty members said they would benefit from having opportunities to meet the student with intellectual disability before he or she joins the course. This would help provide the faculty with more information on how to help support the student and would provide the student an opportunity to advocate for his or her own support needs. Bauer and Harlin (2016) found that initial meetings between IHE staff and faculty provided a helpful way to educate faculty members on UDL, as well to discuss scenarios and strategies relevant to their courses. Likewise, faculty in Burgin et al. (2017) expressed their desire to have known even more about the individual student who would be taking their courses. Involving students in these meetings, when appropriate, could be helpful to interested faculty.

Fourth, program staff should consider asking faculty members who have had successful experiences including a student with intellectual disability to help recruit and support other faculty. Faculty would benefit from learning from other faculty firsthand the ways they make their unique classroom community inclusive and successful for all learners.

Fifth, multiple faculty mentioned that teaching a student with an intellectual disability did not differ substantially from teaching any other college student. They emphasized that the amount of work, time, and support lent to the IHE student is often similar to what is spent toward non-inclusive courses. This information could help attract future faculty who may automatically assume that they would spend more time supporting a student with

intellectual disability in their course. Future implementation of programs should be clear in advertising how much or little support would be required in the inclusive program.

Young adults with intellectual disability have an exciting array of new options for accessing a high-quality postsecondary education. As more and more institutions establish IHE programs, it is important to understand the experiences and recommendations of faculty who teach these students within their various courses. Such information and insights can be critical to ensuring that students with intellectual disability have meaningful access to rigorous, relevant, and rich instruction across the university curriculum. We encourage future scholarship focused on better preparing and supporting faculty in this critical area.

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Table 1

Participant Demographics

Variable	*n* (%)	*M* (*SD*)
Age		49.4 (10.8)
Sex		
Female	16 (69.6%)	
Male	7 (30.4%)	
Years at the university		13.2 (8.9)
0 to 5	6 (26.1%)	
6 to 10	1 (4.3%)	
11 to 15	9 (39.1%)	
16 to 20	3 (13.0%)	
21 or more	4 (17.4%)	
Years as a faculty member		17.1 (10.6)
0 to 5	4 (17.4%)	
6 to 10	2 (8.7%)	
11 to 15	6 (26.1%)	
16 to 20	3 (13.0%)	
21 or more	8 (34.8%)	
Race/ethnicity		
African-American	2 (8.7%)	
Hispanic/Latinx	3 (13.0%)	
White	16 (69.6%)	
Multi-racial	2 (8.7%)	
College affiliation		
Arts and Sciences	16 (69.6%)	
Education	5 (21.7%)	
Music	2 (8.7%)	
Engineering	0 (0%)	
Prior experience with students with intellectual disability		
No	13 (56.5%)	
Yes	10 (43.5%)	