Inclusive Postsecondary Education Provider Perspectives of Stressful Situations for College Students with Intellectual Disability

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Abstract

Students with an intellectual disability are increasingly attending inclusive postsecondary education programs (IPSEs) to equip them to thrive in adult-life environments. Students within these programs receive support in various areas, such as academics, employment, social engagement, personal development, and independent living. While It is well known that college students encounter new and unique stressful situations during their time on campus, many students do not have the strategies to handle these challenges. Stress can be caused by many circumstances and can be handled differently depending on the student and the situation. The purpose of this study was to examine IPSE professionals' perceptions of the most significant and persistent stressful situations encountered by students participating in IPSE programs. The findings gleaned from this study offer four interrelated themes, all of which are related to relationships and communication. These findings along with implications for practice are discussed.

Keywords: college, inclusive postsecondary education, stress, stressful situations

Plain Language Summary

- **Why we did in this study:** College programs for people with intellectual disability are great places for students to meet their goals. Understanding the experiences that these students have in college is important. Before we did this study, no other studies had looked at what causes stress for students with intellectual disability.
- **What we did in this study:** First, we talked with nine people that work for college programs for students with intellectual disability. Next, we asked them about the things that are stressful for students and recorded what they said. Last, we studied what they said to find the things people said most about stress.
- **Findings:** We found that the main things that cause stress for students with intellectual disability are communication and relationships.

- **Conclusion:** College programs for students with intellectual disability need to know as much as they can about what students need to be successful. With what we found in this study, programs can support students better. Other people can also use what we found to do more research on this topic.

There is an extensive literature base that shows less desirable outcomes for youth with disabilities after high school, including infrequent college access and completion. In fact, approximately 23% of individuals with disabilities completed some college, compared to 72% of their nondisabled peers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). Further, the outcomes are even more disheartening for individuals with an intellectual and developmental disability (IDD). Only 11% of high school students with IDD attend a two-year or four-year college after graduating from high school (Grigal, Hart, & Migliore, 2011). Higher education continues to be a promising pathway towards desirable adult-life outcomes, including high wage and high-skill careers (Grigal & Papay, 2018; Plotner & Marshall, 2015). As a result, the growth of IPSE programs for individuals with IDD across the country has intensified.

The increases in IPSE programs across the United States are fueled in part by legislation such as the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA; 2008), which includes provisions to increase access to higher education for students with IDD. The HEOA (2008) removed eligibility barriers to financial support by defining that a financially eligible student with IDD can access federal financial aid (e.g., Federal Pell grants, work study opportunities) if they enroll in an approved Comprehensive Postsecondary and Transition Program (Grigal et al., 2013). In 2010, 2015, and 2020, the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, awarded 10.5 million, 9.8 million, and 9.7 million dollars, respectively, to Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID).

Enrolling in an IPSE program provides opportunities for individuals with IDD to engage in further learning, prepare for independent living, and develop skills related to competitive employment (Grigal & Papay, 2018). Thus, a primary focus of IPSE programs is to narrow the post-school outcome gaps between individuals with IDD and individuals without disabilities by providing students with skills to obtain higher-wage jobs (Grigal et al., 2021). A standards-based conceptual framework for inclusive higher education developed by Think College depicts four standards as cornerstones of practice: (a) Academic Access, (b) Career Development, (c) Campus Membership, and (d) Self-Determination (Grigal, Hart, & Wier, 2011). Student experiences are directly affected by these areas of practice. Although IPSE programs are relatively new, there is a developing literature base that discusses areas such as program development and policy (Brady, 2021; Plotner & Marshall, 2014), academic supports (Becht et al., 2020), peer mentorship (Lewis, 2017; Peregrina-Kretz et al., 2018), and sexual health (Thorpe & Oakes, 2019). However, one area that hasn't received much attention is student stress and stressors (Plotner et al., 2020).

With the new and exciting college opportunities, students are facing challenges that they may not have faced in high school. College brings a constellation of stressors such as

academic issues, financial concerns, and/or social strain (Skowron et al., 2004). The examination and discussion of stress levels in traditional college students is a common topic of research in higher education (Adhern et al., 2011; Blanco et al., 2008; Saleh et al., 2017). Stress results from the interaction between stressors and the individual's perception and reaction to those stressors (Romano, 1992). The American College Health Association (2017) conducted a nationally representative survey that evaluated stress in college students. Results showed that 45.1% of college students reported experiencing higher than average levels of stress, 87% of students felt overwhelmed with responsibilities within the past year, and 84% have felt mentally exhausted. Common stressors rated by students as "traumatic or very difficult to handle" were academics (47.5%), finances (31.8%), intimate relationships (30.9%), and sleep problems (30%). Over 50% of students reported experiencing three or more severe stressors in the past year (American College Health Association, 2017). Additionally, Hong (2015) conducted a qualitative study to capture anecdotal experiences of 16 college students with disabilities for a 10-week period. Four major themes emerged, one of which was college stressors. Students frequently described their daily experiences as "stressful," "stressed out," "upsetting," or "frustrated" (Hong, 2015). Stressful experiences often resulted from physical demands, mental and emotional struggles, and social stigmatization. Students stressed about time management in situations such as waking up on time for class and meeting assignment deadlines (Hong, 2015). Further, Ross et al. (1999) administered the Student Stress Survey to 100 undergraduate students at a mid-sized midwestern university. Results showed that the seven most frequent stressors were change in sleeping habits (89%), vacations/breaks (82%), change in eating habits (74%), new responsibilities (73%), increased class workload (73%), financial difficulties (71%), and social activities (71%; Ross et al., 1999).

Acharya et al. (2018) examined emerging stressors and depressive symptoms in 631 undergraduate students using the Student Stress Survey and found eight frequently occurring stressors, which were experienced by over 50% of the sample. These stressors included "change in social activities," "work with people you don't know," "change in sleeping habits," "increased class workload," "lower grade than anticipated," "placed in unfamiliar situation," "and "change in living environment." The wide array of stressors found in these results is representative of the diverse stressors that college students experience regularly. Although there is prevalent literature that evaluates stressors for college students who are typically enrolled in the university, there are still significant gaps in the literature surrounding student experiences in IPSE programs, including prevalent stressors that students experience (Plotner et al., 2020). Enrollment in postsecondary education programs brings many changes for students with IDD, including many of them living away from their families for the first time. Individuals who previously relied on parents and other relatives for certain supports surrounding stress and anxiety may no longer have access to these supports. The stressful situations students experienced in college and the strategies built to navigate these experiences are useful for challenges throughout life. Thus, providing support to students to manage stress is imperative. The impacts of stress may be compounded for people with IDD who often face challenges with communication (Smith et al., 2020). For students with IDD enrolled in IPSE programs, program staff are potentially their primary support system on campus during stressful experiences. Although there are numerous articles discussing peer-mentoring in college

as a support for students with IDD (Wilt & Morningstar, 2020), there is limited literature that examines IPSE professionals' perceptions on prevalent stressful situations and how to support individuals with IDD through these situations. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine IPSE professionals' perceptions of the most stressful situations encountered by students with IDD in inclusive college settings. Specifically, one research question guided this study: What are the most significant and persistent stressful situations that students with IDD in IPSE programs encounter?

Method

Participants and Procedures

A qualitative research design was employed to investigate the perceptions of IPSE professionals on supporting students through stressful situations enrolled in IPSE programs. Program directors of five IPSE programs were contacted to see if they would participate in the study. Four of the five program directors decided to participate by nominating staff of their program. In one case, the director nominated themself as they felt they were the most equipped to discuss student stressful situations. To qualify for the study, participants must have held their positions for at least one year and be nominated by their current program directors as an individual who provides individualized support to students navigating stressful situations. Individuals nominated were contacted by email, provided with information about the study, and invited to participate. All nine IPSE professionals nominated for the study agreed to participate.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with professionals working for IPSE programs in the Southeastern region of the U.S. Each of the participants worked for IPSE programs housed at 4-year universities that offered a full range of academic and social opportunities and included university housing. Four interviews were conducted face-to-face and five interviews were conducted via phone. Face-to-face interviews were conducted on the university campus in the offices of the IPSE. Interviews lasted approximately 75 minutes and were audio recorded and transcribed. Participants ranged in terms of their education level, role in the program, and duration of tenure with the program. All nine participants have been provided with pseudonyms to protect their identities and are described here and in Table 1. Carla had been with the program for 2 years and was working on her bachelor's degree at the time of the interview. She held a variety of roles, including resident mentor, small group instructor, and academic coach. Elliot, a current graduate student seeking a master's degree, had been with the program for 4 years at the time of the interview and had also held a variety of roles including resident mentor, social mentor, and academic mentor. Christopher was the assistant director for his program at the time of the interview and held a Ph.D. in special education. Amy, a Ph.D. student in special education at the time of her interview, had worked with her program for three years as the exit planning coordinator. Rosa, a Ph.D. student in special education, was serving as her program's project coordinator at the time of her interview and had been serving in that role for 3 years. Jordan, the director of her program, held a Ph.D. in special education and had been serving in that role for two years at the time of her interview. Perry, an undergraduate student, had been working for his program for three years at the time of his interview and supported students in the capacity of resident mentor. Julie had been

working for the program for one year as an intern supporting students academically and socially while completing a bachelor's/master's degree. Gina, a master's student, had been with the program for two years, serving primarily as a resident mentor.

Instrumentation

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to obtain the perceptions of IPSE professionals regarding supporting IPSE program students through more substantial and persistent stressful situations. The interview protocol was developed for this study based on the literature and a research team of five professionals with at least seven years of experience working with college students with diverse needs. A series of meetings were conducted to craft questions and probes, and pilot, and refine the protocol. The final version of the interview protocol consisted of three sections and totaled 30 questions. Specifically, the interview guide consisted of three sets of questions focused on (a) questions about the professional's background and experience; (b) perceptions on the most significant and persistent stressful situations encountered by IPSE program students in five different areas: friendship, roommates, romantic relationships, social media, and academics; and (c) questions about supports and growth of students that occurred after navigating stressful situations.

The first set of questions asked participants to describe their student population, their professional and personal experience with students with a disability, including IDD, the role they serve within their postsecondary education program, and what they think of when they hear the term "stressful situations" as it related to their students. Participants were also asked how someone in their role provides support to students when stressful situations occur. Following the conclusion of the first section, participants were told that for the purposes of the interview, stressful situations were defined as "any issue students face that causes emotional strain in their lives." Participants were informed that researchers were especially interested in the support provider perspectives and the types of situations that students face, how students with IDD problem-solve these situations independently, and the supports the participant and the program as a whole provide to assist these students in resolving the situations. The interview then advanced to the second section, where participants were asked about specific and general examples of stressful situations students encounter across friendships, roommates, romantic relationships, social media, and academics. For each area, participants were asked for common and impactful stressful situations that students encountered regarding that area, how students navigated those situations, and how they or others provided support throughout this process. Participants were encouraged to give specific examples of situations that occurred. If the situations that were provided were broad or lacking detail, the interviewer probed for additional information. The third section gathered information regarding the supports provided during stressful situations and student growth and outcomes from stressful situations. Participants were asked to provide specific examples of when students showed growth after navigating a stressful situation. Lastly, they were then asked if they felt that the current supports their IPSE program provided were effective in facilitating learning experiences from stressful situations.

Data Analysis

The research team reviewed each interview transcript separately multiple times and identified preliminary codes. Next, codes were defined and discussed by the team. The research team then met and reviewed the transcripts to determine if any new concepts appeared that were not represented in the preliminary codes. Both the first and second author independently grouped codes meeting the inclusion criterion (i.e., initiated by at least five participants) into descriptive themes. This process yielded four themes meeting the inclusion criterion. Data trustworthiness measures were taken to ensure data validity. Specifically, member checks were conducted by having summaries of each coded transcript sent to the participant to give them an opportunity to verify the accuracy of the interpretations and to offer new thoughts that may not have been conveyed at the original interview. The third author served as the external auditor and received the coded transcripts and emergent themes to perform an audit. Immediately following, the first and second author met to reach agreement regarding the final themes.

Results

Four themes emerged from interviews, representing four overarching areas of potentially stressful situations for students with IDD in IPSE programs. They are stressors surrounding (a) facilitating and developing meaningful friendships, (b), managing interpersonal conflict, (c) conversations about setting boundaries; and (d) navigating romantic relationships. Each of the four themes is explored herein through salient quotes taken from interview participants. Although not a focus of this study, additional interview content around how students are supported through these situations is explored alongside each theme when it provides helpful context for the ways in which these topics are negotiated.

Facilitating/Developing Meaningful Friendships

The first theme that emerged from the interviews was stress around facilitating and developing meaningful friendships, which included both the stress of the interactions while meeting potential friends and the avoidance of potential friendship interactions. This theme involves student dissatisfaction with their social life, resulting in stress. These stressors could be due to lack of experiences with meaningful relationships before attending college. As Patrick stated:

> The students who are served within the program often, not exclusively but often, come from environments where they may have had a restricted set of experiences for making friendships by the nature of their secondary education program. Could be homeschooling, a self-contained class, maybe an inclusion-oriented program but the inclusion is sometimes more in name than in practice. And so, the students can come to the program with limited skills and opportunities in forming meaningful friendships.

In Jordan's interview, she shared that stress sometimes arises because students lack the skills needed to initiate the beginning stages of friendship. As mentioned above, this could be due to lack of experiences with meaningful relationships. Jordan stated:

> Last year we had a situation where a young man was learning how to appropriately meet new people but he couldn't get beyond the 'introduction part' of his conversations. He was [finding stress] because he just didn't know how to really connect with someone. So, we connected him with a couple other young men (mentors) on campus and they showed him how they would ask a friend to go out with them, and he really improved from that support.

In this situation, Jordan implemented a support where peer mentors on campus coached this student in ways to facilitate a friendship through modeling. She shared that the student's skills developed greatly with this support, and that the student just seemed to be more responsive to another student. Perry shared a similar sentiment, where a student felt stressed due to lack of skills involved in initiating a friendship, and the support he provided was modeling. He stated:

> One of [the stressors is] introducing yourself to people and expanding social networks. I think that's one that some people have high stress within our program. One of the ways we provide support is that's something we practice...I'm currently working with a student who isn't the greatest conversationalist. And so, we have mock conversations where we try to have a full conversation, and just today he was introducing himself to random people. That's something that he wouldn't have done in the past…probably because it stressed him out.

In both situations above, stress arose from not having the confidence or skills to talk to new people, a step that is necessary in developing new relationships. After the support provided by the IPSE program, both students independently displayed those skills at least once. In an example shared by Rosa, the student independently initiated opportunities for socialization with peers, but the stress emerged due to feelings of lack of reciprocation. Rosa stated:

> I had one student who said he felt stressed out and disconnected and wasn't sure how to navigate that. He felt like he reaches out to people but like they never have time for him, or that they're not really even being truthful when they say that they want to be his friend. So, we met and talked about possibly looking for other networking opportunities—getting him involved in different organizations since he's not very involved at the moment. He has one specific church involvement that he attends, but we kind of talked about expanding his social network and looking into other groups to see if he could meet new people that could meet with him more frequently and fill that void that he feels of loneliness.

All the above quotes involved student stressors surrounding dissatisfaction with their personal relationships, such as a lack of meaningful relationships due to limited sets of experiences, or limited skills and confidence on how to approach and meet potential

friends. The next theme explores a stressor that occurs across personal relationships, which is interactions around setting boundaries.

Interactions about Setting Boundaries with Peers

A consistent theme across interview participants dealt with supporting students through interactions related to setting boundaries with peers. Setting boundaries included verbally stating to another individual one's wants, needs, and comfort level within and outside of a personal relationship. Participants communicated that those stressors emerged when students could not effectively communicate their boundaries or felt that their boundaries were not being respected. An excerpt from Rosa exemplifies this point:

> Another area of stress is just that students want to be friends, but they also appreciate their own personal space and private alone time, but they don't know how to communicate that with others. And so, it just kind of gets to a point where the friendship is strained when the friends don't understand why they cannot hang out with each other all the time.

In this quote, Rosa shared that due to the student's stress related to not knowing how to communicate their boundaries with their peers, the friendship became strained. Amy communicated an example where stressors occurred surrounding not only her setting and respecting boundaries, but also when others do not respect her boundaries. She provided an example of conflict where one roommate was allowing another individual to sleep over, which made their roommate uncomfortable. She shared:

> You know, we talk a lot about being direct, but also to be kind to people. This is a time where you have to be really direct and clear, and you need to make sure that what you're saying, you're not talking around it. That you're saying 'I don't like it when this person sleeps over. We've talked about this before. We agreed that this wouldn't happen and it still is.' And just being really upfront and point blank about it, rather than trying to be really nice.

The support provided in this situation involved direct instruction to the boundary-setter about how to reinforce their boundary after it was violated. Rosa also shared an example of where boundary-setting among roommates caused stress:

> [The] freshman was just getting used to having a roommate, and his roommate was using his food a lot. And he was getting stressed about it, but he also wasn't talking to him about it. So, we helped him figure out exactly how to have that communication about what things he is willing to share, but also if it's going to be shared, that his roommate needs to replace things if he was the one that was using it the most, or last, or that kind of thing. And since that conversation we haven't had any other issues.

In this scenario, IPSE program staff supported the first-year student in setting boundaries with his roommate surrounding usage of material possessions. Jordan communicated that growth from setting boundaries included seeking out support when necessary. Support

from that program included self-advocacy skill building, which included boundary setting and seeking support when necessary. The examples above include stressors emerging from one individual feeling uncomfortable with a situation and feeling stress related to setting and enforcing boundaries with others, specifically peers. Several participants mentioned the support provided by IPSE staff during these situations, which included conversations surrounding clear and effective communication.

The next theme explores stressors surrounding managing interpersonal conflict. The circumstances described below are closely linked to the previous theme of setting boundaries. The difference is signified in the fact that in these examples, the conflict is known and prevalent between both parties. In the examples provided in the previous theme, one individual was uncomfortable or stressed, but the person who was violating the boundaries may not have been aware of their stress.

Managing Interpersonal Conflict

A consistent theme across interview participants dealt with supporting students through
A third major theme that emerged from the research was managing interpersonal conflict. Gina provided examples in which conflicts resulted in stress for the student, and how the IPSE program supported the students in during these conflicts:

> Another situation comes to mind which is that there is often miscommunication between friends and that miscommunication leads to very high levels of emotional stress. And the miscommunication can be logistics or it can be trying to communicate and receive messages about their emotions....There is [a] miscommunication, oftentimes through text message, or in a situation when one student [deals with] incoming stress and they aren't able to identify or communicate what they are feeling...And oftentimes what happens with that is they may try to resolve it within a day or two, but then I step in, oftentimes to help them have a mediation, where they know that no one is in trouble, we create a safe space, everyone has time to speak so that the perspectives can be heard and they can process those emotions before they come to the conversation.

In the scenario Gina described, students first attempted to resolve their conflict independently, but this led to higher stress levels and more intense emotions. In her support role, she stepped in and mediated a conversation at a later time, after students had had time to independently process their feelings. Her role as 'mediator' allowed both students to communicate their perspectives with her support to ensure clear lines of communication. Gina also relayed an example of students who became dependent on her to effectively communicate during times of conflict. She stated:

> I had one roommate pair that would pretty consistently not discuss any sort of stress or conflict that they were feeling about that shared space—often cleanliness, dishes, the other persons' belongings in the living area—they wouldn't discuss that until I was there. So, that stress would build up. So, we really worked to try to teach the skills of communicating without me there, but we are a built-in support, so

> although that wasn't very successful with that pair, we were able to, because of that weekly roommate meeting, still provide the support that they needed.

Amy communicated that on some occasions, students act in ways that are not typical of an interpersonal relationship, and conflict arises from there. Students may feel stress from not receiving their anticipated reaction from a peer, or when they are supported in self-reflecting about how their actions may have contributed to conflict:

> I think the most stressful [situation] is when they are not getting the response that they expect from a peer...and then not realizing that there are some things [they did that are causing] problems. For example, over texting of another person or breaking through social norms and being too personal too quickly. And then getting a bad reaction from that.

In this situation, both students were feeling stress, but for different reasons. The student who was angry created conflict when there was no known antecedent. The student who was on the receiving end of her peers' anger struggled to find her voice and defend herself within their relationship. Similar to Gina's situation as the mediator above, Julie communicated that the support she provides often comes in the form of a mediator, where she will text each party to ask clarifying questions to attempt to resolve the situation. In sum, the participants reported various perspectives in common interpersonal conflict among students enrolled in their IPSE programs, and the support provided to students as they navigate these conflicts.

Navigating Romantic Relationships

The above three themes have been largely focused on stressors emerging from platonic interpersonal relationships, primarily friendships and roommate relationships. The final theme discussed here will cover stressors emerging for students while navigating romantic relationships. Romantic relationships are accompanied by stressors for many young adults, and this theme emerged consistently across the interviews. When analyzing the transcripts, it became apparent that this theme was expressed in two major ways. The first way this theme was expressed was through reports of lack of experience within romantic relationships. Participants communicated that many students with IDD enter IPSE programs with little to no experience with romantic relationships. As Christopher stated, "many of the individuals who come to our program, by and large, have had very narrow surface level experiences with romantic relationships, ranging from zero to not much." He continued to communicate that stressors begin before the relationship even starts. Students let it be known that they feel an attraction to someone, and are kind of flummoxed on how to take it to the next step, that is, letting that individual know that they have some feelings for them or that they'd like to pursue a connection, and so they get hung up on how to do that. Rosa shared a similar perspective about stressors involved in pursuing a relationship. Her quote relates back to our first theme of boundaries as well. She shared:

> And I think that it can be difficult for anybody if you are not really sure if the other person is interested in you, and how do you appropriately go about continuing to pursue them without, you know, crossing any boundaries as well.

Supporting the idea of stress related to initiating a romantic relationship, it became clear that sometimes individuals share different definitions or expectations of a relationship, which results in stress. Elliot stated:

> The most important thing being what their definitions of relationships are. And, I say that as a stressor, just because when two people have different definitions of what a relationship looks like, that's kind of what causes the relationship to either blossom or not blossom, you know? So, I would say their definitions are the most important thing because the stress seems to [be] centered around these expectations.

The second way in which navigating romantic relationships emerged as a stressor was around power in relationships, coined "power differentials" by Christopher in his interview. Christopher stated that

> As in many relationships, there can be power differentials where one partner can be more domineering and the other more passive, and by virtue of just observing students, being around them, this particular couple, there have been stressors that emerged where it appears that this power differential was unbalanced for the couple.

Power differentials took different forms across interviews and participants. Two significant examples were shared by Amy and Elliot. Amy's example involved power differentials where the male in the relationship became verbally aggressive towards the female:

> We did have a situation where a girl and a boy were dating, and he was being disrespectful and somewhat aggressive towards her... So we intervened and spoke with the male student and made it very clear that this is against university policy and against program policies and if this continued to happen, that he would be removed from the program.

Throughout the interviews, stressors within and surrounding romantic relationships emerged. Participants communicated that they use a range of tools to support students through stressors arising from romantic relationships. These tools range from informal conversations to determine an individual's intention in dating to explicit discussions to define characteristics of healthy and unhealthy relationships. Two participants mentioned utilizing the counseling center on the university campus as a support for students in navigating these situations.

Discussion

The feeling of stress is universal for young adults entering new worlds such as college and not specific to students with IDD; however, students with IDD may have more

persistent stress due to their lack of experience and confidence. Thus, the need to well-define supports in this area is critical. In a landscape where more and more individuals with IDD can attend college, the expectations, experiences, and supports provided to these students are explored more often. This study indicates a need for supports related to facilitating and developing meaningful relationships, setting boundaries with peers, interpersonal conflict, and navigating romantic relationships for college students with IDD. Interestingly, the findings gleaned from the current study show that many stressful situations were not related to academic rigor, navigating new environments, or finances, as much of the existing literature around college and stress indicates; rather, the emergent themes of this study revolved around stress related to communication and relationships. While coursework and managing finances can be extremely stressful, it is likely that the support in place (and previous support in high school) are there to maximize student success in these areas. When dealing with authentic occurrences, it would be much more challenging to support students in the moment. However, the power of the college experience lies in its diversity and unpredictability and can lead to significant personal growth. Students can grow through being challenged by taking risks and obtaining critical life lessons as most emerging adults do.

College is potentially the first time that students with IDD have been on their own for an extended period. This means that they are away from their families and friends to whom they would normally turn for advice or support. As a result, students are likely establishing relationships with new friends and staff members from whom they may seek support. This change can create a large amount of stress, as well as some conflicts among peers and staff. Individuals with IDD are not alone in their need for social networks and close groups of friends in college (Carter & McCabe, 2020). In addition to improvements in quality of life that may come with increased access to supportive relationships, the extent of college student social networks has also been demonstrated to be predictive of a decreased incidence of risky behaviors (e.g. substance abuse) as a means for dealing with strains to mental health (Mason et al., 2014).

The current literature on facilitating and developing meaningful relationships for students with IDD in postsecondary education programs is limited. According to Scheef et al. (2020), it is important to support the growth of relationship skills using flexible strategies, enlisting peer support, and incorporating rich discussion within coursework and individual meetings. Bohnert et al. (2007) stressed the importance of providing activities and opportunities for college students to create relationships and practice skills they have learned. However, simulating these activities can be challenging as contexts and situations vary. Thus, these artificial scenarios may not transfer well to real life.

Many IPSE programs provide one-on-one support to assist students to expand their social networks (e.g., joining different clubs and groups) and to facilitate activities with other students to foster friendships and romantic relationships in authentic ways both within IPSE programs and outside the programs. La Greca and Harrison (2005) also touched on the importance of relationships and their role in college students' mental health: When students were unable to build positive and healthy relationships with others, they put themselves at risk for depression and anxiety. This is another reason that positive friendships and romantic relationships are so critical during a student's time at an IPSE.

Not surprisingly, there were many supports that were provided to students to help them through stressful situations. For example, assistance with mediation of conflict or communication issues, and staff physically being present during discussions about stressful situations. A widespread support in each of these stressful areas was the use of mentoring, explicit instruction, modeling, scripting, and practicing situations and scenarios. Although the participants in the current study conveyed the success of mediation and their roles as mentors, the potential overreliance of IPSE staff or mentors could inhibit problem solving on their own and should be explored further. It is critical that interventions have full student buy-in and be well aligned with the IPSE philosophy.

Setting boundaries is also an area reported to be quite stressful. According to Rosenberger (2011), setting boundaries is based on students with IDD knowing who they are and being able to maintain relationships they want to keep. Once students take the steps to develop a new relationship, they need to understand how to set appropriate boundaries to avoid over- or under-nurturing the relationship (Rosenberger, 2011). According to participants in this study, many IPSE students need help with understanding how to establish and keep healthy relationships that work for them (including setting boundaries) and how to identify when others are not respecting their boundaries. This can be done through modeling, one-on-one instruction, and personal development focusing in this area. Peer mentoring is another way to teach boundary setting through discussion with peers. Egege and Kutieleh (2015) discussed the importance of a reciprocal relationship between the student and mentor, as well as the mentor providing more support than a friend. Peer mentors are effective because they involve students their own ages working with them through things that they themselves are also working through (Wilt & Morningstar, 2020). Boundary-setting is something college students learn as they continue through their programs and get better with over time. IPSE students may require some additional supports with navigating appropriate personal boundaries in friendships and romantic relationships.

Challenges in communication is a common characteristic for students with IDD (e.g., Belva et al., 2012, which can result in barriers surrounding communication and stress. This is compounded by the fact that oftentimes, students in IPSE programs had limited experience with meaningful friendships and relationships before coming to college, which in turn, reduces the opportunities to manage or deal with conflict. The emergence of positive interpersonal relationships are often novel experiences for students with IDD. Therefore, the conflict that inevitably accompanies an interpersonal relationship is also novel. For this reason, students often need support in navigating these situations.

Another area getting modest attention in the IPSE literature is the promotion of sexual health (Thorpe & Oakes, 2019) and intimacy knowledge (VanHorn Stinnett et al., 2021). It is not surprising that stress surrounding romantic relationships emerged in the current study, as this is a common stressor for many college-age individuals (Darling et al., 2007). College is a time to explore romantic relationships of all kinds. Many students in IPSE programs come to college never having experienced a romantic relationship before but want to experience one while in college (Plotner et al., 2020). With a more casual dating culture are a lot for a college student to process. According to Stinson (2010), many college students believe that many casual romantic encounters do not lead to a

relationship. To navigate these situations and the emotions associated with casual sexual/romantic encounters, dating, and rejection, students in IPSE programs require additional support, including personal development sessions with peer mentors or instructors providing support related to the topic. According to Magolda and Taylor (2014), many college students need support in finding self-authorship, or the ability for a student to make sound decisions for themselves. This takes time and practice, and IPSE programs provide support in assisting students to develop these skills.

Limitations

There are limitations to this current study that merit mention. First, some of the participants had limited experiences (i.e., less than 2 years) working in IPSE programs. Future studies should include professionals with more experience and opportunities to observe and support students in stressful situations. Further, although the design of this study was based on the research question posed by the authors, the decision to focus solely on IPSE program professional perceptions of stressful situations is not without complications. Noticeably absent in this landscape of input on stress that students in IPSE programs encounter is input from the students themselves. Future research would do well to ensure that students with IDD are purposefully included in similar work. Second, the sample of IPSE program staff and administrators that participated in this study was identified based on convenience (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Also, as one of its chief safeguards for data trustworthiness, the research team provided participants of this study with summaries of their interview transcripts with the opportunity to clarify, amend, or add to the content generated. Like the sampling strategy used for this study, this assurance of data trustworthiness was practical yet potentially problematic. Given the importance of safeguards of data trustworthiness in qualitative research, future researchers may consider including the addition of triangulation, more frequent debriefing, and other strategies for bolstering data trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004).

Implications for Practice and Future Research Directions

The above results indicate a need for supports related to facilitating and developing meaningful relationships, setting boundaries with peers, interpersonal conflict, and navigating romantic relationships. According to Scheef, Hollingshead, and Barrio (2020), it is important to support the growth of relationship skills using flexible strategies, enlisting peer support, and incorporating rich discussion within coursework and individual meetings. Bohnert, Aikins, & Edidin (2007) stress the importance of providing activities and opportunities for college students to create relationships and practice these skills they have learned. One-on-one support and explicit instruction of skills and strategies could potentially prove useful, but it is imperative that students are allowed the opportunity to practice these skills in real time and receive feedback. This can be done through peer mentoring and giving students the opportunity to roleplay, model, and script situations they have or may encounter. According to Schwartz et al. (2020), peer mentoring is an effective way to teach and generalize skills for when students with IDD and mental health concerns are dealing with different stressors. Peer mentors allow for students to learn interpersonal skills in a natural setting through seeking out the advice and experience of someone similar to them in age, as well as providing support for students in real time

during stressful situations (Schwartz et al., 2020). Peer mentoring may be an effective way to generalize learned skills in how to better handle stressful situations. All supports should be scaffolded and removed gradually to facilitate independence.

Recently, Rose et al. (2021) published a study looking at the effects of an adult social skills training program called Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills (PEERS) on college students that showed positive results. This program supports students with social skills, utilizes social coaching, and works in natural settings to facilitate generalization (Rose et al., 2021). Utilizing natural settings is paramount, as it allows for students to understand how to appropriately navigate interpersonal and stressful situations, but also to generalize what they are learning for future related situations. Research should be done on how programs like this could be beneficial for supporting students through stressful situations.

It is important to note the relatedness of each of the four themes outlined in the findings of this study. Within the confines of this exploratory study, interpersonal relations are the locus of most of the stressors that students with IDD in IPSE programs experience. In fact, each of the four themes was related to relationship building and maintenance. Moving forward, more research on individuals with IDD experiencing stressful situations in IPSE programs needs to be conducted. The stressful situation themes identified in this study were broad in nature. Specific situations could be explored in order to examine the more nuanced situations. The strategies employed by IPSE programs should also be examined to determine if they are the most effective ways for supporting students dealing with stress. Hopefully, as IPSE programs become more prevalent, more research will be completed in these areas.

In conclusion, dealing with stress is an important aspect of life for all individuals. With increased access to college environments, people with IDD will have more opportunities and experiences where stress will undoubtedly emerge. Thus, stressful situations represent an important but understudied area of research within the IPSE literature. The current study introduces areas of potential stress in inclusive higher education. Such information has implications for how programs support students and staff as they navigate college environments. It is critical that college programs for students with IDD focus on growth and skill development in the most typical and natural of ways. The area of personal development (i.e., dealing with stress, leadership, relationship knowledge) is as important, if not more important, than academic development for many college students with IDD and should be explored as such.

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Table 1

Participant Demographics

Name	Experience (years)	Title	Education
Carla	2	Resident Mentor, Small Group Instructor, Academic Coach	Undergraduate Student
Elliot	4	Resident Mentor, Academic Mentor	Graduate Student
Christopher	3	Assistant Program Director	PhD
Amy	3	Exit Planning Coordinator	Doctoral Student
Rosa	3	Program Director	Doctoral Student
Jordan	2	Resident Mentor	PhD
Perry	3	Resident Mentor	Undergraduate Student
Julie	1	Social and Academic Intern	Undergraduate and Graduate Student
Gina	2	Resident Mentor	Graduate Student