

## Goal Attainment and Quality of Life through Inclusive College: Three Years of Progress

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### Abstract

With growing opportunity for students with intellectual and developmental disability to access a variety of inclusive higher education programs comes an increased need for program implementers to evaluate practices and outcomes alongside participants. This mixed-method, exploratory study examines self-determined goal setting, goal attainment, and quality of life within an inclusive college program as a measure of participant outcome and program evaluation. Furthermore, it provides implications for the importance of self-determined learning and participant voice within program planning, revision, and implementation.

*Keywords:* self-determination, goal setting, inclusive postsecondary education, intellectual disability

### Plain Language Summary

- There are more and more colleges that have programs for students with intellectual disability. Students who go to inclusive college programs each have their own goals and thoughts about how their life is going.
- It is important to know if a college can support students to meet their goals. It is also important to see if students are happy with how their lives are going. Learning about college student goals and satisfaction is one way to find out if a program is helping students.
- **What we did in this study:** We interviewed 16 students attending inclusive college programs about their goals, what they do at college, and how their life is going.
- **Findings:** Students set 92 goals and reported progress on 67% of them.
  - On 77% of goals, students said that they worked on them in their inclusive college program.
  - Students are generally happy with how their lives are going, but some students may like to make more decisions about their classes, social life, where they live, who they live with, and their job.
- **Conclusion:** Interviewing students about their goals and how life is going is important for inclusive college staff.

- We suggest that this helps staff know what kinds of supports and activities students want to meet their goals.
- It helps staff figure out how to make sure that everyone has the same chance to meet their goals.

College-age students with intellectual disability (ID) have historically been excluded from pursuing postsecondary education opportunities at institutions of higher education (IHEs). However, in 2008, the reauthorization of the Higher Education Opportunity Act provided access to financial aid and an alternative pathway for students with ID to attend colleges and universities. From 2008-2018, the number of IHEs with programs enrolling students with ID increased by 500% (Baker et al., 2018), and the number has continued to grow to 315 total programs in the United States in 2023 (Think College, 2023). Currently, inclusive higher education opportunities can be found in 49 states, and 144 of those programs are designated as Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary programs, enabling students to apply for federal financial aid (Think College, 2023). The rapid growth of inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs for individuals with ID has provided far greater opportunity for access to college, as well as a significant need for evaluation of program quality, instructional practices, structures, supports, and outcomes for students (Bumble et al., 2019).

Outcome data have considerable impact on program accountability and decision-making for program practices, resource distribution, and funding (Chapman et al., 2006). For this reason, disability services agencies and IHEs place numerous effectiveness metrics on IPSE programs, including reporting on employment rates, wages upon program exit, inclusive course enrollments, student retention, funding sources, budget, numbers of program staff, and many others. The importance of collecting and evaluating such data is critical for monitoring the quality of existing IPSE programs. While these metrics are important for particular stakeholder purposes, the vast majority do not center on what the individual student is hoping to achieve from their college experience and their own evaluation of program effectiveness.

Quality program evaluation requires that implementers identify all key stakeholders and what each finds important (Center for Community Health and Development, 2023a). While stakeholders operating IPSE programs and utilizing evaluation data should have a voice in the development of program effectiveness measures, those who are served or affected by the effort should equally have opportunity to contribute to program evaluation. Plotner and May (2019) conducted a study comparing the experiences of college students with ID to those of students without ID. The results of the study indicated that comprehensive academic and social supports in college programs for individuals with ID resulted in a positive impact on the perceptions that students with ID had about their college experiences. Examination of such student experiences within the context of IPSE curricula and supports is needed as part of a comprehensive program evaluation process. For the purposes of this study, curricula and supports are broadly defined as components of IPSE programs including academic coursework leading to a credential; academic advising; individualized academic and time management supports; participation in student organizations and social events; access to campus services; person-centered

planning; internship and employment supports; health and mental wellness supports; and community living supports.

## Literature Review

### Survey Instrument

In response to the growing need for quality program implementation and evaluation, IPSE implementers have developed standards and criteria for assessing program quality. Strieker et al. (2010) developed standards for evaluating the academic, social, and career development of college students enrolled in IPSE programs. In 2021, Think College, Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston, developed IPSE program accreditation standards addressing multiple aspects of program implementation. Included in the accreditation framework are quality standards for student achievement, curriculum, student services, and program review (Think College National Coordinating Center Accreditation Workgroup, 2021). Collecting program review information from all stakeholders and highlighting the voices of students enrolled in the IPSE program is key for capturing perceptions of achievement, understanding which curricula and supports are effective, improving access to curricula and supports, and determining the impact of the IPSE program (Center for Community Health and Development, 2023a).

Methods for eliciting program evaluation information from students served by IPSE programs include conducting individual interviews for the purpose of analyzing critical events (Center for Community Health and Development, 2023b) and assessing levels of satisfaction felt by IPSE enrollees toward their curricula and supports (Center for Community Health and Development, 2023c). Interviews and surveys allow participants to share their specific experiences, insight into what they have learned, how they feel about IPSE implementation in relation to their own achievement of personal goals, what could be changed, and other personal thoughts. Interviews and surveys shed light on both the personal experiences of individuals and on the critical events experienced by the group (Center for Community Health and Development, 2023b).

In order to examine student perspectives on key curricula and supports, the quality-of-life construct (QoL) offers a helpful framework for shaping inquiry. For the last 40 years, QoL has served as a key construct for person-centered planning of services and supports for individuals with ID, enabling program implementers to work toward continuous improvement of individualized supports (Brown et al., 2013; Brown & Faragher, 2014). QoL has been characterized in many ways, but generally the field of ID accepts the following defining features: 1) the social well-being of a person; 2) objective and subjective measures or perceptions of material well-being, health, productivity, intimacy, safety, community, and emotional well-being; 3) something that can be experienced only when a person's basic needs have been met; and 4) a state where persons are able to pursue and achieve personal goals (Brown & Faragher, 2014; Verdugo et al., 2005). More specifically, Shalock et al. (2013) identified the following multi-dimensional QoL domains: emotional well-being, interpersonal relations, material well-being, personal development, physical well-being, social inclusion, self-determination, and rights, which serve as an organizing structure for this study.

Given the complexity of curricula and supports available through IPSE programs, QoL offers a comprehensive look at personal outcomes and individual perceptions. Faragher et al. (2014) argued that there are strong connections between the core ideas of education and QoL, highlighting the importance of context, perception, well-being, and empowerment for choice and personal control. For this reason, the QoL domains served two functions in examining IPSE as an educational context: 1) as a structure for individually empowered goal setting, monitoring, and self-evaluation and 2) as a construct to be individually assessed through rating scales. Goal setting, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation are considered essential for achieving learning outcomes (Lee et al., 2009), while QoL assessments are essential for understanding individual thinking, learning, and being within an educational context (Brown & Faragher, 2014).

Inviting those who are most impacted by IPSE program implementation to articulate goals and report progress and experiences provides opportunity for program administrators to respond to the voices and preferences of individual participants. Self-determined goal setting and monitoring are key avenues for promoting college environments supportive of participant voice in program implementation and evaluation. College is a large investment of time and resources; students should have voice, agency, and self-determination in the direction of their program. Consequently, for IHEs to promote continuous growth toward meeting student expectations for student investment, evaluation of goal attainment and quality of life, as indicators of student success, satisfaction, and program effectiveness, is sorely needed. Asking the following questions, we aimed to center participant voice in program evaluation:

**R1:** How does participation in the curricula and supports offered through an IPSE program affect goal attainment and quality of life?

**R2:** Do students enrolled in an IPSE program articulate connection between curricula and supports and their perceived goal progress within QoL domains?

### **Method**

This was a mixed-method, exploratory, multi-year study conducted at IPSE programs located at two faith-based, Midwest IHEs. We aimed to center the voices of those who were directly served by IPSE program implementation in articulating the effectiveness of critical supports for achieving personal outcomes through goal attainment interviews and QoL rating scales. Following the academic calendar, data were collected over three years in three annual phases.

**Table 1***Annual Data Collection Schedule*

Schedule	Activities
Phase 1: September	Goal setting interview using quality of life domains; develop goal attainment scaling
Phase 2: January/February	Goal progress and supports interview; assign goal attainment scaling ratings; and complete quality of life rating scales and questionnaires
Phase 3: April/May	Goal progress and supports interview; assign goal attainment scaling ratings

All students enrolled at both IPSE campuses, as well as graduates, within one year of exit at the time of the study, were invited to participate. Fourteen college students and two graduates with ID, ages 18-26, participated in the study. Table 2 illustrates demographic information, the number of years each individual participated, and the academic level at each year of participation.

**Table 2***Participant Demographics*

Attribute	<i>N</i>
Gender identity	
Identify as male	7
Identify as female	9
Racial or ethnic diversity	
Black or African American	3
White	13
Enrollment status	
Enrolled at time of study	14
One year post graduation	2
Years of study participation	
1 year	7
2 years	6

3 years	3
Year in IPSE during study	
Freshman	5
Sophomore	8
Junior	10
Senior	3
Graduate	2

### Data Collection Phase 1

During Phase 1, participants set goals through an individual, semi-structured interview aligned with the *Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction* (SDLMI; Shogren et al., 2019) and oriented to the identified quality of life (QoL) domains: emotional well-being, interpersonal relations, material well-being, personal development, physical well-being, social inclusion, self-determination, and rights (Schalock et al., 2013). The SDLMI is an evidence-based instructional model that has been used for over 25 years to teach goal attainment across key outcome areas of education, employment, and independent living (National Technical Assistance Center, 2016). We utilized the *SDLMI Student Question Guides* (Shogren et al., 2019) as a basic structure for initial interviews and followed this general process: 1) the interviewer explained QoL domains to participants using plain language and visual supports as needed; 2) participants selected up to five domains for goal identification; 3) participants articulated goals using “I statements” (e.g., “I would like to...”); 4) the interviewer asked participants about their background knowledge pertaining to the goal statement; 5) the interviewer asked the participant to identify any action steps needed to make progress toward the identified goal; and 6) the interviewer asked participants to indicate if they would like to keep their goals private or share them with support staff. The interviewer scribed each “I statement” and sought confirmation and feedback for revision from the participant on the phrasing of the goal statement. Table 3 shows the QoL domains with plain language descriptions.

**Table 3**

#### *Quality of Life Domains with Plain Language Descriptions*

Domain	Original language	Plain language
Emotional well-being	Feelings of contentment; self-concept; manageable levels of stress	Happiness; feeling good about yourself; not too much stress
Interpersonal relations	Interactions; relationships; supports	Talking and being with other people; friends, family, and dating; people you can count on

Material well-being	Financial status; employment; transportation; housing	Having enough money to pay bills and get the things you want or need; having a job or career; being able to get places by bus, car, or other means; having a safe and comfortable place to live
Personal development	Education; personal competence; performance	Going to school, taking classes, or having lessons; feeling like you know what you are doing; being able to learn and do new things
Physical well-being	Health; activities of daily living; health care; leisure	Feeling healthy; exercise, eating, and sleep habits; taking care of insurance and doctor appointments; relaxing or having fun
Social inclusion	Community integration and participation; community roles; social supports	Being part of campus, community, church, or other activities; things that you do with your family, church, college, or other group; having people to do things or go places with
Self-determination	Autonomy or personal control; goals; personal values; choices	Making your own decisions; thinking about what you want to do and taking steps to do it; things that are important to you; choosing things about your life
Rights	Human rights; legal rights	Being treated with respect, dignity, and equality; citizenship - voting and participating in government; community participation - getting what you need to be part of the community; access - being able to get to legal help if needed; due process - having your rights upheld by a judge or other person in authority

*Note.* Original language and plain language are adapted by the researchers from Schalock et al. (2013).

Upon completion of the goal-setting interviews, we utilized two evaluation scales for reporting goal progress during Phase 2 data collection. The first scale was taken from the Individual Plan Summary scale from *Short, Reliable Outcome Measurement (SROM) Tools for Quality Tracking in Developmental Disabilities Systems* from the *Personal Quality of Life Protocol* (Conroy, 2017). This scale was identified as the method for participants to self-report progress on their identified goals at midyear. Table 4 illustrates the language used for the self-reported goal progress scale.

**Table 4***Self-reported Goal Progress*

Rating	1	2	3	4	5
Descriptor	Going backward a lot	Going backward a little	No change	Going forward a little	Going forward a lot

We developed a second scale to evaluate each goal for participant access to curricula and supports in relation to their self-reported progress. Goal Attainment Scaling (GAS) has long been used in rehabilitation settings as a useful method for empowering individuals to maximize personal outcomes (Clarkson & Barnett, 2021; Kiresuk et al., 1994; Siegert & Levack 2015). In committing to participant voice, the researchers refrained from assessing skill development from an observer perspective and chose to report solely participant perception of their own progress. Using the -2 to +2 GAS scale illustrated in Table 5, researchers then evaluated whether or not participants could identify specific IPSE program curricula or supports connected to their progress report, and subsequently, we looked for relationships between reported progress and access to curricula and supports. GAS scale ratings were assigned by two researchers and discussed for agreement. Each GAS scale is tailored to the wording of the individual goal but closely follows the template shown in Table 5.

**Table 5***Goal Attainment Scaling Template*

Scale	Criteria	Description
-2	much less than expected progress	Participant has no continued interest in achieving goal
-1	less than expected progress	Participant has continued interest in achieving goal; reports no engagement with curriculum or program-based supports
0	expected level of outcome	Participant has continued interest in achieving goal; reports engagement with curriculum or program-based supports
+1	somewhat more than expected progress	Participant has continued interest in achieving goal; reports engagement with curriculum or program-base supports; reports emerging or supported skill development



+2	more than expected progress	Participant has full satisfaction with progress on goal; reports engagement in curriculum or program-based supports; reports emerging or supported independence
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### Data Collection Phase 2

At midyear, participants completed additional scales and questionnaires from the *SROM Tools for Quality Tracking in Developmental Disabilities Systems* (Conroy, 2017) with individual support from the researchers for reading, scribing, and paraphrasing as needed. The SROM Tools are part of the Personal Quality of Life Protocol, which was designed to be modular, meaning that individual scales and questionnaires can be selected to assess situationally relevant aspects of QoL (Center for Outcome Analysis, 2012). The selected scales utilized in this study included: 1) Weekly Routine and Activities; 2) Time, Money, and Integration; 3) Individual Plan Summary; 4) Decision Control Inventory; 5) Quality of Life Perceptions; and 6) Closest Relationships Scale (Conroy, 2017). These particular scales were selected to assess student perceptions of their own agency in directing how they spend their time and make decisions, engagement in work aligned with their employment preferences, and satisfaction with their relationships and QoL.

We also conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant assessing their own progress on their self-identified goals. Interviews followed this general structure: 1) the interviewer explained the goal progress self-report scale from Table 4 and shared a visual support as needed; 2) the interviewer read the goal statements from the first interview to the participant; 3) the interviewer asked the participant to rate their progress using the 1 → 5 scale; 4) the interviewer asked the participant to support their rating with examples or evidence; 5) the interviewer asked the participant if the goal was addressed through ISPE curricula or supports; 6) if the answer was “yes,” the interviewer asked the participant to identify which aspects of the IPSE program were connected to their goal. Upon completion of the midyear interviews, we assigned GAS scores to each goal using the GAS scale shown in Table 5.

### Data Collection Phase 3

At end-of-year, we repeated the semi-structured goal progress interview. Participants were again asked to rate their goal progress, give evidence or examples of that progress, and articulate what, if any, curricula or supports were connected to their goals. Upon completion of the end-of-year interviews, we assigned GAS scores to each goal using the GAS scale shown in Table 5.

### Example Goal Setting, Progress Reporting, and GAS Processes

The following excerpt serves as an example to illustrate the goal setting and progress reporting process conducted during semi-structured interviews at the beginning and end of each academic year. We asked participants to select a category from the identified QoL domains and create a goal using an “I statement.” Joseph, a participant in

his first year of IPSE, selected “social inclusion,” then set the following goal during his first interview: “I would like to sometimes do social activities. Maybe hang out with more people in the dorm. Maybe floor dinner.” Goal setting was followed by inquiry regarding what is currently known about the goal area and what steps could be taken to make progress on the goal. At his end-of-year interview, Joseph rated his progress related to social activities as a “4,” which means “going forward a little.” In explaining his rating, he said, “[I went to] the Spring Formal, Dance [Club]—just watched it—eat with other people (it depends), basketball. [I] do sometimes, when they put something on the board, I put it on my phone—a reminder of something.”

Another example serves to illustrate the GAS scale development process used to assess access to IPSE curricula and supports. After selecting Rights as her first goal domain and articulating “voting” as her goal idea, Aliah stated, “I would like to learn about voting, elections, and who will be the next president.” She went on to describe, “I never got to vote before. I watched my parents vote but never did it before.” The researchers developed a scale using the GAS template. At midyear interviews, Aliah rated her own progress using the 1 to 5 scale (see Table 4), and the researchers assigned a second rating using a GAS model. Table 6 illustrates the scale drafted to monitor Aliah’s access to curricula and supports related to her goal of voting in the presidential election.

**Table 6**

*Sample GAS Scaling - Voting and Elections*

Scale	Criteria	Descriptor
-2	much less than expected progress	No continued interest in voting
-1	less than expected progress	Continued interest in voting; no engagement with curriculum or program-based supports related to elections, candidates, voting, and access
0	expected level of outcome	Continued interest in voting; engagement with curriculum or program-based supports related to elections, candidates, voting, and access
+1	somewhat more than expected progress	Continued interest in voting; engagement with curriculum or program-base supports; participant reported emerging or supported skill development related to elections, candidates, voting, and access
+2	more than expected progress	Full satisfaction with progress related to elections, candidates, voting, and access; engaged in curriculum or program-based

supports; participant reported emerging or supported independence

## Data Analysis

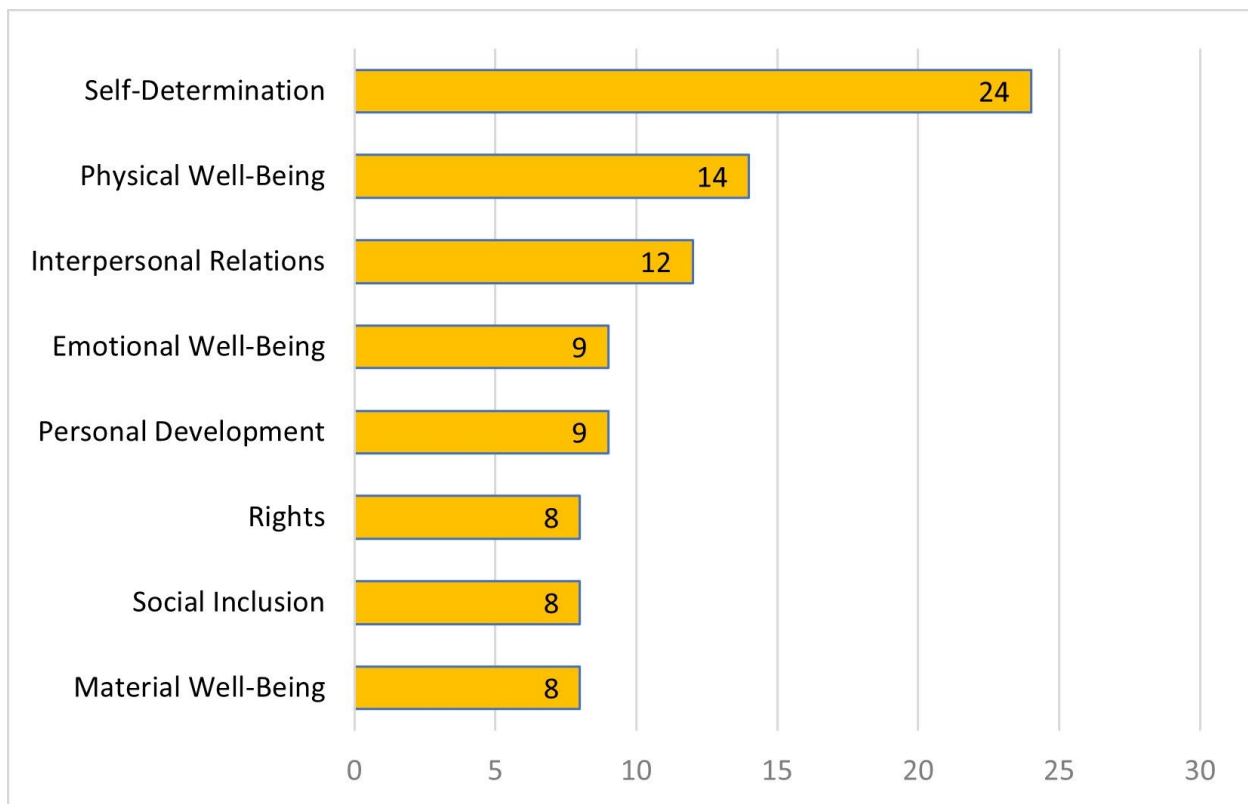
Two primary methods of data analysis were utilized in this study: 1) thematic analysis and 2) frequency distribution. Interview records and goal content provided data for coding, thematic analysis, and visualizing the frequency of codes distributed within identified themes. Individual, self-reported goal progress (1 to 5) ratings and GAS (-2 to +2) ratings provided additional data for frequency distribution. *The SROM Tools for Quality Tracking in Developmental Disabilities Systems* (Conroy, 2017) scales provided supplementary qualitative data that served as a source for data triangulation, supporting thematic analysis and frequency distribution data.

Thematic analysis is an iterative process that constantly moves between the stages of familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a report. (Nowell et al., 2017). As participants identified goals each year through interviews, we utilized line-by-line coding to create data labels that could be interrogated for potential categorization from year to year. At the end of each academic year, initial codes were reviewed and categorized into themes by grouping similar codes together. The codes developed during subsequent academic years were then compared to the codes from the previous year(s) to check for confirmation of previously identified themes or the emergence of additional categories. While the QoL domains (emotional well-being, interpersonal relations, material well-being, personal development, physical well-being, social inclusion, self-determination, and rights) offered an initial organizing structure, we quickly discovered that subthemes emerged within each domain as categories became more robust.

Visual representation of frequency distribution is particularly useful for demonstrating the number of observations in each data category (Kalaian, 2008). Participant-reported progress ratings, access to curricula and supports ratings, and the frequency of codes within identified themes are reported as frequency distributions in the following summary. In addition, excerpts from interview records are included in the data analysis and reported to give further insight into frequency distributions.

## Results

Analysis of three years of goal attainment data showed that 16 participants set 102 goals over all eight identified QoL domains. Ten goals were excluded from the overall analysis due to individual factors impeding participation in follow up interviews. The remaining 92 goals were distributed across the eight identified QoL domains as shown in Figure 1. Participants set goals in the area of self-determination, physical well-being, and interpersonal relations with the highest frequency. The remaining goals were equally distributed across rights, social inclusion, material well-being, emotional well-being, and personal development.

**Figure 1***Goal Distribution across Participant-Selected QoL Domains*

The following sections expound on the data presented in Figure 1 by illustrating the individual nature of goal setting and progress reporting and presenting the overall analysis addressing the research questions. Results were divided into two sections: 1) interview excerpts connecting goals to QoL domains; and 2) summaries and frequency distributions of participant-reported progress, themes present within goal statements, GAS ratings, alignment of participant-reported progress with curricula and supports, and QoL ratings.

**Interview Excerpts Connecting to QoL Domains**

Interviewing participants provided an opportunity to gain valuable insight into individual short-term and long-term goals, perceived progress, and access to curricula and supports. Participant goals addressed various facets of career, social, community, financial, and daily living activities. The following excerpts have been included as examples illustrating how goals connected to the QoL domains, how progress was reported by participants, and how goals were assessed for alignment with IPSE curricula and supports.

*Self-Determination*

Emma, who was in her third year of IPSE, chose to set a goal in the area of self-determination, defined as autonomy or personal control, goals and personal values, and choices (Schalock et al., 2013). Emma stated, "I want to live on my own with roommates but have the option to live alone." Through further discussion, "live alone" was defined by Emma as "having my own space," rather than living alone in an apartment or house. At the midyear interview, Emma rated her progress as a "4," meaning "going forward a little." She reported, "I'm scared when I cook on the stove or the oven. Someone helps me. I can do my own dishes. I can clean up my room and my shower." At the end-of-year interview, she rated her progress with a "5," meaning "going forward a lot." She provided explanation for her rating as follows:

I'm really good at going to my room, hanging out with friends, getting ready for bed. I go to my space. I know this [is] really good. [Support staff] helps too, "make sure you go to bed at 10 o'clock." I practice cooking and doing chores by myself. If my roommate asks, I say, "I want to do it by myself."

From a program evaluation perspective, Emma's interview provided valuable information. It pointed toward the growth she experienced, but also toward the community living support staff and social worker as programmatic supports that contributed to her progress.

*Material Well-Being*

Another participant, Lena, was in her first year of IPSE and set a goal in the area of material well-being, defined as financial status, employment, and housing (Schalock et al., 2013). In relation to her selected domain of employment, she said, "I want to help people with the storm damage and volunteer at the Red Cross." At end-of-year, Lena rated her progress on this goal as a "3" meaning that she felt like she was "staying the same" and making no progress. While Lena does not report progress toward achieving this employment goal, data collected during interviews supported that she had continued interest in working with the Red Cross and that she had engaged in related curricula. Examples of experiences related to her goal described in the interview included: 1) a completed research project addressing job duties and employment qualifications at the Red Cross; 2) a first aid class that she was scheduled to take in an upcoming semester; and 3) participation in an employment seminar designed for developing skills for job-seeking.

The overall GAS assessment showed that she was engaging in IPSE curricula and supports with no self-identified skill development; therefore, her goal attainment scale rating for program evaluation purposes was a "0," meaning that she made "expected progress" by accessing curricula and supports. If she remained interested in achieving this goal, it could be carried into future years with a focus on connecting employment experiences more closely to her goal of working with the Red Cross. Here is what Lena said at her end-of-year interview:

I want to know more stuff about helping people. More ideas about what I do. In employment class, we talk about interests. First Aid class next year; [but] not really any volunteering this year. I researched this job this year. I did a slideshow about a future job. I did Red Cross. You need a high school diploma, sign up online, and stuff. Keep working on [it] next year.

### *Personal Development*

Jay, a student in his third year, set a goal in the area of personal development at the beginning of the academic year. This domain is defined as education, personal competence, and performance (Shalock et al., 2013). Jay shared these ideas in his initial interview:

I would like to be better organized and manage time more. I have three systems and would like to have only one. One to two times per week I forget to do something—make [my] bed, simple stuff...mail money to college. My online class has a calendar and sends weekly emails. I currently write down assignments and ask for help.

At midyear, Jay rated himself as a “4,” meaning going forward a little. When asked to explain his rating, he reported that he had developed a single system for tracking coursework, social activities, and employment. He was fully satisfied with his progress and described a daily planning system using technology that had been implemented in his IPSE program. However, he also mentioned that it was still a work in progress. On the GAS scale, the researchers rated his goal attainment in relation to curriculum access as a “+1” due to his increased level of independence, access to curricula, and his acknowledgement that his organization system was still a work in progress.

### **Summaries and Frequency Distributions**

To address the research questions of perceived IPSE impact on goal attainment, QoL, and connection to curricula and supports, we explored the interplay between individual responses and group trends. Group results have been described in the following sections using summary data and frequency distributions in four ways: 1) goal themes summary; 2) self-reported goal progress summary; 3) alignment of self-reported goal progress to supports and curricula accessible within the IPSE summary; and 4) quality of life survey results summary in relation to goal content. Additional interview excerpts have been interspersed to illustrate key results.

#### *Goal Themes Summary*

As categories surfaced through line-by-line coding of goal content, we discovered specific subthemes within the QoL domains. During interviews, participants selected the QoL domains for their individual goals; however, some goals coded to two or more subthemes within a specific domain. In the domain of personal development, participants showed their eagerness to develop new skills in a variety of academic and non-academic areas, including time management, driving, college courses, spiritual leadership, dance,

and parenting. In the area of interpersonal relations, goal content themes emerged for reducing arguments, getting along with friends, and dating. In the emotional well-being domain, participants focused on mental health, feelings of contentment or happiness, and managing anxiety. Goals related to self-determination made up the most robust goal domain ( $n = 24$ ); however, the content of self-determination goals varied widely, including those related to self-determined employment, living situations, decision-making, transportation, and more. Table 7 provides a summary of subthemes identified in each QoL domain.

**Table 7**

*Goal Subthemes*

Domain	Number of Goals	Goal Subthemes within Domain
Self-determination	24	Employment Living situation Transportation Decision-making Religion Social activities Community contribution Medical
Material well-being	8	Saving money Managing a budget
Emotional well-being	9	Self-care Feelings of happiness and fulfillment Coping skills Anxiety and stress management
Physical well-being	14	Fitness and exercise Eating habits Sleep Weight loss
Rights	8	Voting Equality
Personal development	9	Time management Learning new skills
Social inclusion	8	Involvement with the student body On campus social activities Off campus social activities
Interpersonal relations	12	Dating New friendships Deeper/better relationships

*Self-Reported Progress Summary*

In addition to goal content themes, interviews produced insights addressing an individual's perceived progress. Of the 92 goals set by participants, 62 goals received

self-report ratings of “going forward a little” or “going forward a lot.” The remaining 30 goals received ratings of “no change” ( $n = 27$ ) or “going backward” ( $n = 3$ ). Goals addressing mental wellness, learning a new skill, budgeting, healthy habits, and developing deeper relationships were more likely to be rated as progressing than goals related to self-determination, exercising voting rights, dating, and increasing social activities. Factors reported by participants as connected to goal progress included having access to curricula, access to opportunity, independence in decision-making, and also, support for decision-making when needed. Figure 2 shows the themes that emerged from coding of goal content and the number of goals in each theme category that were rated as “progress reported” or “no progress reported.”

**Figure 2**

*Self-Reported Progress by Goal Theme - All*



Because self-determination comprised the largest number of goals set by participants, we disaggregated the individual themes present within this domain further. Self-determination goal content varied widely and could be specific to an individual’s circumstances. For example, Madi identified a goal for exercising agency over the home care responsibilities divided between her and her roommate. When asked about access to curricula or supports addressing this goal, she noted that it was supported by community living personnel and discussions with IPSE program staff. At year-end, Madi

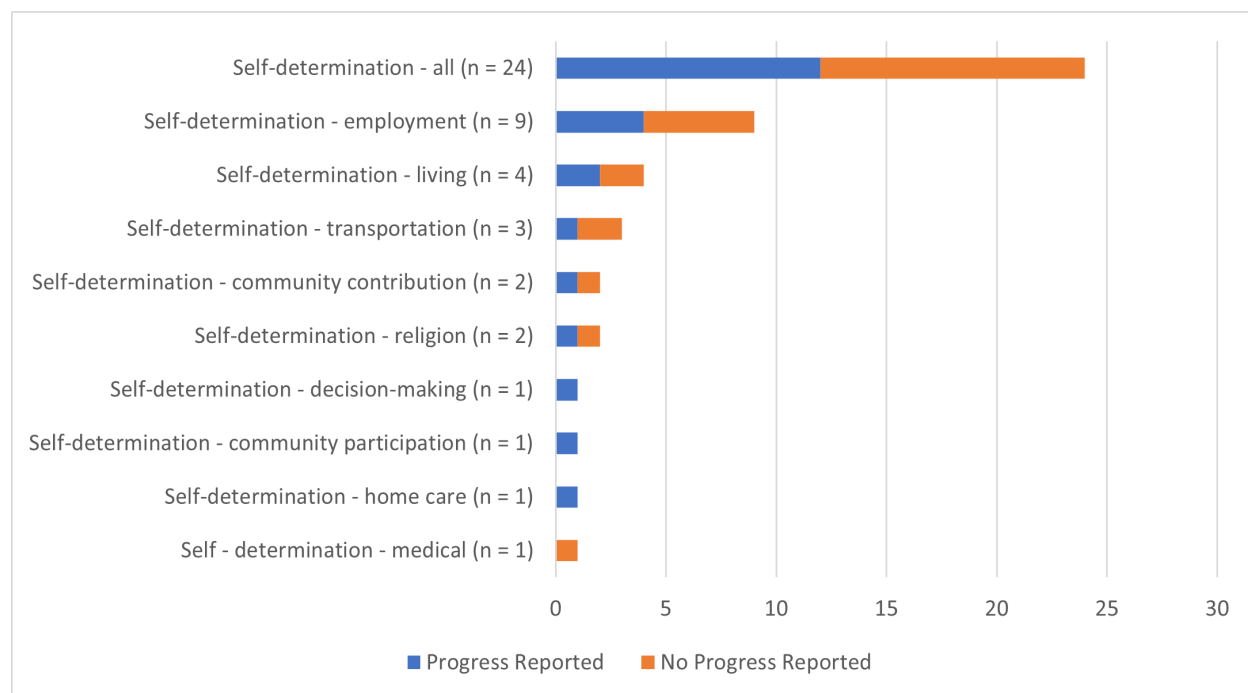


summarized her progress toward negotiating responsibilities and identified the supports in place to facilitate self-determination.

Participants rated individual self-determination goals related to decision-making, community participation, and home care as “progressing.” Goals with themes related to self-determined employment, living situation, and transportation were most common and also most frequently rated with no progress. Figure 3 shows the disaggregation of self-determination goals and participant-reported progress.

**Figure 3**

*Self-Reported Progress by Goal Theme - Self-Determination Only*



*Perceived Alignment of Progress to Curricula and Supports Summary*

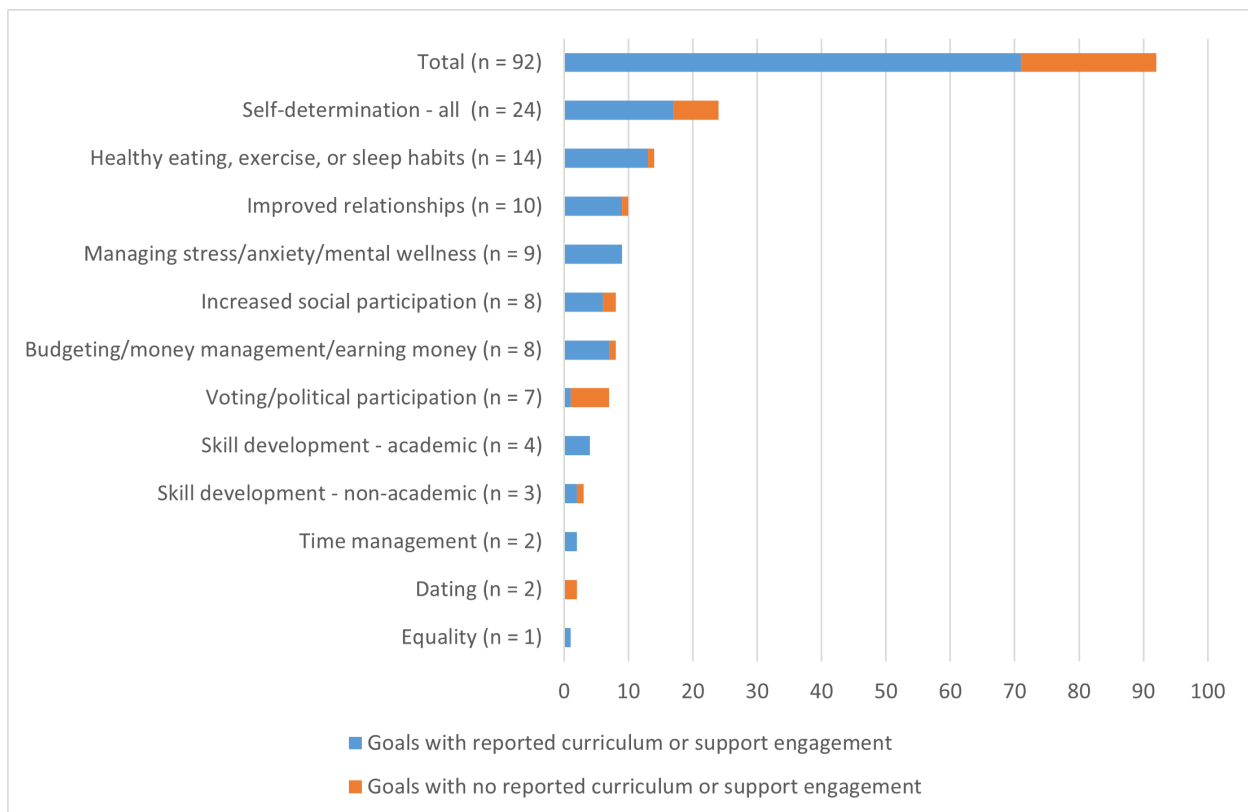
As in Madi’s case, interviews provided additional information related to curricula and supports available to participants addressing their individual goals. Figure 4 shows the number of goals in each theme category that were connected to identified curricula and supports offered by the IPSE program and utilized by participants. Of 92 total goals, participants connected 77% to curricula and supports. Goals related to dating, voting or political participation, and learning non-academic skills were least likely to connect with curricula or program supports. Goals related to academic skill development, time management, mental wellness, and budgeting were most likely to connect to IPSE curricula and supports.

While many goals had connections to curricular aspects of the program, not all goals with reported progress had curriculum connections. For example, Aliah reported

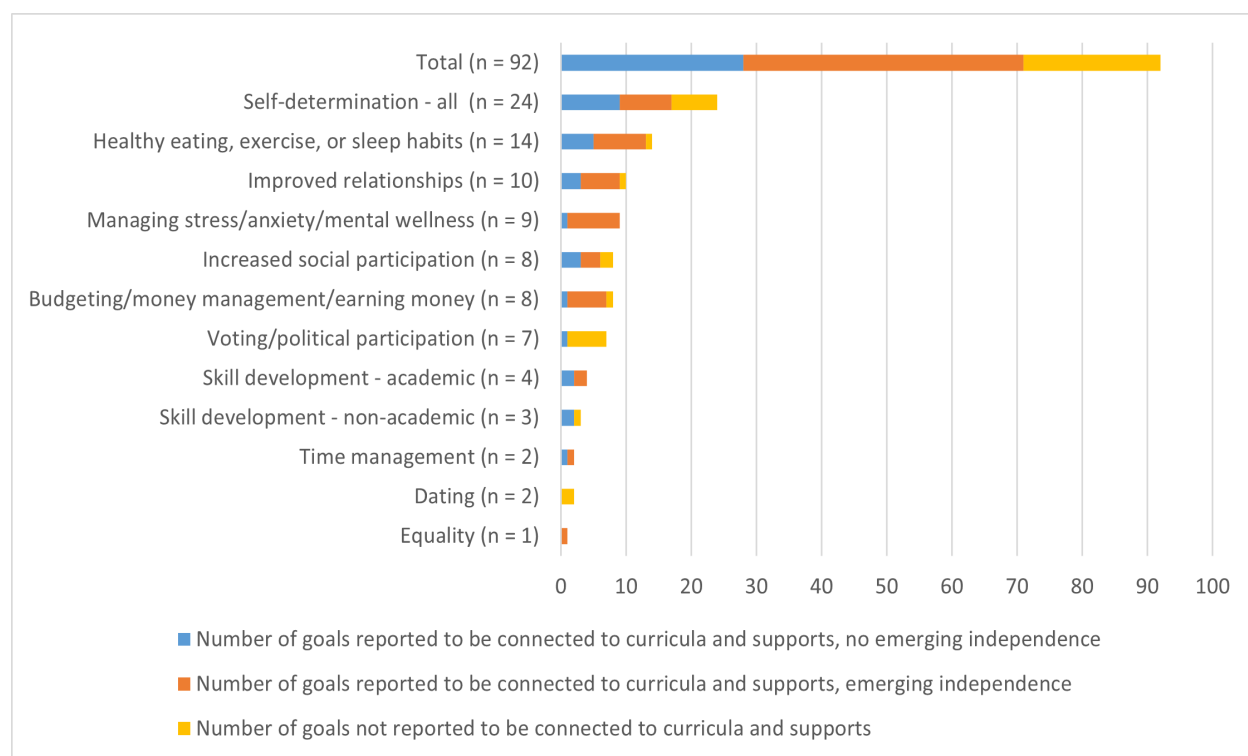
progress on her goal for planning to vote in the presidential election; however, she articulated that no program supports or curricula were available to support goal attainment. Aliah recounted that her parents assisted her with voter registration, completion of an absentee ballot, and submission through the correct channel. In this case, Aliah's goal received a GAS rating of "-1." She had made progress, but it was not connected to IPSE curricula or supports.

**Figure 4**

*Goal Connections to Curricula and Supports*



One additional look at the relation of goals, progress, and curricula incorporates GAS. Figure 5 represents goals set by participants, connection to curricula and supports, and their emerging skills with regard to their identified goals. Of 92 goals, 31% had connection to curricula and supports, but no self-reported progress within an academic year (GAS ratings of "0"); 46% of goals were connected to curricula and supports, and participants reported progress and emerging independence (GAS ratings of "+1" or "+2"); 23% of goals had no reported connections to curricula or supports, regardless of an individual's progress status (GAS ratings of "-1" or "-2").

**Figure 5***Goals with Self-Reported Progress in Relation to Access to Curricula and Supports*

Goals related to mental wellness were most likely to be rated as progressing and connected to curricula and supports. One illustration was offered by Sam, a student who was in his final year of the IPSE program. Sam identified a goal in the area of emotional well-being. In follow-up interviews, he described the progress made over the course of the year as well as the supports in which he engaged. During his initial interview, he provided the following statement about what he wanted to work toward:

I would like to work on being less hard on myself. I inflict the judgment on myself so that I don't have to feel it from other people. People who care about me sometimes give firm messages, and that doesn't always feel good, but they want me to grow.

At end-of-year, Sam reported:

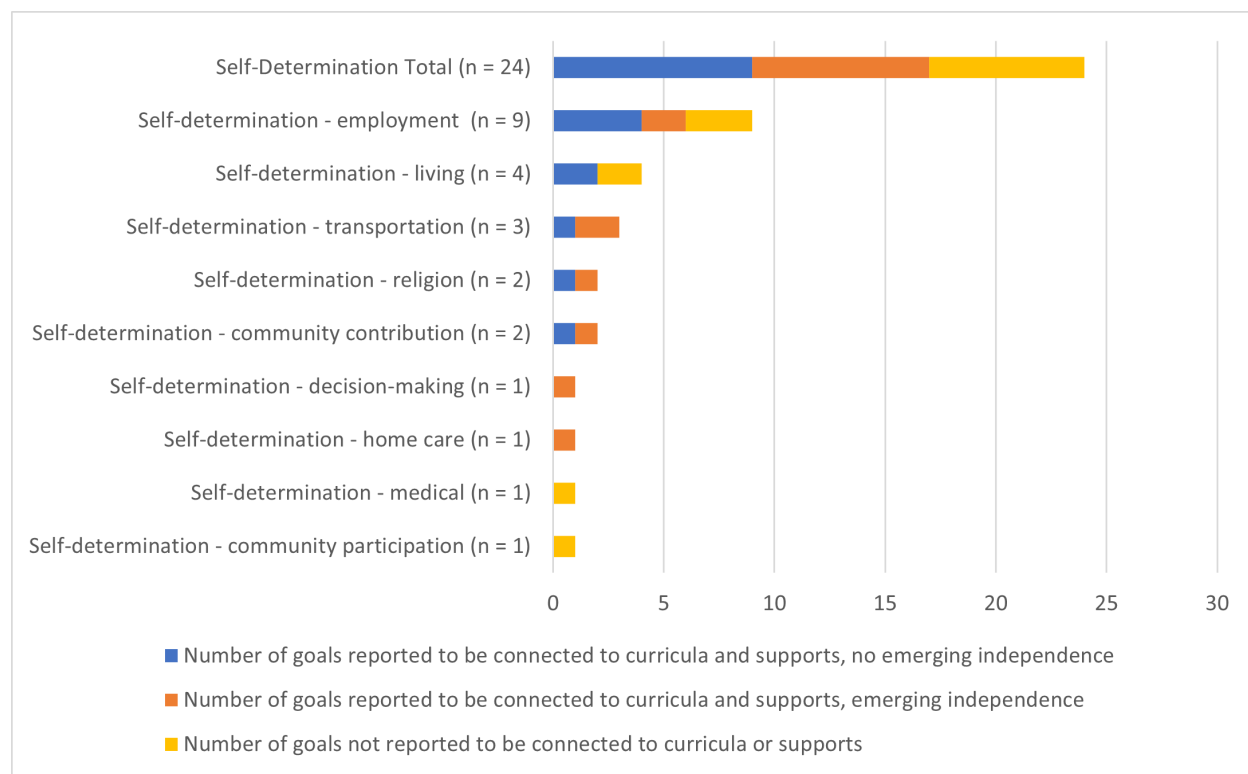
I am hard on myself a lot less with the strategies that I have tried... I lost my wallet and I wasn't even hard on myself. I was frustrated, and it wasn't a pleasant experience, but I wasn't hard on myself. I've worked on it with [the program social worker], but I don't think with anyone else.

Because the self-determination domain represented the largest number of total goals, we disaggregated progress and GAS ratings for this category in Figure 6. Of 24

goals, 41% were supported by curricula and supports with no reported emerging independence within an academic year (GAS rating of “0”); 36% of goals had curriculum connections, and participants identified emerging independence (GAS rating of “+1” or “+2”); and 32% of goals had no program supports or curricula, regardless of progress status (GAS rating of “-1” or “-2”).

**Figure 6**

*Self-Determination Goals in Relation to Access to Curricula and Supports*



One example of a self-determination community contribution goal connected to curricula and supports but no reported progress was articulated by Jared. He expressed the following goal statement and explanation:

I would like to make contributions to the community. I would like to share my disability with the whole [Midwest region IHE] student body. I would like to share what it means to me. Sharing that story can really show other people how it can change someone’s life. All disabilities have a meaning and purpose. I have certain areas that I am passionate about a lot. I’ve had a lot of difficulties and obstacles. I would like to talk about that really.

At midyear and year-end, he described some of the experiences he had during the academic year connected to his goal and reported no substantial change in his attainment of making a contribution to his college community. Jared expressed:

I shared my story with two classes at [the Midwest region IHE]. I wanted to brainstorm myself, but [program staff] helped me with it. I would like to make a change, but there is no change yet. I did a presentation in an education class and in a religion class. I haven't done any more since then.

Jared's supports description may point to an incongruence between his own feelings of goal attainment and the supports for drafting his narrative enacted by IPSE staff. Jared's perception of progress may have been impeded by limited opportunity to exercise independence in drafting his narrative.

Two other examples of goals in the area of self-determination were illustrative of perceived goal progress in relation to curricula and supports. Aliah set this goal, "I would like to earn money by working in design—interior or clothing." She identified work-based learning experiences and instruction in job-seeking, but she was not able to identify specific connections between employment supports and her area of interest, leading to a self-rating of "3," meaning "no change." Similarly, in the area of self-determination for social activities, Tara set this goal: "[This semester,] I would like to do badminton and Cans for Cares," a volunteer activity on campus. She noted participation in other social activities, but no connection to supports for her identified activities, leading to a self-rating of "3."

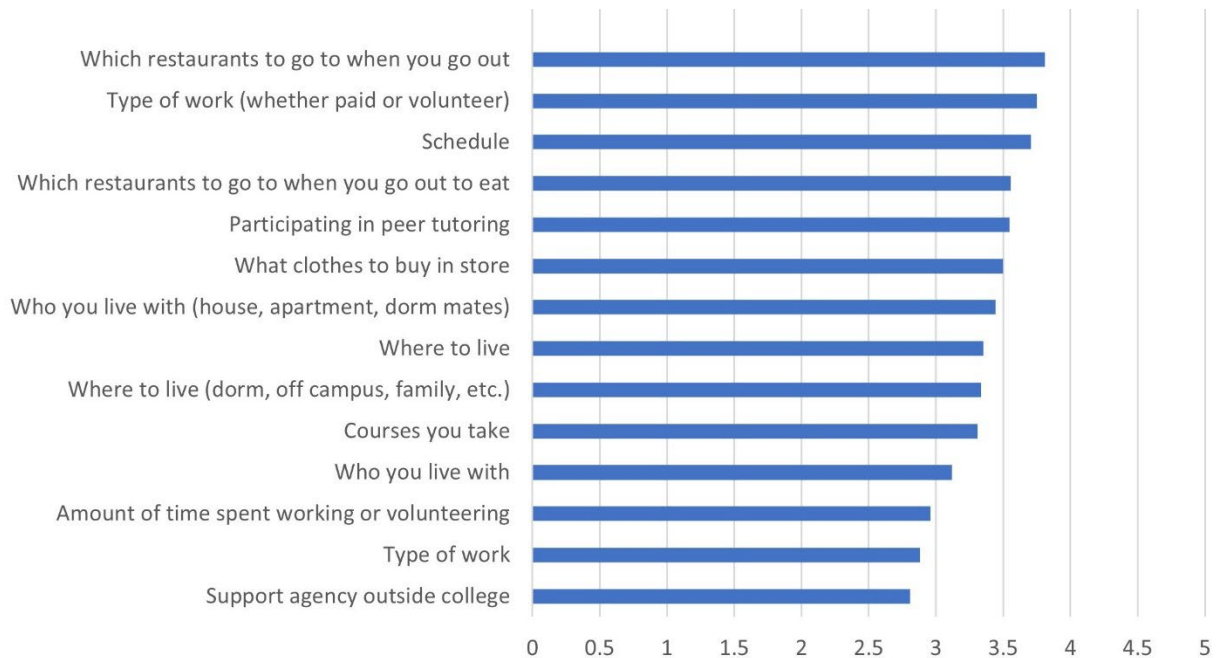
### *QoL Rating Scales Summary*

Lastly, we utilized selected scales from *The SROM Tools for Quality Tracking in Developmental Disabilities Systems* (Conroy, 2017) as a data source for confirming themes and progress trends discovered through thematic analysis and frequency distribution. Participants were asked to rate survey items on a 1 to 5 scale. We aggregated all survey data and produced average ratings for each item. Generally, the *SROM Tools* revealed that participants were very satisfied (average ratings between 4.0 - 5.0) with current engagement in their college courses, treatment by peers, relationships with family members, safety, living situation, level of happiness, and overall quality of life.

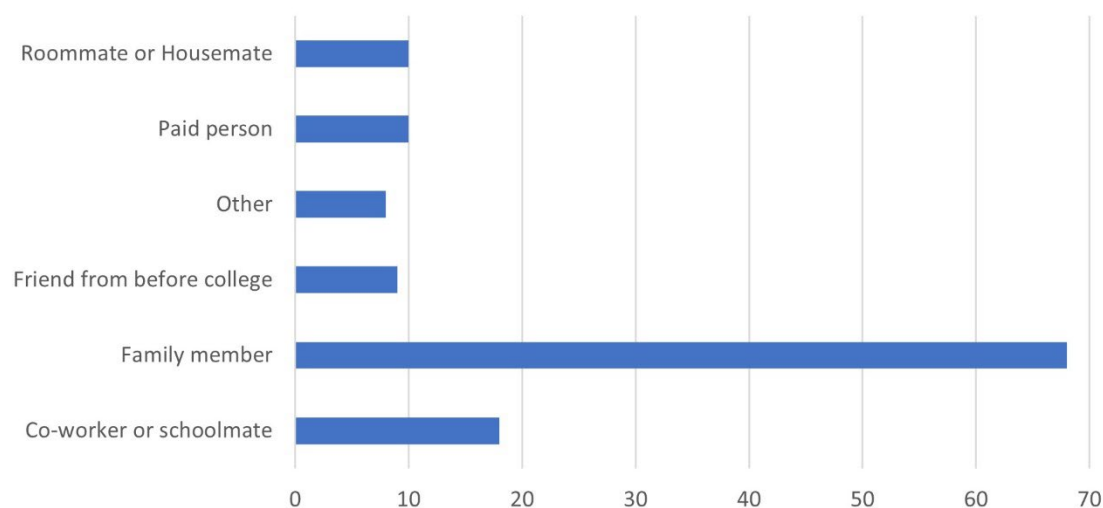
However, the Decision Control Inventory and Closest Relationship Survey produced results aligned with goal attainment data in the areas of self-determination and interpersonal relations. Figure 7 shows that enrollees reported lower (average ratings at 3.99 or lower) decision control over the courses they took, where they lived, and with whom they lived; how much time they spent volunteering in the community; the type of work in which they engaged; and satisfaction with feelings of contribution to their community. Participant-reported goal progress ratings also showed mixed progress results for increasing social activities and self-determination for living situation, decision-making, employment, and contribution to community.

**Figure 7**

*Decision-Control Inventory, Average Ratings Below 3.99*



Furthermore, Figure 8 shows that of 123 close relationships identified by participants on the *Closest Relationship survey*, 18 close relationships (15%) included a friend or coworker that was made in college, and 19 close relationships (8%) included a roommate or housemate. All other relationships identified were family members, paid workers, or friends from before college. Again, this aligns closely with mixed progress results for participation in social activities and development of new or deeper relationships and friendships.

**Figure 8***Closest Relationship Survey***Discussion**

Program evaluation is a multi-stakeholder process that can be used to assess the needs and wants of community members and support program improvement (Center for Community Health and Development, 2023a). This study was designed to elicit IPSE participant voice in aspects of program evaluation, exploring how participants perceived their goal attainment and QoL as connected to or impacted by curricula and supports offered through IPSE. While experiences of curricula, supports, goal attainment, and QoL were shown to be highly individualized, we offer the following key insights that emerged from this three-year process.

By comparing the results of self-reported progress ratings and GAS ratings, we discovered that participant perceptions of progress do not always match program implementer perceptions, as evidenced by Aliah, Jared, and Tara’s self-determination goals. In each of these cases, the participants cited curricula and supports connected to their goal areas (e.g., job-seeking curricula and practice, public speaking opportunities, and college social activities), but none of these experiences led to feelings of progress toward their identified goals. This particular finding lends insight into how the curricula and supports were received by participants and demonstrates why seeking evaluation information from all stakeholders is critical for continuous improvement. This finding may signal a need for curricular experiences that are more closely connected to individual goals and/or a need for more explicit instruction addressing the purpose of IPSE curricula and supports. Collaborative understanding of the “why” behind curricular and experiential choices, between IPSE participants and implementers, could be beneficial for moving away from implementer-directed supports toward self-managed instruction, where participants determine if they are taking actions aligned with their self-selected goals (Shogren et al., 2019).

Results of thematic analysis and frequency distribution yielded information that confirmed participant access to supports and curricula in several areas and provided insight into curricular features that should be sustained for future students. Access to supports and curricula related to mental wellness, happiness, managing stress or anxiety, exercise, and healthy eating habits were consistently identified by participants in the Midwest region IPSE programs as present and leading to progress. Program implementers may consider documenting specific curricula and supports that most contribute to the perceived progress.

Results also yielded several areas for possible growth for the IPSE programs through identification of goal statements or themes with little or no reported progress. While these goals varied in topic specificity and individual circumstance, they could be broadly categorized into 1) increased participation in social activities and relationships, 2) voting and political engagement, and 3) perceived progress toward employment in a field of interest. IPSE program implementers should consider goal attainment progress and access to curricula and supports when working toward continuous improvement. For example, because employment is a measured outcome of IPSE programs (Papay et al., 2017), further inquiry into student perceptions and the alignment of work-based learning experiences with student interests may be warranted.

QoL, characterized as 1) the social well-being of a person; 2) measures or perceptions of material well-being, health, productivity, intimacy, safety, community, and emotional well-being; 3) something that can be experienced only when a person's basic needs have been met; and 4) a state where persons are able to pursue and achieve personal goals (Brown & Faragher, 2014; Verdugo et al., 2005), remains a valuable construct for shaping inquiry about program quality and directions for continuous program improvement. As noted earlier in the *SROM Tools for Quality Tracking in Developmental Disabilities Systems* (Conroy, 2017) results, IPSE enrollees were generally very satisfied with their current engagement in their inclusive courses, treatment by peers, relationships with family members, safety, living situation, level of happiness, and overall quality of life. However, they reported lower satisfaction on survey items related to 1) choice in employment, 2) choice in courses, 3) choice in volunteer activities, 4) feelings of contribution to community, 5) choice in where to live, and 6) choice of who to live with. Key links between participant progress reports, access to curricula and supports, and QoL emerged by comparing the results of the *SROM Tools* survey data to goal attainment data. Participation in social activities, which had mixed goal progress results, may be impacted by having limited opportunity for self-determination in one's living situation. Feeling empowered to vote and become politically engaged, which had no reported connection to curricula and supports, may lead to greater feelings of community contribution. Feeling as though you are progressing toward your employment goals, which had mixed progress results, may be positively impacted by having greater choice in courses and employment experiences while still in college. Links between goal attainment perceptions and QoL survey data may generate new questions for investigation or improvement of current supports and curricula.

Inclusive higher education has been shown to positively impact multiple aspects of QoL, including employment and material well-being, personal development, and social



development for individuals with ID (Butler et al., 2016; Moore & Schelling, 2015; Papay et al., 2017; Zafft et al., 2004). Expanding evaluation inquiry, eliciting the voices of those most directly impacted by curricular choices provides additional nuance to the existing body of evidence in support of implementation of IPSE programs and future directions. Goal attainment and QoL data provide program implementers with a starting point for asking questions relative to their own context, student population, and program structure.

### **Limitations**

Individuals who consented to participate in a study addressing personal goals may have comfort and familiarity with goal setting and identifying steps toward goal attainment. It is possible that the participants, and their favorable approach to the process, may not be representative of the larger group of students enrolled in an IPSE program. Furthermore, the study does not offer any specificity around the types of curricula and supports that are effective for supporting goal attainment, merely that participants set goals, and many of those goals connected to curricula and program supports. This study does not purport to establish a causal relationship between goal progress and specific supports and curricula.

Person-centered planning (PCP) is a key feature of IPSE programs and was practiced on both Midwest region IHE campuses at the time of the study. The goals identified in this study were not explicitly tied to participant PCPs. While some study goals were also articulated on participant PCPs, the study may have uncovered several personal goals that were not represented in the PCP process. This may have impacted reports of progress and connection to curricula and supports, but it also may have identified new areas for program improvement.

### **Impact of COVID-19**

During the 2019-2020 academic year, data collection, enactment of curricula, and program supports were disrupted from March 2020 - May 2020. As a result, we collected participant-reported progress data from beginning of year to midyear during this period. Furthermore, COVID-19 impacted our access to program graduates from 2020 - 2022, limiting it to two graduates. As this study progresses in future years, we will seek to increase our program graduate participant population.

### **Future Directions**

This analysis provided an initial, broad look at student perceptions of goal attainment and QoL while participating in an IPSE program. It served as a first step toward gaining better understanding of the perspectives offered by those directly affected by program implementation. As a next step, study of the impact of specific curricula and supports on student perceptions is needed to dive more deeply into specific aspects of effective program implementation and participant preferences. In addition, studying student perceptions of goal attainment in the context of the PCP process could produce individualized, actionable program adjustments for continued work toward program improvement.

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