Forging Pathways: A Multi-Case Study of Individuals with Intellectual Disability Pursuing Postsecondary Education via Community Colleges

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Abstract

Individuals with intellectual disability (ID) are underrepresented in higher education. Of those who access higher education, the majority enroll at community colleges. This study sought to understand how students with ID forged pathways to higher education via community colleges. Five individuals with ID, who each attended a different community college in the United States, and their parents/guardians, were interviewed. Cross-case analysis revealed four themes positively impacting the college-going pathway for students with ID: value-driven grit, pathway knowledge, community support, and accessibility. Families also appear to be the primary systems supporting these pathways to community colleges for individuals with ID.

Keywords: community college, intellectual disability, higher education, inclusion, Down syndrome

Plain Language Summary

- Individuals with intellectual disability attend college at lower rates than their peers.
- Individuals with intellectual disability who do enroll in college are more likely to do so at a community college.
- Understanding how students with intellectual disability have successfully transitioned to community colleges after high school may help other students, families, and professionals.
- **How I did this study:** I interviewed five individuals with intellectual disability in five different regions in the United States who attended their local community college, and at least one of their family members. For four individuals with intellectual disability, that family member was a parent. For one individual with intellectual disability, that family member was a sister with whom the student lived.
- **What I found:** Enrolling at a community college was the result of four main factors. The people I interviewed valued education, inclusion, and reaching one's potential, which fueled the pursuit of goals related to those values despite challenges. Study participants were knowledgeable about community colleges and programs, and the processes to enroll in college. Each student had some type of support provided (i.e., having people help with navigating campuses

and transportation to and from campuses). Community colleges provided academic, geographic, and financial accessibility, which made them a viable option for students and families.

- **Conclusion:** This study shows that community colleges provide accessible higher education options for students with an intellectual disability when combined with specific support services. Despite facing challenges, students with intellectual disability and their parents/guardians foster college-going goals, founded on values, by using knowledge and grit.

Literature Review

Postsecondary Education Access

Students with ID may access higher education in four ways: 1) as traditional students; 2) through transition programs; 3) dual enrollment programs with local education agencies (LEAs) (Plotner & Marshall, 2014); or 4) via postsecondary education programs for students with ID (PSEID). The majority of students with ID who access higher education as traditional degree or non-degree seeking students do so via community colleges. NCES (2017) data of undergraduate students who reported a disability for the 2011–2012 academic year showed enrollment only at public 2-year institutions for those with a developmental disability (as ID was not specified in the data). Secondary data analysis of the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) reported community college attendance for students with mild ID was 25.8% within six years of exiting high school (Bouck, 2014). Similarly, data from the High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 showed that 27% of students with ID who were ninth graders in 2009 enrolled at a nonprofit 2-year institution by 2013 (NCES, 2017).

PSEID have expanded significantly since the enactment of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) (2008), albeit program availability varies by state (Think College, n.d.). This expansion coincides with the HEOA grant-funded PSEID known as Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID). These grant-funded programs have served more than 5,200 students from 2010–2024 (Think College National Coordinating Center, 2025).

Barriers to Access

Despite PSEID expansion, most individuals with ID do not transition to higher education post-high school. Some factors impacting students with ID accessing and enrolling in higher education are similar to the general student body (i.e., financial barriers), while others are unique to this student population, including practices at LEAs (i.e., segregated education and emphasis on non-academic tracks) and Individualized Education Program (IEP) transition goals that do not include postsecondary education (PSE) (Smith Lee et al., 2018). Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), each student with an IEP must receive transition services related to one of the listed IDEA transition goals, of which PSE is an option.

Grigal et al. (2011) looked at IEP goals for students with ID via secondary data analysis of the NLTS2 and found approximately 11% of IEP goals involved attending 2- or 4-year colleges; however, if a student had a disability other than ID, that percentage was higher (58%). Anderson and Butt (2017) found that students without ID were guided to PSE while students with ID were directed to service agencies, which may not align with reported student and family expectations. The NLTS 2012 reported that 50% of transition-age students with ID indicated an expectation to obtain PSE after high school (Lipscomb et al., 2017b). Survey research by Griffin et al. (2010) of 108 family members who had a student with ID and/or a developmental disability in transition planning indicated feeling mostly positive about their child attending a PSE program. Family members also reported that educators were less supportive and provided insufficient guidance. This discrepancy may be related to national survey results from the NLTS 2012 that showed less than half (44.7%) of 17- to 18-year-old students with ID (and 38.3% age 19 or older) provided input in their own IEP and transition planning (Lipscomb et al., 2017b), and service agencies, such as Vocational Rehabilitation counselors, were the most common professionals participating in transition IEP meetings (Grigal et al., 2011).

Academic Preparation

Lack of academic preparedness related to placement in segregated special education classroom settings may impact higher education enrollment for students with ID (Griffin et al., 2010; Perna, 2005). Students with ID were reported as the most likely disability subgroup to spend less than 40% of the school day inside a general education class, at a rate of 47.2% in 2021 (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services [OSEP], 2024). General education placement may increase academic preparedness, as Buckley et al. (2006) found that students in an inclusive educational placement had a mean gain of more than three years in reading and writing skills compared to the students who attended special schools. Inclusive placements in primary and secondary education have also been found to develop other skills, including those needed to navigate college campuses (Griffin & Papay, 2017).

Students with ID may lack access to quality education and schools (Lipscomb et al., 2017a). They also may not graduate or will graduate without a regular high school diploma (Grigal et al., 2012). The OSEP (2024) reported that students with ID were the second least likely disability subgroup to graduate with a regular high school diploma at 48.4% and had a dropout rate of 13.6%. Comparatively, the regular high school diploma graduation rate for all students with disabilities served under IDEA was 75.4% for the 2020–2021 academic year.

Parental/Familial Factors

Family dynamics may impact PSE attainment. Finances and parent/guardian educational attainment are known to influence higher education enrollment for the general student body (Renn & Reason, 2013). According to the NLTS 2012, individuals with ID and their families face poverty at higher rates than their peers, and students with disabilities having an IEP were the least likely (26%) to have one parent who earned a four-year degree or higher compared to students without disabilities (37%). Educational

attainment may also impact income, and Griffin et al. (2010) found that finances were a barrier to PSE for 36% of individuals with ID.

Other familial factors correlated with enrollment in PSE are parental educational involvement (Wagner et al., 2014) and parental expectations (for the general student population) (Renn & Reason, 2013). These are both areas of strength for this student population. The NLTS 2012 showed that parental involvement for students with ID has increased overall since 2003 (Liu et al., 2018) and that 32% of parents of students with ID had the expectation that their child would obtain PSE (Lipscomb et al., 2017b). The NLTS2 data showed parental expectations of PSE for students with ID were a strong predictor of reaching that educational goal (Papay & Bambara, 2014).

This qualitative study sought to understand and explain the aspects that contributed to students with ID pursuing, accessing, and enrolling in PSE via community colleges post-high school. The following central research question guided this study: How have students with ID successfully pursued pathways to postsecondary education via community colleges?

Methods

A case study research design was used for an "in-depth analysis of a bounded system" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 42). Then, a multi-case study approach was utilized to study the quintain (Stake, 2006). The quintain in this study was students with ID attending community colleges or community college PSEID.

This study included five cases and eleven participants, with at least two participants (the individual with ID and his/her parent/guardian) per case. Table 1 shows the demographic information for each participant by case. The sampling strategy utilized was purposeful sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Participants were solicited by emailing directors of PSEID listed in the "Find a Program" Think College (n.d.) online database, using professional connections, and posting information in e-newsletters with disability-serving entities.

Participants

Student participant criteria included the following four essential criteria: (a) 18 years of age or older; (b) completed, graduated, or exited from high school; (c) has ID (determined by being eligible for IDEA special education services under the category of "intellectual disability," had ID listed as the disability determination with Social Security Administration, or had a condition associated with ID such as Down syndrome); and (d) enrolled currently or previously as a traditional community college student or student in one of the community college PSEID. Parent/Guardian participants were assessed in conjunction with determining student participants and included the following criteria: parent or legal guardian of the student participant, and participated in at least one LEA IEP committee meeting for/with the student participant during high school (as applicable).

Table 1: Participants

Case	Participant Pseudo-nym	Marital Status	Age	Race/ Ethnicity	United States Regional Location	Enrollment	Disability Diagnosis	Medical Diagnosis	Household Income Range & Employ-ment Status	Highest Level of Education (Parent/ Guardian)
Frank	Frank	Single	30	White	South-eastern	Community college, Traditional	Intellectual disability	Trisomy 21 (Down syndrome)		
	Kim	Married	61	White	South-eastern				$70k-99k; Employed	Doctorate
Minnie	Minnie	Single	39	White	South-western	Community college, PSEID	Intellectual disability	Cerebral palsy		
	Apple	Married	33	White	South-western				$50k-60k; Employed	Bachelor's
Captain	Captain	Single	20	White	Mid-western	Community college, Traditional	Speech impairment	Trisomy 21 (Down syndrome)		
	Betty	Married	60	White	Mid-western				$200k+; Employed	Doctorate
Martin	Martin	Single	29	Hispanic	Mid-Atlantic	Community college, PSEID	Intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorder	(none reported)		
	Mary	Married	53	Hispanic	Mid-Atlantic				$60-90k; Employed	Master's
Jane	Jane	Single	19	Mexican American	Western	Community college, PSEID	Intellectual disability	Trisomy 21 (Down syndrome)		
	Chris	Married	60s	Mexican American	Western				$120-145K; Employed	Some college, certificate

Case	Participant Pseudo-nym	Marital Status	Age	Race/ Ethnicity	United States Regional Location	Enrollment	Disability Diagnosis	Medical Diagnosis	Household Income Range & Employ-ment Status	Highest Level of Education (Parent/ Guardian)
	Evie	Married	50s	Mexican	Western				$120-145k; Employed	Some college, certificate

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted using Zoom video conferencing software. Screening interviews were conducted to assess the ability to consent based on interviewees' responses after the sharing of study information, including the understanding of the purpose of the study, the volunteer nature of participating, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time. IRB approval occurred before participant recruitment. Information in the *Informed Consent* form was reviewed with each participant before data collection. Participants were asked to choose a pseudonym, or if the participant preferred, I created one for them (Wang et al., 2024).

Interviews were recorded, semi-structured, and guided by interview protocols (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). A teacher with Texas Early Childhood–12th Grade Special Education and Early Childhood-6th Grade General Education certifications reviewed the student interview protocol questions to ensure phrasing of and vocabulary used in the questions were appropriate for individuals with ID who may have delays in reading comprehension (Afacan & Wilkerson, 2021). Parents/guardians were interviewed first, followed by interviews with the students, which aided in providing details for understanding some aspects of the oral narrations of student participants (Barton-Husley et al., 2017; Taylor, 2018).

Data Analysis

Data analysis included explanatory case descriptions and in- and cross-case analysis to determine common themes within and across cases (Yin, 2018). Interviews were transcribed, removing identifying information. Data were drawn from interview transcripts, documents (provided in Captain's case), and researcher notes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Captain's documents included a twelfth-grade IEP and an individual psychoeducational evaluation report. Interview transcripts, researcher notes, and information from documents (referred to collectively as data) were grouped by case for in-case analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data were read and reviewed for familiarity and analyzed thematically by hand (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Open coding was used to segment and label data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) and generate a code list (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Relatedness between codes was identified, and similar codes were grouped (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Data were reviewed using the reduced code list to assess if data supported the codes, and the similarity of codes from the revised list was used to identify themes for each case (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

Themes and codes were organized into a data tree to identify connections and codes that did not fall under the main themes (Office of Data, Analysis, Research, and Evaluation, 2016). Interpretation of the themes and text was aided by relating codes to the research questions, literature, and theoretical framework. Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model provided the lens through which to interpret data. Each case was reviewed to generate a visual diagram of key findings that contributed to the quintain. After case descriptions and identification of case themes in individual cases, cross-case analysis occurred (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The prominence of each theme and the findings in support of the themes were noted (Stake, 2006). Assertions were generated related to identified themes across the individual cases.

Credibility

In conducting qualitative research, I understand the importance of positionality. I am a parent of an individual with ID and have values of inclusion that impact my interpretation of information, research, and perspective. I addressed personal biases as reasonably possible through reflexivity, triangulation of methods, member checking, and peer debriefing (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Results

The results of this study produced four cross-case themes showing how students with ID accessed higher education via a community college. These themes were value-driven grit, pathway knowledge, community support, and accessibility. The data supporting these themes had aspects of aspirational, navigational, social, and resistant capital (Yosso, 2005).

Value-Driven Grit

Value-driven grit was the most prevalent theme generated from the cross-case analysis. Grit is the "passion for and perseverance toward especially long-term goals" (Duckworth & Gross, 2014, p. 319). Being value-driven is basing decisions and the pursuit of goals on personal values. Value-driven grit, therefore, is when specific values drive the pursuit of long-term goals that involve perseverance to achieve.

One obvious long-term goal in the case studies was the pursuit of higher education. This was communicated by parent and student participants in conjunction with the value of education. In addition, was the long-term goal of self-actualization, defined as "the process by which an individual reaches his or her full potential" (Sullivan, 2019, para. 1). The goal of self-actualization included values of education, as well as inclusivity and autonomy. Applied to a hierarchical goal framework, the goal of higher education was a lower-order goal aligned with the superordinate goal of self-actualization (Duckworth & Gross, 2014).

Higher Education Goals and the Value of Education

Higher education goals were present in each case, with students verbally expressing a desire for PSE to their parents/guardians. For example, in the case of Minnie, upon losing her employment, she told Apple, "I want to take classes. I want to go to [the community college]." The parent/guardian participants had similar desires for student participants to obtain PSE. These desires often preceded the articulation of goals for PSE from student participants, as seen with Captain's mother, who began financially planning for college when Captain was young. Likewise, Evie "wanted [Jane] to experience the same thing that [their] other children experienced," referring to college. Participants engaged in conversations about college and visited college campuses together.

The value of education underlined higher education goals. When student participants were asked about the desire to go to college, Frank stated, "I wanted to learn new things," and Jane said, "[T]o be smart." Captain shared that she wanted to go to college "to have fun and get more education." Parent participants shared this value of education. Betty stated, "[O]ur family believes in higher education . . . it's just part of who we are. And so, yes, we had a prenatal diagnosis . . . but . . . [that] didn't change that basic fundamental fact of who we are." Parent participants also attended IEP meetings and were involved with their student's school, both in volunteer and paid positions—Frank's mother was a substitute teacher, and Jane's father was a classroom teacher.

In navigating educational spaces, resistant capital was evident. This appeared as requests for inclusive education at various levels that were denied and eventually provided after personal advocacy efforts (Yosso, 2005). When seeking PSE, a community college staff member prohibited Frank from registering. The staff member requested to speak with Frank's mother on the phone and then requested a meeting with Frank and his mother on campus. After this meeting, registration was denied until the staff member received instructor approval that Frank could enroll in the community college course.

Goal of Self-actualization and Values of Inclusivity and Autonomy

The goal of self-actualization was seen in each case. Aspects of self-actualization were formed and communicated through "familial contexts" where the focus was on the overall development of student participants (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). The paths to long-term goals of self-actualization were presented as actions related to self-determination, seeking socially inclusive experiences, pursuing educational goals, and countering low expectations. For example, Martin's father taught Martin his trade and "never [treated

Martin] as if he didn't know how to do things." Although Martin was nonverbal until the age of ten, his mother engaged daily with him in face-to-face conversation. When Martin was described and evaluated by a former teacher as being unable to continue in a work-based program, Mary brought Martin with her to her employment and had him assist with office work.

Parents/guardians had what Jane's mother referred to as "high expectations." Comparatively, low expectations were communicated by people outside of the current familial context in every case. I refer to the "current" familial context, as Minnie's sibling described their parents as having low expectations for Minnie, who spent years unemployed, the dominant postsecondary outcome of individuals with ID. When Minnie stated her desire to pursue higher education in her late 30s, this goal was supported by her sister, Apple.

Additional messages of low expectations came from doctors and parents in the case of Minnie; public schools in the cases of Martin, Frank, and Jane; and a peer's parent in the case of Captain. Captain shared her awareness of low expectations for individuals with Down syndrome, saying, "There was some people when I was born, saying, I couldn't go to college, and I can't do certain things and they also asked me if I needed help all the time because of my disability." Mary shared her experiences with low expectations from school personnel when she stated, "Even a [school] district person told me that I had too high expectations for my son." In the cases of Minnie, Martin, and Jane, schools encouraged transitioning to LEA vocational programs instead of discussing and supporting a pathway to higher education.

Efforts to counter low expectations and assumed limitations occurred within familial contexts. Chris spoke about factors that contributed to Jane going to college as follows:

> The contributions that were made were loving parents, parents that love God first before anything else . . . a strong mom when they were, she was told, 'Oh, she can't speak,' 'She won't be able to speak' or whatever they said she couldn't do. We work as a team that makes sure she could do it; being involved in her school, making a strong presence or a voice for her in that school; just including her in the community and having to deal with all her setbacks . . . . The main things that I told [Evie] was she needs to know that she's loved and she's part of a family unit. . . . Every morning when I wake [Jane] up, I'll say, 'Stand up woman of God.'

Parental/guardian expectations appear to be related to their views of disability. None of the parents/guardians mentioned self-pity or sadness in having a child (or sister in Minnie's case) with a disability. Captain's mother described disability as "part of the continuum of human condition." Mary stated, "I don't want someone telling me you know 'We feel sorry, or this or that.'" The parents/guardians' view of disability impacted actions such as seeking out socially inclusive experiences—including the pursuit of higher education. Maintaining "consistently high aspirations" and continuing to pursue goals despite obstacles and low expectations is evidence of aspirational capital, the goal of self-actualization, and grit (Yosso, 2005, p. 78).

Goals included values that supported core human needs (Ryan & Deci, 2002). Self-actualization was supported by values of autonomy and inclusivity, with autonomy being the ability to have control over one's decisions, a core human need along with relatedness (Legault, 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2002). Relatedness, "having a sense of belongingness both with other individuals and with one's community" (Ryan & Deci, 2002, p. 7), is similar to inclusivity; however, inclusivity is generally used when referring to fostering relatedness specific to marginalized groups. These values can be seen regarding Captain's engagement in higher education. She commented, "I love college. You know, I get to meet all kinds of different people."

The core human needs of autonomy and relatedness, along with competence, were used to create the concept in disability studies called self-determination, which is deemed as important for individuals reaching their full potential (Ryan & Deci 2002). It is evident when individuals exert control over their decisions. Student participants exhibited self-determination and the value of autonomy when they requested to pursue PSE and were involved in that process. Minnie's request to pursue PSE included suggestions of courses she could take. Frank's mother, Kim, fostered self-determination and self-advocacy by encouraging Frank not to have others speak for him and to express his desires. Evidence of this included when Frank expressed his desire to join the band in an IEP meeting, stating, "I wanted to be in marching band . . . and my teachers looked at my mom and said, 'Are you serious?' And my mom looked at me, and she said do I want to do it, and I said, 'Yeah.'" Later, Frank exhibited self-determination and self-advocacy related to seeking enrollment in higher education, which Kim referenced in her comment:

> [W]e have pushed him a lot to be assertive and self-determined. And I think you know by the very nature of him trying to talk to the lady on the phone and not have her talk to me, to talk to him, was really huge because he knew he was the one she needed to talk to. And my husband and I go back and forth all the time, reminding each other not to speak for him; let him speak for himself.

Captain displayed self-determination when she advocated for higher education at an IEP meeting in high school. She stated, "I told them one of my goals is to get to college." Having the value of autonomy and expressing this value by engaging in self-determination appears to have contributed to successfully pursuing PSE.

Related to autonomy, findings suggested the presence of self-efficacy (Ryan & Deci, 2002). Self-efficacy is the belief in one's ability to accomplish a specific endeavor. Captain, Jane, Minnie, and Martin observed siblings going to college, and Frank's close friend enrolled in one of the PSEID at a university. These experiences may have increased interest in doing the same and belief in the ability to do likewise. For example, Minnie and Martin voiced the desire to go to college when their siblings went to college, suggesting self-efficacy gained from vicarious experience. This belief in one's ability may also stem from experiences in each case where students were encouraged to develop independence skills (i.e., Frank using public transportation, Jane riding the "regular" school bus, Martin learning his father's trade, Minnie navigating the college campus, and Captain going on mission trips). Captain expressed self-efficacy reflecting on her pre-

college experiences: “I can’t remember any specific people, you know. But I do know they said that I needed help a lot. And I don’t really need help, you know, like I can do things by myself.”

Inclusivity was another value guiding decisions under the larger goal of self-actualization. Each student was engaged in co-curricular, extracurricular, and/or community activities (i.e., church, sports, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts). For Chris, inclusivity is a part of daily life—“Whatever we do, she’s included.” Betty, Captain’s mother, showed the value of inclusivity in her comment:

> And so, when . . . Captain was prescribed physical therapy or speech therapy or things like that, we tried to find things that were more inclusive. I cannot tell you how annoyed it makes me when people look for adaptive swim classes for babies. It's a baby; no baby knows how to swim. Like go to a baby swim class, you know, you don't need one that's set aside for people with disability. . . . That's just been my attitude, since she was born, was that, let's just make this kind of as normal life as possible.

In high school, Captain was a manager for various sports teams and was a teaching assistant. Frank was in the marching band. Martin attended band class. Jane was in cheerleading and Bible Club. Outside of school, Jane and Minnie attended church. Captain went on mission trips with her church, took dance lessons, was in Girl Scouts, and was training to be a counselor with this organization before the COVID-19 pandemic. Frank was in Boy Scouts and met the associated requirements to earn the rank and award of Eagle Scout. Students also had inclusive work experiences. Jane worked in the high school cafeteria and at a fast-food restaurant. Captain interned at a physical therapy practice, and Martin worked in the office at his mother’s employment. Frank worked at the YMCA, and Minnie worked at a movie theater.

The value of inclusivity was, in part, why Mary chose the PSEID. She expressed that the students in the PSE program had “access to everything that the other kids [had] and I like that.” She continued, “[T]hey are not segregated like in a room where nobody sees them, they are, you know, into the community.”

Pathway Knowledge

Pathway knowledge was the second theme that emerged from cross-case analysis and represents the ability to build pathways to college, despite challenges, by utilizing knowledge of and experiences with higher education systems to navigate these educational spaces and related processes. This theme primarily stemmed from navigational capital held by college-educated parents/guardians with personal experience in higher education. Participants’ pathway knowledge helped address the challenges and barriers to PSE that students faced by supporting the college-going pathway in tangible ways. This included aspects such as securing or providing transportation, assistance with the application and enrollment processes, visiting campuses, meeting with staff, advocacy, and paying tuition. Since the parents/guardians had a working knowledge of the higher education landscape and processes, applying pathway knowledge and

navigational capital supported the forging of pathways to community colleges for students with ID in this study (Yosso, 2005).

This pathway knowledge was seen in all six of the parent/guardian participants, who each had varying levels of college education, with the highest degree obtained for one participant being a bachelor's degree, another participant a master's degree, and two participants completing doctoral degrees. The two parents who had some college without earning a degree held industry-specific credentials and were alumni of the community college where their daughter would later enroll. Similarly, Minnie's sister previously attended the community college that Minnie would eventually attend. Experiences gained as college students, generally, and as students at the local community colleges (in the cases of Jane and Minnie), provided navigational capital and needed "skills [for] maneuvering through [these] social institutions" (Yosso, 2005, p. 80).

Some parents/guardians also gained knowledge of educational systems via work experiences. Jane's father worked as a public school teacher. Frank's mother worked as a public school substitute teacher and in higher education in a position related to PSEID. Captain's mother was a university professor. Notably, these latter two cases with parents who worked in higher education were the only cases where there was awareness of PSEID prior to student enrollment at the community college, and these participants looked at university-based PSEID before pivoting to community colleges—a pivot related to community colleges being affordable and feasible. These two cases were also the only cases in which the decision was made for the students to graduate from high school upon completing their senior year.

In the three cases with parent/guardian participants without prior knowledge of PSEID, each utilized and was guided to transition services in the form of vocational programs offered by their respective LEAs. Awareness of PSEID in these cases came when parents/guardians pursued PSE at community colleges for their students, independent of LEAs, which, in the cases of Martin and Minnie, came after exiting LEA transition/vocational programs. In Jane's case, it occurred when her parents utilized the LEA's pathway to vocational rehabilitation, but independently and simultaneously enrolled Jane at a local community college nearby with the intention of the family providing needed support. It was the community college employees who provided social capital in the form of information to the parents/guardians and students about the PSEID on their campuses (Yosso, 2005). In summary, the LEAs in four of the five cases (Captain's case being the exception) did not direct students to college post-high school despite this goal being articulated to IEP team members in three of those four cases (i.e., Jane, Martin, and Frank).

The two cases that accessed the community college via PSEID after exiting LEA transition/vocational programs (i.e., Martin and Minnie) resulted from the parent/guardian seeking accessible educational options/higher education access points. Mary searched for an educational program and found a reading program at the community college. She "went to the college to ask about the program," and later, when Martin took "a test" at the college, an employee phoned and told her about the college's postsecondary program for students with developmental disabilities. Apple showed awareness of community colleges

and the diversified course offerings therein when she went "through [the community college's] website . . . at like the adult education classes," in an effort to help her sister, Minnie, obtain her goal to go to college. After contacting the college, she was provided with information about the college's PSEID.

Student participants showed awareness of higher education with college being discussed within familial systems. Many of the student participants became aware of colleges and universities via family members. Captain was the only student who also had a high school staff member discuss college with her. Captain stated her paraprofessional in high school "likes to talk about college with me. And after I passed that test . . . he's like, 'You're going to get that diploma and you're gonna go [to] college. I'm proud of you.'" Additional personal experiences that increased knowledge of college in other cases was when Minnie learned about the community college after her group home participated in a temporary "educational project" on campus, and when Frank watched his friend with trisomy 21 go to a university program for students with ID. Afterwards was when he expressed the desire to do likewise.

Community Support

The third cross-case analysis theme was community support. Community support means support provided beyond immediate family members; it includes social capital in the form of "networks of people and community resources" (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). Parents/guardians provided significant support as previously described along the collegiate pathway, yet additional services and networks influenced access to and enrollment in PSE at the community colleges.

College-supportive "networks of people" were important contributors to accessing and/or persisting on the collegiate pathway. In Captain's case, this included a paraprofessional and a tutor who provided educational services that helped Captain pass state standardized tests required for graduation. Captain's IEP team supported the goal of higher education, and an independent professional who conducted Captain's full psychoeducational evaluation recommended pursuing that goal by starting at a community college instead of a university-housed PSEID. This recommendation was followed and proved successful, as at the time of the interview, Captain was near completion of an associate's degree. Additionally, social capital in the form of feedback from parents of students in the community college's PSEID during enrollment was used by Martin's mother to proceed with enrollment. Extended family members helped pay Minnie's tuition the majority of the time she was in the community college program. A professor approved Frank enrolling in his course, an action resulting in access to higher education, as without this approval, the admissions staff member was not going to permit enrollment, showing prejudice in her interactions with questions such as, "Well, if I let him come . . . will he know how to behave?"

Some networks of people overlapped with community resources. Frank used a Medicaid waiver program to receive direct transportation services and a support person who helped him navigate the community college campus and assist him in class as needed. Jane received similar services from a community resource, the LEA's transition

program, which provided staff who walked with Jane from the transition center to the community college and helped her navigate the campus. Captain received a scholarship from Ruby's Rainbow, utilized the college's disability services office for accommodations, and secured two collegiate support programs—one from the community college and one outside of the community college. The latter, for students earning an associate's degree, provided counselors and other check-ins described by Captain's mother as "little extra guard rails" that contributed to choosing the community college. The former was a program that provided student-centered support for students with disabilities on campus, utilizing peer mentoring and in-class help with note-taking and other assistance. Having this support meant, from Captain's mother's perspective, the community college "emerged as the right thing to do."

The community support present in the cases assisted is addressing challenges along the collegiate pathway. For example, although Captain and Frank were without LEA transition services due to graduating from high school after senior year, and Frank was denied vocational rehabilitation services, the community and college services listed earlier provided support with attending their respective community colleges. In the case of Minnie, she and her sister were not informed of government funding that would have paid for the community college program until Minnie was near completion of the program. Despite this lack of government funding, the network of people outside of her immediate family allowed her to overcome the financial barrier she faced in pursuit of PSE at the community college.

Accessibility

The fourth theme that emerged was accessibility, meaning community colleges were accessible PSE options academically, financially, and geographically. This aligns with the general institutional characteristics of community colleges to offer an array of educational opportunities specific to community needs, and have missions aligned with providing affordable higher education to the communities in which they reside (Kisker et al., 2023). These institutional characteristics were an important aspect in PSE access for the student participants, with their varying levels of academic preparation and resources, who each, at the time of the interview, lived in a community college district with their respective parents/guardians.

A high school diploma is typically required to access higher education (outside of dual enrollment courses). Four of the five student participants left high school without a regular high school diploma. The knowledge of the academic accessibility and range of educational options available at community colleges was seen when three of the four parents/guardians of these students turned to community colleges before being redirected to PSEID. Minnie's sister originally pursued PSE for Minnie at a community college with the intent of having Minnie enroll in remedial courses, and Martin's mother similarly initially investigated the community college because of a reading skills development program. Frank's community college experience involved taking courses with a co-curricular focus, a pursuit that did not require a regular high school diploma. Captain was the only student participant with a regular high school diploma. Despite these differences, the community colleges provided academically accessible paths to PSE.

The community colleges were also financially and geographically accessible, which sometimes were interrelated, as it is less expensive to attend a community college and live at home than it is for a student to attend a university PSEID. Kim explained, “Well, in regards to location, so the school in [our state], he would have had to live there, and we couldn’t afford it.” Mary stated similarly, “I had look at all the programs. One was private, but it was very expensive . . . and the other one was very far . . . that was not something that I could do.” Speaking of cost, Captain’s mother stated the community college was a “reasonable” option, commenting that “it's more reasonable than anything else we could have done, frankly.”

Community colleges were not only affordable, but the location of the colleges within the communities in which the students resided also made them geographically accessible. The student participants did not have driver’s licenses and relied on family or other transportation services to get to their respective campuses. Some student participants utilized public transportation services that serviced certain areas, so the colleges needed to be within range of those services. Captain’s mother explained, “Proximity is a big one,” referring to factors that contributed to choosing the community college. She elaborated, “[B]ecause it's local we were able to get her ADA ride . . . So, they come to our house and pick her up and that was possible because literally, the community college is five minutes away.” Similarly, Minnie’s sister provided transportation for Minnie to the college’s campus and noted that the nearby location allowed that to be feasible.

Discussion

Grigal and Hart (2012) wrote that “college expectations are present in subtle—or not so subtle—messages that permeate . . . secondary experiences” (p. 221). The messages present in this study were seen in LEAs’ actions of focusing transition on vocational tracks, while participant expectations included PSE. This difference appears to be related to disability lens. Similar to findings by Beighton and Wills (2017), parents/guardians had a strengths-based view of disability, as shown in the way Chris wakes Jane up in the mornings with the statement, "Stand up woman of God.” Instead of "wake up," it was "stand up," denoting a sense of empowerment. "Woman" is an adult, not a child or someone child-like. Being “of God” relates her to deity. Similar statements showing a strengths-based view of disability were present across all five cases.

The “high expectations” aspect commonly discussed in transition studies (Grigal & Hart, 2012; Martinez et al., 2012; McGrew & Evans, 2004; Yarbrough et al., 2014) was a myopic summary of the data in this study. Expectations are typically discussed in a dichotomous “low” and “high.” Applying this to these cases would have perpetuated a sociocultural narrative of what is normal; anything above an assumed norm would be “high.” Yarbrough et al. (2014) found that of the 17 parents of adult children with ID in their study, 50% reported that they expected their child to go to college, and 75% of those parents indicated this expectation was not an IEP goal. Based on those findings, parental expectations of college for a student with ID are average, not high.

Explaining results as "expectations" also excluded other variables. The goal of higher education was part of the superordinate goal of self-actualization. This was evidenced in Frank's mother's remark that "[t]here's no reason to put a ceiling" on what individuals with ID can accomplish. Goals were long-term; honored familial values of education, autonomy, and inclusivity; and were influenced by strengths-based views of disability. Values anchored the grit necessary to pursue PSE goals while removing, overcoming, and/or resisting "restrictive structures" and low expectations (Perna, 2006, p. 118). Yarbrough et al. (2014) found similar strengths-based views of disability and values of higher education in parents of individuals with developmental disabilities who attributed the goal of college to their child having that desire. While students in this present study expressed similar desires and acted with self-determination, parents/guardians also fostered and supported those goals. This aligns with findings that parents often provide for the functional and academic support needs of students with ID (Anderson & Butt, 2017; Schmidt, 2005) and that self-determination in individuals with ID occurs within familial systems (Ankeny & Lehmann, 2011; Taylor et al., 2019).

Some student participants expressed the desire for college when a sibling went to college, suggesting self-efficacy from vicarious experiences and a familial college-going culture. This culture may have stemmed from the parents/guardians having attended college. Similarly, Yarbrough et al. (2014) found that parents of individuals with developmental disabilities had "expectations [that] grew less from the . . . IEP transition process and more from their own experiences having attended college and wanting the same experience for their child" (p. 8). This study's findings align with those results.

Participants with ID in the present study who accessed college may have been supported by other familial factors. Parent/guardian participants were married, college-educated, and with annual household incomes ranging from $50K-$200K+. In the general student body, families' socioeconomic status (SES) has influenced college choice and access (Perna, 2006; Yosso, 2005), with the higher the SES, the greater the likelihood of PSE enrollment (McFarland et al., 2019). The families' SES in the current study may have provided the capital to forge collegiate pathways, including finding accessible PSE options and securing necessary support services.

Limitations and Delimitations

The limitations of this study included self-selection in recruitment, which resulted in some racial and ethnic groups not being represented. It was not an intended or desired outcome to leave out the voices of students who identify with other racial or ethnic groups. Researcher bias is also a concern in qualitative studies, and this was addressed with triangulation and by using a peer reviewer. A delimitation inherent in this study's design was the exclusion of LEAs from individual cases. School staff were not interviewed, as doing so was unfeasible in the cases of students who had exited high school years prior.

Recommendations for Future Research

Research is needed to further understand how to support students with ID in transitioning to PSE post-high school. The literature lacks inquiry into the possible

correlation between strengths-based views of disability and the pursuit of higher education for individuals with ID, both from a LEA and familial perspective. How does a strengths-based view of disability versus a deficit view impact educational attainment, trajectories, and pursuits? How does the view of disability impact goals within familial and educational systems, especially when not aligned?

Parents/guardians all had at least some college and annual household incomes above the poverty level, with some exceeding income median levels for their state of residence (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Study participants self-identified as either White or Hispanic, meaning there was no representation of Black, Asian, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, American Indian, or Alaskan Native individuals. Thus, the experiences and voices of individuals who identify with these races/ethnicities, have annual household incomes below $50K, or have educational attainment of less than "some college," need to be heard. To better understand community college pathways for students with ID, research that includes those who identify with one or more of the categorical descriptions described above is necessary.

Conclusion

Students with ID and their families may forge pathways to community colleges as a result of value-driven grit, pathway knowledge, community support, and community college accessibility. Community colleges and LEAs can assist these families by aligning their practices with the goal of PSE for this student population. Such goals, expressed by students with ID and their families, may include adopting a strengths-based view of disability, which is supported by the long-known statistical relationship between IQ scores and student achievement—that variables unrelated to IQ impact student achievement (Daunhauer et al., 2014; McGrew & Evans, 2004).

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