Selling Sex...Ed: Bringing Sexuality and Relationship Education to Inclusive Postsecondary Education

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Abstract

Sexuality and relationship education topics and skills fall squarely within the aims of inclusive higher education because they teach independence and social awareness in building friendships and romantic relationships. These skills also support student independence in situations that may arise in workplaces and other community settings. Sexuality and relationship education prepares students for informed decision-making, provides basic information about health screenings for cancer and sexually transmitted diseases, and teaches healthy relationship skills, and can be provided at both private and public universities. Despite the clear need for this content, sexuality and relationship education is not currently required for inclusive postsecondary education programs, potentially increasing the risk of adverse events for students and the universities where inclusive postsecondary education programs are housed. We detail the process of implementing sexuality and relationship education programming at a university in the southeastern United States over the course of five years. We also provide persuasive arguments for critical stakeholders (parents, program staff and leadership, students, community members, and university administration and general counsel) that programs can use to support any efforts to implement sexuality and relationship education within their own programs.

Keywords: inclusive postsecondary education, sexuality and relationship education, program implementation

Plain Language Summary

- This article will discuss how and why one Inclusive Postsecondary Education program implemented sexuality and relationship education.
- Sexuality and relationship education includes information on various topics such as puberty (body changes as you get older), sexual activity and being safe, how to have healthy relationships of all kinds, decision-making, and personal beliefs and values.

- **What we did in this study:** The authors of this paper describe what sexuality and relationship education is, how it may or may not have been implemented in students' grade school experiences, why it is important for inclusive postsecondary education programs to consider implementing it, and how one inclusive postsecondary education program decided to implement sexuality and relationship education in its curriculum.
- **Conclusion:** Inclusive postsecondary education programs are a good place to provide sexuality and relationship education because it can teach students how to make decisions using consent and their values and how to protect themselves in relationships with others. Inclusive postsecondary education programs might consider budget, support staff, and students' needs when identifying the best fit for sexuality and relationship education curriculum in their course plans.

Sexual development contributes to one's identity and quality of life across the lifespan, and it is important to have open conversations and educational curriculums related to topics of physical development, sexual orientation, and sexual behavior to normalize sexuality among people with disabilities (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021). Individuals with intellectual disability have the right to information and acknowledgement that it is normal to have sexual urges and desire intimacy and relationships (Pownall et al., 2020). People with disabilities also deserve to know how their body will physically develop (e.g., puberty) and what to expect through the different stages of life, including relationships of all kinds, how to manage their feelings, and safety-related topics.

Sexuality and relationship education can provide broad information about a variety of topics related to sexual activity, sexuality, safer-sex practices, and personal beliefs and values (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021). Individuals who participate in these programs gain knowledge of safer-sex practices, healthy relationships, and consent, among other topics (SIECUS, 2024c). Comprehensive sexuality and relationship education uses a "rights-based approach" and aims to "equip young people with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values they need to determine and enjoy their sexuality" (Panchaud & Anderson, 2016, p. 1). Comprehensive sexuality and relationship education provides accurate information and supports critical thinking about relationships, sexuality, and reproductive health, including the biological, socio-cultural, psychological, and spiritual aspects of sexuality, while addressing how their attitudes, beliefs, and values are formed. Comprehensive sexuality and relationship education accepts that humans are sexual beings that require more than just a prevention-based approach to sexuality and sexual behaviors (Panchaud & Anderson, 2016). Sexuality and relationship education may also address sexual messaging from various sources including media, family, and religious organizations (Kennett et al., 2012). This article will discuss the importance of sexuality and relationship education implementation in inclusive postsecondary education, as well as outline the process of implementation for a program located in the southeastern region of the United States.

Review of Relevant Literature

Sexuality and Relationship Education in K–12 Public Education

Finding resources to provide sexuality and relationship education while navigating topics that may be seen as controversial can be difficult, which is why the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) has created standards that outline specific topics and broad concepts that should be provided in sexuality and relationship education for primary and secondary school students. These standards were first identified and developed in the first edition of the National Sex Education Standards: Core Content and Skills, K–12 in 2011, and later revised to create the second edition in 2020. These standards include developmentally appropriate introduction of topics and information based on age and cognitive level. These standards created by SIECUS include: (a) consent and healthy relationships, (b) anatomy and physiology, (c) puberty and adolescent sexual development, (d) gender identity and expression, (e) sexual orientation and identity, (f) sexual health, and (g) interpersonal violence. While these standards are a helpful guide for educators, some states do not require sexuality and relationship education as part of K–12 curriculum. This means that graduates from across the United States are entering postsecondary education with varying levels of information on sexuality and relationship education topics, if any at all (SIECUS, 2020).

A systems-level barrier to accessing sexuality and relationship education for students with intellectual disability is a recent wave of laws reducing access to sexuality and relationship education, which may have a negative effect on sexuality and relationship education provision (Najarro, 2024). The latest trend in this type of legislation relates to banning or severely curtailing diversity, equity, and inclusion, all tenets of effective sexuality and relationship education. They are of particular importance to the disability community as inclusion is the foundation of special education in K–12 and inclusive higher education authorization (HEOA, 2008; IDEA, 2004; Section 504, 1973; SIECUS, 2024a). The SIECUS State of Sex Education Legislative Look Ahead notes that in 2023, there was an 800% increase in restrictive sex education laws passed in eight states. This includes 108 bills introduced in 31 states, with nine bills passing, including: (a) Arkansas Senate Bill 294, (b) Arkansas Senate Bill 284, (c) Florida House Bill 1069, (d) Idaho House Bill 228, (e) Indiana House Bill 1608, (f) Iowa Senate File 496, (g) Kentucky Senate Bill 150, (h) Mississippi House Bill 1390, and (i) North Dakota House Bill 1265 (SIECUS, 2024a). Many of these bills listed were related to anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric and used the guise of parental rights to limit or completely block access to sexuality and relationship education in grade school for minors. In 2023, eleven states enacted bills instituting book bans or censorship of instructional material deemed “sexually explicit” or “harmful” in nature; these states include: (a) Florida, (b) Iowa, (c) Kentucky, (d) Louisiana, (e) Mississippi, (f) North Dakota, (g) Tennessee, (h) Texas, (i) Utah, (j) Virginia, and (k) West Virginia (SIECUS, 2024a).

Conversely, there was a 20% increase in supportive sex education bills across the country compared to 2022, reflecting advocacy efforts to respond to the opposing, more restrictive bills introduced in the same year. The 55 bills on the affirmative side of sexuality and relationship education included making it more comprehensive by adding more

content areas, making it more inclusive, ensuring it is medically accurate, and efforts to make language related to it developmentally appropriate (SIECUS, 2024c). SIECUS's guiding principles of teaching these standards include having high expectations to promote quality education; including functional knowledge and skills; using a trauma-informed lens; considering social, racial, and reproductive justice and equity; applying an intersectional lens; utilizing inclusive language; implementing theoretical frameworks of learning including social learning theory, social cognitive theory, and the social ecological model of prevention; using evidence-based approaches from research; and aligning sexuality and relationship education with existing educational standards (SIECUS, 2024c). Noting these changes in legislation provides valuable information for inclusive postsecondary education programs to consider related to a) what information students may be entering their programs with based on the location of their K-transition experiences, and b) how their state might view provision of sexuality and relationship education in the higher-education setting.

In addition to the systems-level barriers, people with intellectual disability also face individual-level barriers to accessing sexuality and relationship education. This includes teacher bias, with teachers' perceptions of student benefit driving the decision to provide instruction or not. Higher expressive language ability was found to predict the provision of sexuality and relationship education (Barnard-Brak et al., 2014). Although people with intellectual disability express the desire to be educated by qualified professionals, sexuality and relationship education may be left to special education teachers who have limited resources and curricula to deliver this information (Hole et al., 2022; Strnadová et al., 2022).

Further, parents may be unprepared to take on the role of sexuality educator. For instance, parents report needing educational guides, parent support groups, and parent education to meet the needs of their children (Schmidt et al., 2021). Parent uncertainty about how and what to teach, and parent perceptions that this knowledge and these skills were of little importance to their child's life mean that parents may not be providing the education at home (Pownall et al., 2011). Parents may also curtail their child's access to relationships by expressing discomfort with the topics, labeling the topics "inappropriate" or "wrong," and shutting down conversation. For example, people with intellectual disability report learning about the LGBTQIA+ community through television rather than their teachers or parents (Hole et al., 2022). In summary, people with intellectual disability face both systems and individual level barriers to accessing sexuality and relationship education in their schools and homes.

Sexuality and Relationship Education in K-12 Public Education

Right to Education

Education is a human right (United Nations, 1948). In the United States, all children have a right to a free and appropriate public education. This right was extended to students with disabilities in Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (1973) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004). Best practices for sexuality and relationship education include providing comprehensive education that gives each person

with the information to make decisions for themselves (UNESCO, 2018). Some states mandate instruction in specific areas such as healthy relationships and HIV/AIDS prevention (SIECUS, 2024b).

The Promise of a Full Life

There are many benefits to implementing pleasure-based sexuality and relationship education, including building healthy relationships, teaching consent and sexual rights, encouraging healthy relationships and sexual empowerment, in addition to the traditional risk-reduction outcomes of delayed and safer sexual activity among others (Mark et al., 2021). For students with intellectual disability, special educators may frame this as teaching as self-advocacy and self-determination skills.

However, a pleasure-based rationale is largely absent from the experiences of people with intellectual disability. Instead, the focus is on restriction and prohibition. All students with intellectual disability are subject to ableism and assumptions about their interest in sexuality topics and relationships (Gill, 2015). Providing sexuality and relationship education gives students the information they need to make the best decisions for themselves and makes informed consent possible. It also provides them with the dignity of risk, a concept that, along with sexuality and relationship education, may make typically developing people uncomfortable. This is a discomfort that all who support students should push through to fulfill inclusive higher education's promise of living a fuller and more expansive life though experiences past high school and transition programs (Grigal et al., 2024).

Statistics and Risk

People with intellectual disability are considered an "at risk" population, as statistically, individuals with disabilities are more likely to experience abuse (Curtiss & Kammes, 2020; Goh & Andrew, 2021; Treacy et al., 2018). This increased risk is thought to be related to several factors, including: (a) cultural beliefs that stigmatize the sexuality of individuals with intellectual disability, (b) sexual repression (including physical punishment for expressions of sexuality and/or being denied access to supports for their sex lives), (c) potential oversight of gaps and/or dysregulation in statewide policies that regulate disability services and legal statutes regarding sexual assault and sexual abuse surveillance/registration systems, (d) criminal justice and reporting systems that are complex and do not serve people with intellectual disability, (e) learned helplessness, and/or (f) lack of comprehensive sexual education (Curtiss & Kammes, 2020). An investigation by NPR found that people with intellectual disability are seven times more likely to be sexually assaulted, and 12 times more likely if they are female (Shapiro, 2018).

In the general population, sexual abusers are more likely to be acquaintances than strangers; people with disabilities' sexual abusers tend to be family members, acquaintances, and support workers (Malihi et al., 2021). Therefore, preparing individuals with disabilities by teaching them to use appropriate anatomical language, identify warning signs and instances of sexual assault or any type of abuse, and navigate how to

share information, could be critical in mitigating further abuse or harm to this population (Curtiss & Kammes, 2020).

Research on Implementation

People with disabilities, particularly young adults with disabilities, are less likely to get information about sexuality and relationship education from their parents and healthcare providers (Pownall et al., 2012; Travers & Tincani, 2010) and therefore may need to rely on sexuality and relationship education provided by high school or college programs. Sexuality and relationship education is important for individuals with intellectual disability entering inclusive postsecondary education programs as they navigate college campuses and independent living away from their established support system, likely for the first time. Students with intellectual disability face the increased risk of abuse (Curtiss & Kammes, 2020; Goh & Andrew, 2021; Treacy et al., 2018) coupled with new opportunities to make decisions independently and the social and behavioral expectations of a college campus. For example, incoming inclusive postsecondary education program students may lack the skills to understand different sexual signals, codes, and social norms (Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2019).

Sexuality and relationship education can also serve as risk mitigation and self-advocacy training in inclusive postsecondary education programs by helping prepare students to practice important social skills, such as learning to say “no” in uncomfortable situations, learning what is and is not consent, having conversations about difficult topics with people who have earned their trust, and negotiating with intimate partners and other people in different relationships (Ferrante & Oak, 2020). Sexuality and relationship education also provides information about what to expect during medical exams (e.g., breast, prostate, and pelvic exams), along with information about the correct use of different contraceptives. Further, university students should be familiar with Title IX and have the vocabulary and concepts, including consent, necessary to make reports or take part in the Title IX process. Many universities offer Title IX training, but without the accompanying vocabulary and concepts, students with intellectual disability may not be able to access the information in the training.

While there is limited research on sexuality and relationship education in inclusive postsecondary education programs, important conclusions can be drawn from what currently exists. In their 2021 study, Stinnett and colleagues surveyed staff members from inclusive postsecondary education programs to understand (a) how inclusive postsecondary education programs support their students in building intimacy knowledge and (b) how often inclusive postsecondary education staff members receive professional development on building students’ intimacy knowledge. A total of 88 respondents representing 36 states in the U.S. shared their experiences and perspectives for a 33% response rate through the Continuum of Support for Intimacy Knowledge in College Survey (CoSik-C). Many of the responding programs provide intimacy-based education in group courses consisting solely of inclusive postsecondary education program students (46.6%). Some programs additionally used one-on-one meetings between students and full-time program staff to provide students with resources related to intimacy education and materials on romantic relationship and

sexual activity knowledge. Programs used discussion (91.4%), handouts and worksheets (54.3%), role-play (51.9%), lecture (49.4%), media (48.2%), and guest visits or site visits such as a health center (12.4%).

Almost half of those surveyed report that their inclusive postsecondary education program does not assess students' intimacy knowledge or level of interest in engaging in romantic relationships and sexual activity. Additionally, 58% of respondents indicated that their program's peer mentors never received professional development on intimacy education. Reported barriers to professional development on intimacy knowledge included (a) intimacy knowledge is of lower priority, (b) intimacy is not prioritized at faith-based institutions, (c) dual-enrollment challenges (e.g., perceived as liability from local education agencies), and (d) lack of time to address the topic due to need for instructional support in other areas.

In their 2023 article exploring perceptions of staff employed in inclusive postsecondary education programs across the United States using previous data from their CoSik-C survey described above, Stinnett and Plotner found that 89.2% of inclusive postsecondary education staff surveyed believe that students with intellectual disability should be able to engage in intimacy if they desire to. The study also found that many staff members believe students lack confidence to ask for support in learning more about sexuality and relationships. As a further barrier, staff believe that peer mentors that work with inclusive postsecondary education program students do not feel prepared or comfortable discussing intimacy with students enrolled in their inclusive postsecondary education programs (Stinnett & Plotner, 2023). Researchers additionally note that sexuality and relationship education efforts should employ integrative implementation, with the responsibility of teaching the content shared amongst instructors, vocational rehabilitation counselors, occupational therapists, family systems, and others within an individual's support network (Drew et al., 2024).

Implementation of Sexuality and Relationship Education in an Inclusive Postsecondary Education Program

Program Description – Inclusive Postsecondary Program

This article discusses an inclusive postsecondary education program housed in an R1 institution in the southeastern region of the United States. The program's five areas of focus include: (a) academic enrichment, (b) integrated work experiences, (c) personal and social skills, (d) health and wellness, and (e) independent living skills. In the 2023–2024 academic year, the program was staffed by seven full-time staff, one part-time staff, seven graduate assistants, and 244 peer mentors who provided various supports within the five areas of focus listed above. This inclusive postsecondary education program had 25 students in the 2023–2024 academic year across a two-year basic program and a two-year advanced program. Please refer to Tables 1 and 2 for student demographics.

Table 1

Demographics	Mean	Range
Age	22.42	19 - 29
Full Scale IQ Score*	61.61	40 - 75
Reading Level	5.45	2 - 11

*Note. *incomplete data for 3 students*

Table 2

Student Demographics	n	%
Gender		
Female	15	35.7%
Male	27	64.2%
Ethnicity		
White	35	83.3%
Black	5	11.9%
Hispanic	2	4.7%
High School Placement		
Majority Inclusive Classes	18	42.8%
Majority SPED Classes	21	50%
Homeschool	3	7%

Note. n = 42

The faculty, staff, and students who were involved in implementing sexuality and relationship education were the program director (PhD in special education; high school self-contained teacher for eight years), a faculty member (PhD in special education; board certified behavior analyst – doctoral; middle school behavior program teacher for five years), graduate assistants (Master's students in special education or clinical mental health), and undergraduate research assistants (receiving course credit through

a course in the counseling minor program). We will refer to them by these titles throughout the rest of the description.

Sexuality and Relationship Education Delivery – Overview

The program director added sexuality and relationship education as part of the curriculum in spring 2020. Sexuality and relationship education programming consists of three areas: student, parent, and staff. Students take a mandatory course for the entire first semester of the program. The parent educational component (two hours) takes place during required on-campus orientation. Parents also learn about the sexuality and relationship education components during all preview day events showcasing the program and during the interview and application process. The staff complete an eight-hour sexuality and relationship education training. This training was last provided in summer 2022. The next section is a detailed description of each phase of sexuality and relationship education delivery. Please refer to Figure 1 for a timeline of when each element of sexuality and relationship education was introduced.

Initiating Sexuality and Relationship Education

The university established the program in 2018 and did not include sexuality and relationship education in the curriculum. This was before the program director or the faculty member were hired, so they were not privy to conversations either for or against sexuality and relationship education at the university, college, department, or program level.

Since the program's inception, peer mentors and interns were required by risk management to attend "Stewards of Children: Darkness to Light" training, which taught prevention strategies and how to respond to sexual abuse of children. In Fall 2019, this training enabled a peer mentor to report an incident that occurred between an intern and a student in the program. That student reported the situation to a peer mentor, who then reported to the director. While the personal information shared was not sexual in nature, it did make the student uncomfortable. The director then asked for support from university administration. To address any potential future issues of this nature, the provost of the university mandated that the program provide sexuality and relationship education to all students. This situation brought to light that students themselves also needed to be trained on how to enforce appropriate boundaries and report any inappropriate behavior. Students should be empowered to protect themselves and recognize red flag behaviors and behaviors that have the potential to become abusive or exploitive. This became an integral part of the program's safety protocols with all students trained in abuse recognition and reporting. Sexuality and relationship education provision began in Spring 2020 and has continued annually.

Initiating Sexuality and Relationship Education

Selecting Sexuality and Relationship Education Curriculum

The director conducted an online search for research on sexuality and relationship education curricula for people with intellectual disability. Unfortunately, there is very little research evaluating the effectiveness of commercially available sexuality and relationship education curricula, particularly at the college level. However, the director found reviews of commercially available sexuality and relationship education curricula for people with intellectual disability conducted by Wolfe and colleagues (Wolfe et al., 2018; Wolfe et al., 2019). The reviews found that Positive Choices© included the highest number of effective instructional strategies (modeling, story-based interventions, visual strategies, social problem solving, and role-playing). Additionally, the university administration prioritized safety and basic knowledge, and Positive Choices© was rated well in those areas. The director also found that Positive Choices© included student workbooks and premade slide decks, which would be helpful for graduate students tasked with teaching the course to use as a starting place for instruction. Based on the results of these reviews and the availability of funds, the director purchased the teacher manual and student workbooks for Positive Choices© which also included a CD-ROM of the slideshow presentations

After supervising the course for two years, the faculty member found that Positive Choices© required significant modification to bring it up to date and required supplementation with additional materials and curricula. For example, in the section on sexual orientation, Positive Choices© only includes straight (referred to as heterosexual) or gay (referred to as homosexual and lesbian) orientations. Similarly, the section on contraceptives only includes external condoms, the birth control pill, the shot, and sterilization. Positive Choices© also includes medically inaccurate information about the hymen and does not include romantic partners in the list of types of relationships. Thus, in 2022, the faculty member used their professional development funds to attend a three-day online training by Elevatus Training. This three-day online training covered three curricula: one for young adults and adults with intellectual disability (22 lessons/classes), one for parents of people with intellectual disability (two-hour training), and one for staff that serve people with intellectual disability (eight-hour training). After training, electronic copies of all handouts and slide decks were made available to anyone who completed the training. The faculty member also opted to purchase all three curricula in hard copy.

To address topic gaps in the Positive Choices© curriculum, the faculty member directed an undergraduate research assistant to review the content standards from SIECUS and the Positive Choices© and Elevatus© curricula as rated by Wolfe and colleagues (2019). In topic areas where Positive Choices© had lower scores, we replaced content with Elevatus© materials and lessons. These include body image, gender identity, love, raising children, negotiation, and sexuality through life. Additionally, if there were no materials related to an area of need, the faculty member created materials. These include sexual fantasy, sexual dysfunction, abortion, sexuality and society, gender roles, sexuality and religion, diversity, sexuality and media, and sexuality and arts.

Instructors for Sexuality and Relationship Education

Instructors for the sexuality and relationship education courses have included Master's-level graduate assistants (clinical mental health or special education) and tenure-line faculty (as part of service allocation or part of teaching allocation paid by the program). Additionally, undergraduate research assistants have served as peer models and provided academic accommodations for course credit. For details on instructors, curricula, and parent and staff training, please refer to Figure 1.

Cost to Implement

By far, the costliest input for sexuality and relationship education instruction is the instructor's time. While this program had the budget to employ graduate assistants and then a faculty member to provide instruction, there may be less costly options, including having faculty instruct as part of their service allocation. A trained staff member could also provide this instruction. Programs may alternatively find support from Planned Parenthood, independent living centers, or other disability-focused or sexuality and relationship education-focused organizations. If your local area has resources at the county or state level to support sexuality and relationship education, public health workers may be available to provide some if not all the instruction. However, we urge caution when considering instructors without a background in special education or a related field as the person may not be aware of the unique learning and instructional needs of people with intellectual disability (Stoffers & Curtiss, 2024).

Please see Table 3 for a complete breakdown of the costs of implementation minus any facilities costs (provided by the university for free to the inclusive postsecondary education program). The faculty member purchased any supplies needed for the course using program funds including: a) anatomical models (erect penis, vulva/vagina/uterus, flaccid penis with testicles and prostate), b) menstrual supplies (pads, tampons, discs, cups), c) physical examination supplies (latex gloves, speculum, lubricant [individual packages], extra-long swabs), d) contraceptives examples and safer-sex supplies (intrauterine device [IUD], dental dam, NuvaRing, birth control pill, internal and external condoms, emergency contraceptives [Plan B], and implant), and e) general classroom supplies (sticky notes, whiteboard markers, poster board for class rules, etc.). Some of the example contraceptive supplies were purchased online at https://www.sexedstore.com/contraceptive-education-kit/. The anatomical models were purchased from Jim Jackson at https://jimjacksonanatomymodels.com/. He has recently added an array of skin tones and pubic hair colors. We recommend that programs reach out to on-campus and community providers for possible resources, loan of materials like anatomy models, and instructional support. This could include the health center, sexual health programming, healthy relationships programming, nursing or medical programs, psychology programs, public health programs, or other related fields.

Table 3

Cost of SRE Implementation in Southeastern IPSE

Description of Item	Cost in 2024
Facilitator(s) Instruction Time*	
Faculty Member	$5,760 (12% allocation)
Staff Member	$4,500
Graduate Assistant(s)^	$3,600
Undergraduate Research Assistant	$0, Course Credit
Certification for Trainer	
Elevatus Certification+	$975
Elevatus Certification, Curriculum, and Materials (student, parent, and staff)	$1,195
Parent Training Materials	
Elevatus Curriculum and Materials for Parents+	Only available with certification
On-Campus Summer Orientation	Cost assumed within orientation
Staff Training Materials	
Elevatus Curriculum and Materials for Staff+	Only available with certification

Student Course Materials	
Positive Choices Instructor Manual and 10 student workbooks+	$430
Positive Choices Workbook(s) for Students*	$25 per workbook
Elevatus Curriculum and Slide Decks+	$474
Supplemental Materials	
Anatomy Models+	$1,480
Physical Examination Supplies*+	$90
Hygiene Supplies*	$90
Examples of Contraceptives (online set)+	$199
One-time Use Contraceptives*	$45
Classroom supplies*	$30

Note. *Yearly cost, +One time cost. See narrative for description of what items are included in anatomy model cost, physical examination supply cost, hygiene supply cost, contraceptive examples cost, and classroom supplies cost. ^3 hours per week + percentage of tuition waiver.

Instructional Tasks and Responsibility Allocation

The inclusive postsecondary education program provides three categories of programming: student, parent, and staff. Student instruction takes place in a semester-long class that met once a week for two hours (Spring 2020) and twice a week for one hour and 15 minutes for a total of two and a half hours of instruction per week (Fall 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023). Parent training takes place during interviews (one hour) in the fall semester of each year and in the summers during orientation (two hours). Staff training has taken place once during Summer 2022 (eight hours).

Staff Training

In Summer 2022, the faculty member trained all staff of the inclusive postsecondary education program (the Director, the Assistant Director, cohort coordinators [3], administrative staff [1], and a part-time worker [1]) using the Elevatus© curriculum in two sessions at four hours each. The training included basic information about the developmental stages of sexuality, the needs of people with intellectual disability, how to answer difficult questions, and ways to prepare themselves emotionally to answer those questions. The training also included activities, role plays, notes, discussion, and worksheets.

Parent Training

Prior to the faculty member attending the Elevatus training (Fall 2020 and Fall 2021), they trained parents on the basics of the topics covered in Positive Choices©, evidence-based instruction for people with intellectual disability, how to use natural teaching opportunities (TV shows, family events, song lyrics, etc.) to start conversations about sexuality and relationship education topics, and best practices in sexuality and relationship education for people with intellectual disability. The Fall 2020 training was conducted online due to ongoing COVID-19 precautions.

Once the faculty member was trained on the Elevatus© parent training curriculum, they began training parents using it during required summer orientation (2022, 2023, 2024). The parent training defines sexual health, gives an overview of human development, and asks parents where they received their sexuality and relationship education information and what messages they got about sex and sexuality growing up. The training also teaches parents methods for answering difficult questions and includes discussion questions, worksheets, and role plays.

Assessment of Student Knowledge of Sexuality and Relationship Education

Students in the initial course (Spring 2020) were assessed using scores on pre- and post-tests. The faculty member found statistically significant improvement in student scores on each assessment (Drew et al., 2023). The instructors have added to the assessments each time the course was taught to reflect the new information provided with supplemental materials and the Elevatus© curriculum. These assessments include

multiple choice, true/false, and matching questions. Students take four tests throughout the semester.

Discussion

While many universities react to issues such as sexual harassment, assault, or inappropriate relationships by providing sexuality and relationship education, we implore universities to instead move toward providing this education proactively. Considering the tendency for universities to employ a reactive approach, "selling" sexuality and relationship education or persuading stakeholders of the value of sexuality and relationship education can be a difficult and daunting prospect. Each stakeholder may be sensitive to different approaches or arguments for or against sexuality and relationship education provision in inclusive postsecondary education programs. As such, we have provided a few approaches that we have seen impact various stakeholders' acceptance and support of sexuality and relationship education.

Sexuality and Relationship Education as Abuse Prevention

There are a multitude of barriers that can hinder the availability of accurate sexuality and relationship education information that includes parent discomfort, professionals' discomfort, religious background and beliefs, and ableism (Pownall et al., 2012; Travers & Tincani, 2010). However, given the disturbingly high rates of exploitation and abuse perpetrated against this population coupled with the unique circumstances of inclusive postsecondary education enrollment (e.g., many students are living away from their system of support and caregivers for the first time and increased risk of domestic violence for people 18–24), comprehensive sexuality and relationship education is even more critical as abuse prevention (Black & Kammes, 2021; Kaukinen, 2014; Shapiro, 2018).

Sexuality and relationship education as it relates to safety and abuse prevention should be considered an important area of personal development within person-centered planning. Sexuality and relationship education teaches red flags for abuse and how to seek help if abuse is occurring. Sexuality and relationship education teaches appropriate social skills for dating and relationships, which can also be viewed as abuse prevention. Students should be equipped to self-advocate and protect themselves against potential abuse or harassment. We find that this approach is persuasive for program staff and leadership, parents and guardians, and community members outside of the university.

Sexuality and Relationship Education as Professional Development

Professionals such as instructors or other campus personnel may also have some discomfort in mentioning sexual health due to fear of lack of parental and school support, and lack of confidence in the subject matter (Treacy et al., 2018). The program director and faculty member recognized the importance of equipping staff with the tools needed to handle sensitive topics, such as difficult conversations around relationships, gender identity, and sexual orientation, in a manner that supports both student and staff

comfort and safety. To ensure consistency and understanding, the faculty member trained staff on language used in the sexuality and relationship education course to reinforce expectations and create a unified approach when such situations arise.

The director also emphasized the necessity of having two people present during conversations related to sexuality and relationship education content for accountability and support. The training also included step-by-step instructions for how to answer difficult questions and guidance on what to do if a staff member is not comfortable (e.g., how to redirect students to appropriate resources and people). During the Elevatus© training, staff engaged in role-playing exercises and gained practical skills in how to redirect, support, and avoid alienating students. This proactive approach ensures that staff are prepared to navigate challenging discussions while maintaining a respectful and inclusive environment. In this way, sexuality and relationship education can be viewed and advocated for as part of professional development. This approach may be effective for program staff and leadership and university administration.

Sexuality and Relationship Education as Holistic Education for Students

As stated in the program description, the inclusive postsecondary education program described in this article includes five core areas for student development: (a) academic enrichment, (b) integrated work experiences, (c) personal and social skills, (d) health and wellness, and (e) independent living skills. Sexuality and relationship education instruction can support each of these areas. For academic enrichment, the course can be academically rigorous and modified or accommodated as needed for students with intellectual disability. The program in this manuscript uses the sexuality and relationship education course as a first foray into the world of college academics by employing the same course management system as all university courses (Canvas), giving exams with study guides, and requiring the course like a typical college course of study.

Sexuality and relationship education can support employment by teaching how to respond to unwanted sexual behavior or any type of harassment (based on gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, or other protected class) that may occur in a workplace. Sexuality and relationship education can also teach assertiveness and self-advocacy and make students aware of their rights. On the flip side, sexuality and relationship education can proactively address behavior like harassment which may occur if students are not taught how to properly engage in dating or courtship behavior.

Concerning personal social skills, sexuality and relationship education teaches social skills in all types of relationships: strangers, acquaintances, helpers, friends, family, and romantic, which can be invaluable across domains, but particularly in employment and in maintaining relationships and social connections. These are tied to quality-of-life indicators and can help a person with intellectual disability remain connected to their community. As students participate in and exit inclusive postsecondary education programs, they may reside with other people with intellectual disability or non-disabled roommates and independently engage in interpersonal relationships post-program, including romantic and sexual relationships, alongside their

pre-existing family and friend relationships. These relationships all require skills, and as students age, the requirements for having fulfilling relationships may also increase. Adult relationships of all kinds shift and grow with time, and our students need the skills to navigate those changes.

Sexuality and relationship education teaches critical information on health and wellness including the importance of and what to expect during routine health screenings (pap smear, pelvic exam, breast exam/mammogram, prostate exam, and testicular exam). Sexuality and relationship education also teaches health and safety skills including the effective use of contraceptives to decrease the risk of sexually-transmitted infections and diseases and unplanned pregnancy. Sexuality and relationship education also addresses areas of mental health including building healthy relationships, recognizing "red flag" behavior and abuse, and emotional awareness and regulation.

For independent living skills, healthy relationships are a key component of a fulfilling community-based life. Sexuality and relationship education covers these in depth along with appropriate and safe dating, effective communication, and informed decision-making. Program staff and leadership, parents and guardians, and employment partners may find this argument persuasive.

Sexuality and Relationship Education for an Inclusive Campus

Most universities accept federal funding and are therefore required to follow the non-discriminatory hiring and employment practices of the federal government. This extends into the use of hate speech or the creation of hostile environments. Students with disabilities, just like their typically developing counterparts, may hold racist, sexist, or homophobic views, which can result in their expulsion and other social consequences. They may also have skill deficits in addressing or relating to people who have different religions, sexual orientations, and gender identities.

Sexuality and relationship education can address the diversity of viewpoints on many issues and teach social skills including asking gender-neutral questions (i.e., asking if someone has a partner rather than asking if they have a husband or wife), how to address someone with their correct pronouns, and how to navigate situations where other people's personal lives conflict with their religious beliefs. This can reduce the risk of hostile environments and the social consequences of judgmental or exclusionary behavior. It can also reduce the risk of litigation against the university and inclusive postsecondary education program based on discrimination or hostility toward protected classes. This appeal may be effective for program leadership, university administration, and general counsel.

Sexuality and Relationship Education as Risk Mitigation and Advocacy Training

Universities are often risk-averse and prioritize student safety above all else. By speaking to the university's priorities, program staff can help university administration see the importance of sexuality and relationship education as risk mitigation. Sexuality

and relationship education equips students to self-advocate, make accurate reports to Title IX, and fully participate in any Title IX meetings as either the complainant or the respondent by teaching accurate language and skills around concepts like consent, inebriation, and sexual acts that are against the law. Sexuality and relationship education can also teach students their rights and responsibilities as they pertain to Title IX. This approach may be effective for program staff and leadership, university administration, and legal or general counsel roles.

Program Accreditation and Conceptualizing Sexuality and Relationship Education as a Student Need for Independence

As of 2024, the Inclusive Higher Education Accreditation Council accreditation standards for inclusive postsecondary education programs do not directly address sexuality and relationship education. As a result, programs may view sexuality and relationship education as an optional component of inclusive postsecondary education rather than a required aspect of postsecondary learning for individuals with intellectual disability. However, the standards do require person-centered curriculum based on program-identified student needs for independence, which could include sexuality and relationship education (Think College National Coordinating Center Accreditation Workgroup, 2021). We propose that programs at least offer (if not outright require) sexuality and relationship education as it relates to students' desire for knowledge and independence. The need for the skills is usually immediately apparent when they include: medical examinations, self-advocacy, self-determination, allowing for and accepting diverse viewpoints, safety skills, healthy relationship skills, etc. Arguing that sexuality and relationship education should be made accessible as part of person-centered curricula related to student goals and outcomes may be helpful for university administration and program staff to gain support in the implementation process.

Conclusion

Students with intellectual disability who pursue postsecondary education are in a unique position to receive and need sexuality and relationship education. First, many of these students are away from their natural supports (e.g., parents, school staff, faith community) for the first time in their lives, just like their typically developing peers. Second, they are expected to adhere to both the conduct requirements and social norms of university settings with limited access to skills practice and concepts like consent, bodily autonomy, and legal and illegal behavior.

Inclusive higher education purports to make students more employable, independent, and included in society at large. To realize the vision of inclusive higher education, universities have both an ethical and human rights obligation to provide students with disabilities the skills they need to be successful. Inclusion is not a place, but rather a set of supports and instructional practices that allow students access to education and community. Without those practices and supports, inclusive higher education is inclusive in name only, leaving students to struggle and fail to meet the behavioral expectations for college students. Further, these skills apply to every domain of an

independent life including employment, social and community engagement, and physical and mental health.

It is the authors' hopes that other inclusive postsecondary education staff members assess their program's readiness for sexuality and relationship education. The process could include engaging program stakeholders (e.g., campus administration, parents/guardians, staff, community support, etc.) and advocating for prevention rather than reaction to issues including Title IX complaints by students or against students in the program, sexual assault, abuse, inappropriate conduct from students, volunteers, or staff, or unplanned pregnancy. Parents are critical to reinforcing concepts taught in sexuality and relationship education and as a source of additional information after classes end. The same is true for administrative support, including funding for sexuality and relationship education materials, approval of new coursework, allocation/funding for instructors, and advocacy at the state level for policy related to sexuality and relationship education. Each program should consider the culture in their geographic region, campus ethos, and staff comfort with these topics in their assessment of how to broach teaching and training opportunities related to student safety, relationship satisfaction, and self-advocacy.

Finally, we asked our students why they think having sexuality and relationship education in inclusive postsecondary education programs is important:

"I think it's important for other programs like EAGLES should teach [sexuality and relationship education class] is because so they can learn the importance of relationships and friendships and also how to make those decisions for yourself and not based off of others."

"I think that it is important to teach [sexuality and relationship education class] because we learn about consent, we learned about what is right thinking, and we learned about what is legal and illegal behavior."

"It is important for programs like EAGLES to have [sexuality and relationship education course] because it is informative for the students that didn't have the opportunity to have it in high school. Sex ed it has not been in schools to teach students it in the safe way, like [sexuality and relationship education course] and EAGLES have. It has helped me in my personal relationship and be a better partner in the relationship."

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Figure 1

Timeline for SRE Implementation