Addressing the Challenging Behavior of College Students with Intellectual Disability in Inclusive Postsecondary Education Programs

Andy Masud, Ph.D., BCBA-D https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8890-0975
University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Stephen M. Kwiatek, Ph.D. https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5310-790X
Utah State University

Virginia L. Walker, Ph.D., BCBA-D https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3248-7290
University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Julianne Hunter, M.S.E. https://orcid.org/0009-0005-7944-9090
Bailey Haycock, B.S. https://orcid.org/0009-0004-7972-8703
Utah State University

Abstract

There is limited research on the way in which inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs address the challenging behavior of prospective and enrolled students. In this exploratory survey study, we surveyed 46 IPSE program directors from various geographic areas across the United States to discover how programs addressed student challenging behavior. We asked directors to identify how student challenging behavior impacted the admissions process and how their program plans for and implements individualized behavior supports for students who exhibit challenging behavior. Our results indicated admissions decisions for IPSE programs vary widely, and only some directors reported planning for and implementing behavior supports for their students. We discuss key findings, limitations, future research avenues, and implications for practice.

Keywords: inclusive postsecondary education, challenging behavior, intellectual disability

Plain Language Summary

- We conducted this survey study to explore how inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs support students who engage in challenging behavior.
- **What we did in this study:** We surveyed 46 IPSE program directors from across the United States to understand how challenging behavior influences admissions decisions and how programs plan and provide individualized behavior supports for these students.
- **Findings:** Our findings showed admissions practices vary widely, and only some directors reported offering formal behavior support.
- **Conclusion:** These results highlight the need for clearer guidance and future research on how IPSE programs can effectively support students with challenging behavior.

As an amendment to the Higher Education Act of 1965, the Higher Education Opportunity Act (P.L. 110-315) was passed in 2008, resulting in policy changes and federal funding to create comprehensive transition and postsecondary (CTP) programs for students with intellectual disability (ID). CTP programs are degree, certificate, or non-degree programs that (a) are offered by an institution of higher education; (b) provide instruction to support skill development for students with ID to continue academic, career and technical, and independent living areas; (c) include advising and curriculum structure; and (d) ensure students participate no less than half time in academics through credit-bearing courses, auditing courses, or non-credit bearing non-degree courses with students without disabilities, and internships or work-based training with peers without disabilities. Although the Higher Education Opportunity Act (2008) did not require the development of CTP programs, it allocated funding toward the development or expansion of model Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability (TPSID) and provided funding to support the Think College national center. CTP programs and TPSID model programs, both of which are considered inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs, have provided access to college for students with ID, which had previously been a barrier, especially for students without a high school diploma (Think College, 2024).

Research has shown IPSE programs have supported students with ID in improving skills and outcomes such as (a) navigation skills for college campuses and surrounding areas (e.g., Richter & Uphold, 2020), (b) time-management skills (e.g., Wennerlind et al., 2019), and (c) self-determination skills (e.g., Smith Hill et al., 2024; Torres et al., 2023). Further, guidance has been provided regarding what constitutes quality IPSE programs (e.g., Grigal et al., 2022; Kohler et al., 2023). However, one critically important area that has been understudied is how students with ID who engage in challenging behavior access and receive support from IPSE programs. For the purposes of this study, challenging behavior refers to any behavior that interferes with learning or social relationships, causes harm to the student or others, or results in property damage (Walker & Snell, 2013).

One explanation for limited research in this area could be the difference between expectations and supports outlined in federal legislation for K–12 settings, guided by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA; 2004), and expectations and supports outlined in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA; 1990) and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. These are guiding federal pieces of legislation used to support individuals with ID against discrimination across various areas including employment, transportation, public accommodations, and access to community programs and services. Under IDEA (2004), educational teams are required to create and implement a behavior intervention plan (BIP) based on the results of a functional behavior assessment (FBA) in response to a change in placement when challenging behavior is considered a manifestation of the student's disability. In cases when a student's challenging behavior hinders their own learning or that of their peers, IDEA (2004) requires the team to consider positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS). IDEA (2004) also requires a student's individualized education program (IEP) to include a provision for supplementary aids and services for the student. These include any aid, service, or support across

educational and non-educational needs that allow a student to access the least restrictive environment.

Although IDEA (2004) provides procedural guidance concerning when K–12 schools must consider behavioral supports, it does not offer guidance regarding how these supports should be provided and by whom. Nonetheless, the literature contains professional recommendations that extend beyond the aforementioned legal requirements (Collins & Zirkel, 2017). For example, professionals recommend individualized BIPs should only be developed when challenging behavior cannot be adequately addressed through universal and secondary supports, such as those offered through a PBIS framework (Center on PBIS, 2023). Professional recommendations also highlight the critical importance of developing BIPs based on FBA outcomes, as function-based interventions generally are more effective than those not aligned to function (Jeong & Copeland, 2020). It is important to note these recommendations also are supported by decades of research spanning different student age groups, challenging behavior forms, and disability categories, including students with ID who are likely to exhibit challenging behavior at higher rates than peers without disabilities (Simó-Pinatella et al., 2019).

Although there are legal guidelines and professional recommendations schools follow to support the behavioral needs of students with ID who receive special education services in K–12 settings, these same aspects are less clear in relation to supporting the behavioral needs of college-age students with ID attending or prospectively attending IPSE programs. Because Part B of IDEA (2004) covers school-age children with disabilities (ages 3 through 21 years), students with ID are no longer eligible to receive special education services under IDEA (2004) once they complete their secondary education (e.g., high school). Although ADA (1990) protects the rights of people with disabilities (including those with ID) against discrimination with the goal of providing equal opportunities and access across settings such as work and school, there is no specific language related to individuals with ID or specific language about supporting behavioral needs. In the absence of specific federal guidance like IDEA (2004) and research offering guidance on behavioral supports planning within the context of IPSE programs, it is likely that these programs address student challenging behavior differently from one another. For example, some IPSE programs may include admissions criteria or make supports planning decisions based on a specific form or intensity of challenging behavior.

In light of the limited research specifically focused on addressing the behavioral needs of students with ID within the context of IPSE programs, it is critically important to examine current IPSE practices regarding prospective and enrolled students who engage in challenging behavior, especially given the emerging evidence suggesting challenging behavior may factor into admissions decisions. For example, in a survey study of IPSE programs, Grigal and colleagues (2012) found some of the surveyed institutions of higher education indicated their use of typical admissions criteria included behavioral expectations, safety skills, and disability type. Likewise, Papay and Bambara (2011) discovered some programs, particularly those in which students have partial to no access to the resources their peers have (e.g., typical college classes, campus clubs and activities), commonly deny admissions to students who engage in challenging behavior. However, due to the limited scope of these studies, it remains unclear how IPSE programs

reach admissions decisions when challenging behavior is present (e.g., parent report, IEP paperwork, observations) and support the behavioral needs of students with ID once admitted into a program. To address this critical area of research, we conducted an exploratory survey study to address the following research questions: (a) How do IPSE program directors report admissions for students with ID who exhibit challenging behavior? (b) How do IPSE program directors report individualized supports planning for enrolled students with ID who display challenging behavior? and (c) How do IPSE program directors report supports implementation for enrolled students with ID who display challenging behavior?

Method

We conducted an exploratory survey study to address our research questions. In the sections that follow, we provide details about the study respondents, development and distribution of the survey instrument, and data analysis procedures.

Respondents

Respondents were 46 IPSE program directors across 46 separate programs. To be eligible for inclusion in the study, respondents confirmed their role as a program director of an IPSE program for students with ID who had completed their secondary education prior to admission into the program. Most respondents reported serving in this role for 5 years or less (61.4%); others reported 6–10 years (27.3%), 11–15 years (6.8%), or more than 15 years (4.5%). The number of years spent supporting students with disabilities varied across respondents as follows: more than 25 years (34%), 6–10 years (18.2%), 16–20 years (13.6%), 5 years or less (11.4%), 11–15 years (11.4%), and 21–25 years (11.4%). A majority identified as White (95.5%) and female (78.3%). Fewer reported their race as Asian (2.5%) or chose not to respond (2.5%) and reported their gender as male (13%) and genderqueer woman (2.2%). All but one participant described their ethnicity as not Hispanic or Latino (97.6%). The average age of respondents was 43.9 years (range = 18–68 years).

IPSE program demographic information related to program location is presented in Figure 1. Most program offices were located on campus (97.7%) and/or in virtual spaces (6.8%), off campus (2.3%), or in other locations (2.3%). Student living arrangements varied across programs as follows: off campus (45.5%), both on and off campus (31.8%), and on campus (22.7%). Across all programs (100%), students attended classes on campus, with some also attending classes virtually (13.6%); three program directors (6.8%) were unsure of where students attended classes. Programmatic student data (e.g., student demographics, student supports) are presented in Figure 2.

Survey Development and Dissemination

Prior to survey dissemination, we obtained institutional review board approval at each research team member's institution. Respondents completed an anonymous survey through Qualtrics (https://www.qualtrics.com), an online survey program appropriate for research. The researcher-developed survey included a total of 36 items organized across

five categories: (a) program director demographic information, (b) program demographic information, (c) admissions related to challenging behavior, (d) individualized supports planning for students who engage in challenging behavior, and (e) individualized behavior supports implementation for students who engage in challenging behavior. Survey items were based on the research team's collective practical and scholarly experience and literature related to postsecondary education for students with ID and individualized supports planning in K–12 settings (Center on PBIS, 2023; Think College, 2024). See the Appendix for a complete list of survey items and corresponding response options for the final three survey categories. Within the survey, we defined challenging behavior as any behavior that interferes with learning or social relationships, causes harm to the student or others, or results in property damage (Walker & Snell, 2013). It is important to note respondents who indicated their programs did not plan and/or implement individualized supports (or were unsure) were not prompted to respond to items under these categories.

To evaluate the content and usability of the survey, we engaged in two evaluative processes to pilot the survey instrument. First, we gathered feedback from six experts in the areas of secondary transition and postsecondary education for students with ID. Experts rated the extent to which survey items aligned to the research questions, the wording of survey prompts and response options were technically correct and appropriate, definitions of key terms were adequate, response options were logically ordered and comprehensive, and the length and time required to complete the survey was reasonable. Experts also provided qualitative feedback to clarify their ratings. Second, we conducted think-aloud cognitive interviews (Willis, 2005) with three former program directors to determine whether additional adjustments were needed to the content and design of the survey. We identified these interviewees based on their former roles as IPSE program directors and thus their expertise in IPSE programs. The group included an assistant professor of special education, an assistant professor of inclusive education, and an inclusion specialist. During these interviews, we prompted interviewees to complete the survey while sharing their screen via Zoom and vocalizing their thought processes. Based on the expert reviews and cognitive interviews, we made several adjustments to the survey. For example, we addressed perceived ambiguity and jargon, revised language for greater clarity, altered the wording of survey items to better capture diverse perspectives, and included areas that were deemed to be missing from the initial survey draft.

Once we finalized the survey, we distributed email invitations through Qualtrics over the course of 2 months in the spring of 2024. Using the Think College program directory, we identified 326 potentially eligible postsecondary education programs for students with ID. A member of the research team accessed each program's website to identify the program director's name and contact information. When emails were undeliverable, a research team member attempted to identify the appropriate contact for the program. In total, three programs did not receive an invitation for these reasons. Because the number of program directors who received our survey invitation is unknown, we were unable to determine a response rate. We distributed follow-up invitations 1, 3, and 7 weeks after the initial email invitation to those who had not completed the survey. Upon survey completion, respondents had the option to enter a raffle for one of 10 $50 electronic gift cards.

Data Analysis

Of the 62 respondents who accessed the survey, 52 were eligible based on the inclusion criteria. However, we analyzed only those responses from the 46 (88.5%) respondents who submitted responses to one or more items in addition to the demographic items. For closed-ended items, we calculated basic descriptive statistics (e.g., count, percentage, range). As not all respondents responded to each survey item, these calculations reflect the number of respondents who responded to a given item. It is important to note several items required respondents to select all applicable response options; thus, some reported percentages exceed 100%.

For open-ended items (e.g., "other, please describe"), we qualitatively analyzed responses using a content analysis approach (Schreier, 2012). The second and third authors independently reviewed responses for each open-ended survey item to generate an initial coding frame, subsequently met to reach consensus on the final coding frame, and then independently applied the codes to each response across all open-ended items. Their positionality is guided by their lived experience as educators and beliefs in inclusive education. Additionally, they engaged in reflexivity through cross-disciplinary conversations focused on secondary transition (second author) and Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) experience (third author), allowing them to ensure qualitative results were representative of participant responses. Given the interdisciplinary approach of our research team, we intentionally opted not to use one particular framework (e.g., PBIS) to conceptualize our survey, as that could have potentially limited the results of our exploratory survey. The purpose of the content analysis was to identify commonalities and differences among open-ended responses as opposed to interpreting the meaning behind the responses. To finalize the coding process, the same research team members met a final time to reach consensus on the applied codes and subsequently shared these applied codes with the other research team members as a means of peer debriefing (Brantlinger et al., 2005). In the results section, we present these qualitative data with illustrative quotes alongside the quantitative data from the open-ended responses.

Results

In this section, we present findings specific to each research question. We present the descriptive quantitative data for closed-ended items and qualitative data for open-ended with corresponding illustrative quotes.

Admissions

When asked about the extent to which students who engaged in challenging behavior prior to applying to an IPSE program were eligible for admissions into the program, a large percentage of respondents (43.5%) indicated it would depend on various factors. Others indicated students with challenging behavior were sometimes (30.4%), never (13%), or always (8.7%) eligible; two respondents (4.3%) were unsure. Responses varied regarding the extent to which the type, intensity, and extent of interference of challenging behavior influenced admissions decisions (see Table 1). The type of challenging behavior that would result in denial of admissions varied across programs

(see Table 2). The most commonly reported types of challenging behavior included physical aggression (80.4%), property damage (58.7%), verbal aggression (58.7%), and elopement (54.3%). Fewer program directors reported disruptive verbal behavior (32.6%), other forms of behavior (e.g., dishonesty, inappropriate sexual behaviors; 4.3%), and stereotypy (6.5%) as resulting in admissions denial. Four respondents (8.7%) indicated challenging behavior would not result in denial of admissions into the program and two (4.3%) were unsure.

For those who indicated admissions decisions were based on other factors, most explained type, intensity, frequency, or recency of challenging behavior played a significant role in decision making. For example, one program director said, “If behaviors are extreme, especially in the physical nature, this may limit the acceptance of those students. Challenging behaviors as a whole would not necessarily keep a student out of the program, however.” In considering the type of challenging behavior, another noted:

> Any of these behaviors may result in denial of admission if severe enough to interfere with the student's ability to benefit or to affect the learning of others. A reasonable trial period with interventions and supports always precedes the decision to deny admission. Admission is rarely denied.

Others discussed the extent to which challenging behavior must align with expectations outlined in the student code of conduct: “Applicants are expected to meet the standards of the Student Code of Conduct with minimal support from staff.” Another participant explained:

> If the behavior is going to put the student or others at risk or if the student cannot follow the academic code and code of conduct, they are not an appropriate fit. We are an academic program not a therapeutic program.

Program directors also described how available supports and programmatic approaches influenced admissions decisions. As summarized by one respondent, “It depends on whether the levels of support offered are adequate to meet the needs.” The idea of adequate support was echoed by another who referred to programmatic review of psychoeducational documentation “... to determine if our programs offer the appropriate levels of support.” Some respondents noted program-specific processes to determine eligibility that indirectly or directly take students’ behavioral needs into consideration. For example, one program director explained, “Students are all reviewed for eligibility to be admitted to [name of university]. Also, students interested in [program name] must enter for a trial period to be approved.”

Figure 1

IPSE Program Demographic Information Related to Program Location

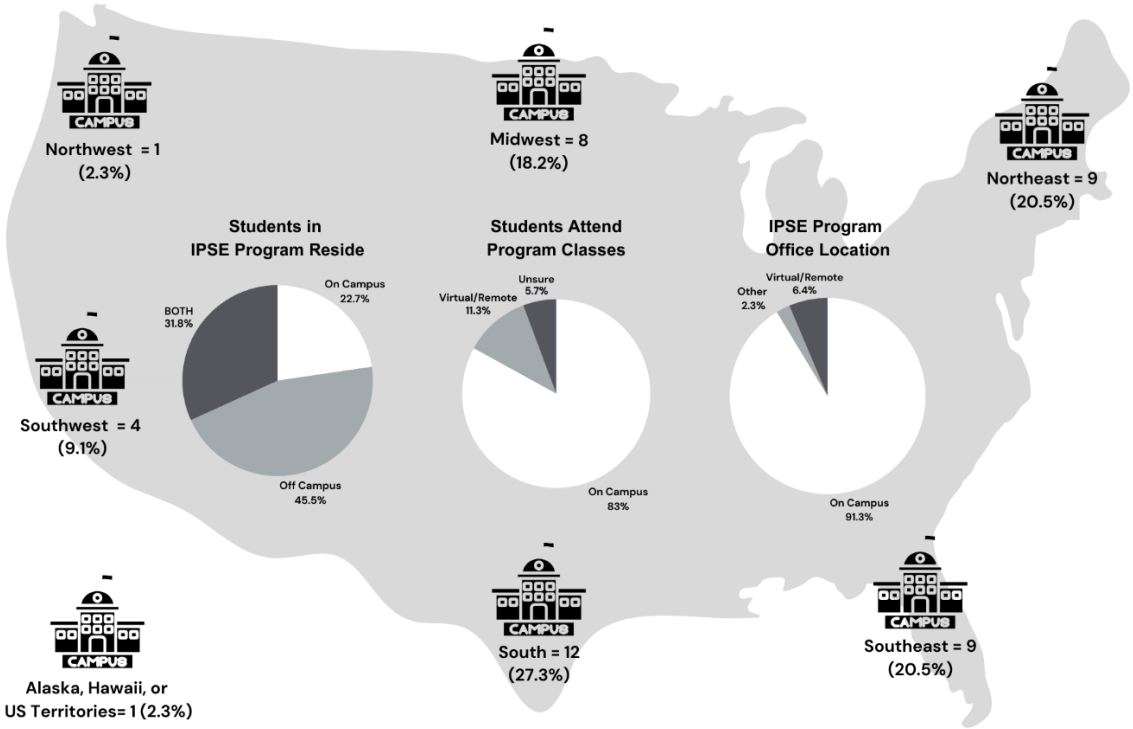

Figure 2

Programmatic Student Data

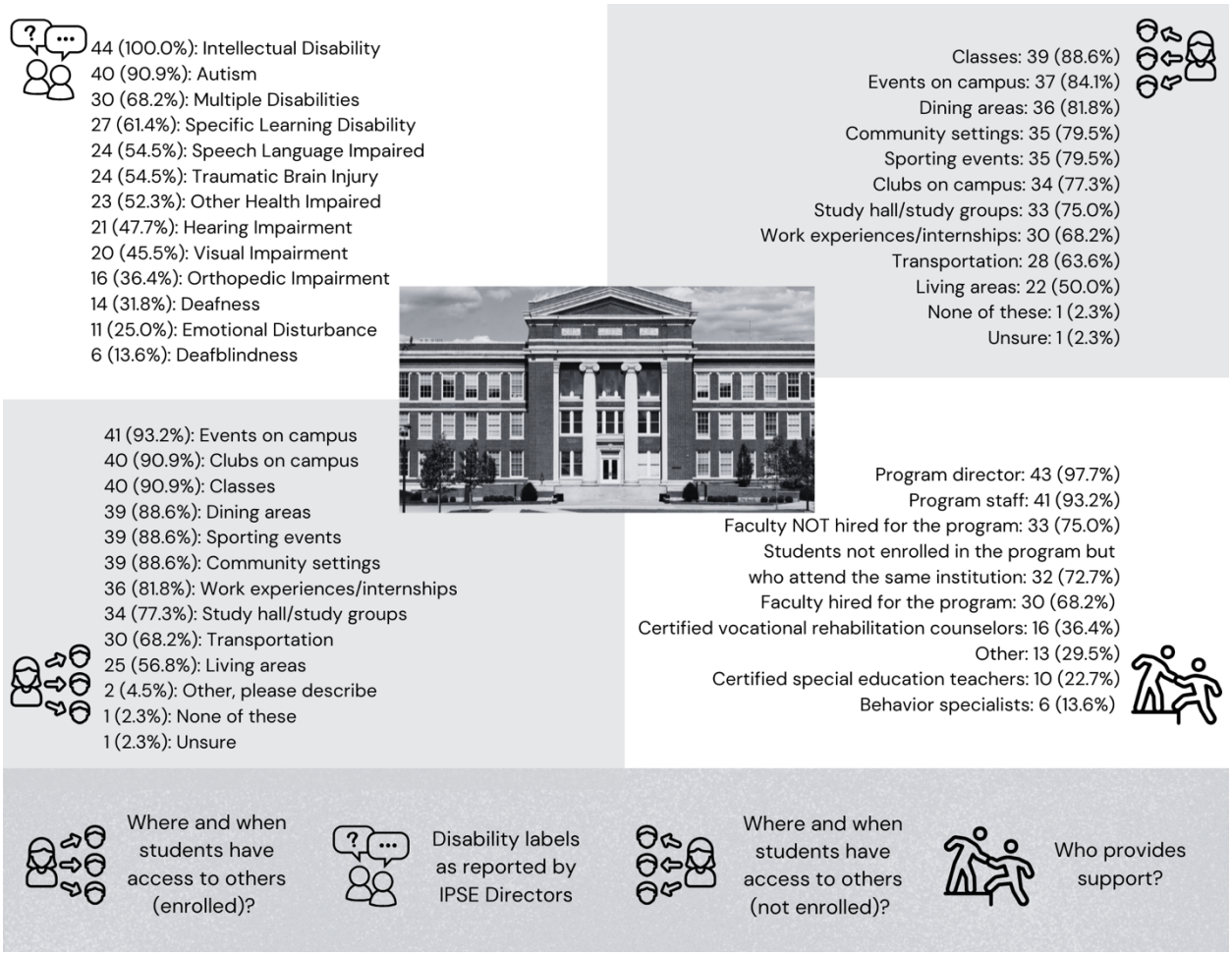

Table 1

Admissions Decisions Based on Type, Intensity, and Extent of Interference of Challenging Behavior

	Percent of Respondents				
Factor	Always	Sometimes	Never	It Depends	Unsure
Type of challenging behavior	19.6%	37.0%	10.9%	30.4%	2.2%
Intensity of challenging behavior	41.3%	37.0%	6.5%	15.2%	0.0%
Extent of interference of challenging behavior	43.5%	32.6%	6.5%	15.2%	2.2%

Table 2

Reported Behavior Types That Would Result in a Denial of Admission

Behavior Type	*n*	%
Physical aggression	37	80.4
Property damage	27	58.7
Verbal aggression	27	58.7
Elopement	25	54.3
Self-injurious behavior	20	43.5
Disruptive physical behavior	20	43.5
Non-participation/non-compliance	19	41.3
Disruptive verbal behavior	15	32.6
Other	10	21.7
No behavior results in denial	4	8.7
Stereotypical behavior	3	6.5
Unsure	2	4.3

Respondents also shared the information sources programs used during the admissions process in relation to student challenging behavior. The most common responses included the student's most recent IEP (95.7%), letters of recommendation (78.3%), most recent re-evaluation (76.1%), most recent BIP (71.7%), family reports (69.6%), medical records (60.9%), and direct observations conducted by the program (58.7%). Less common responses included the student's summary of performance document (41.3%), previously collected observational data (37%), and other sources of information (e.g., psychological assessments, adaptive assessments; 21.7%). As described by one program director, "We require current (within the last 3 years) psychological and adaptive assessments as part of our application process. If a challenging behavior is documented, we ask targeted questions about it in our interviews."

Supports Planning

Next, respondents indicated whether their program planned and implemented individualized behavior supports. Just under half (47.8%) reported their programs planned and implemented supports, with fewer indicating supports planning and implementation did not occur (39.1%), or they were unsure (13%). When asked what factors would prompt a program to plan and implement individualized behavior supports, respondents referenced the following: (a) type, intensity, frequency, or recency of challenging behavior; (b) adherence to the student code of conduct; (c) supports available to students; and (d) a reported need from someone (e.g., student, parent, faculty, staff member). In relation to type, intensity, frequency, or recency of challenging behavior, one program director explained individualized behavior supports were prompted by "any behavior that would disrupt the learning environment." Another suggested supports planning and implementation occurs for "behavior that is ongoing and interferes with others' learning or safety." Another participant reflected on the frequency and intensity of challenging behavior:

> We assume competence when all students start the program, however, if the student has 3 incidents of the same behavior after staff has intervened the team will analyze data collected and individualized behavior supports are implemented. The behavior has to be severe enough to warrant an intervention (for instance, hitting head in class when frustrated - this behavior may cause injury but also disrupts learning for the other students). The goal [is] to extinguish/decrease the behavior and the individualized supports would fade out.

Program directors indicated violations of student code of conduct often resulted in programs developing and implementing individualized behavior supports. Some respondents also suggested the degree to which existing supports were effective and supports were available through the program led to supports planning. For example, one program director noted:

> For instance, if a student has high anxiety and shuts down, we would support them by trying to anticipate what makes them anxious, surround them with the support of staff, frequent discussions on what is working/not working, what to do when feeling anxious, etc.

Another respondent explained, “Program supports are needed when student behaviors in the classroom interfere with their learning along with their inclusive peers. This could be due to noise, distractions, etc.” Finally, “student requests, parent requests, repeated negative experience with a challenging behavior, student injury to self or others, etc.” would prompt program directors to act in response to reports from various stakeholders.

Respondents reported several information sources used by programs to inform development of individualized behavior supports including preference assessments (77.3%), FBA (63.6%), record review (63.6%), and other types of information (e.g., student observations, discussions and interviews with different stakeholders; 27.3%). One participant (4.5%) was unsure, and another (4.5%) indicated their program did not use assessment information when planning individualized behavior supports. For those who noted FBA outcomes informed supports planning, all respondents specified their programs relied on interviews with student, staff, and faculty (100%), and most reported relying on direct observations of the students in settings where challenging behavior was present (92.9%). Less commonly reported FBA methods included rating scales (35.7%) and an experimental functional analysis (35.7%).

Respondents described a wide range of individualized behavior supports that had been identified for students in their program. These included various antecedent-based approaches (e.g., scheduled breaks, visual supports, instruction on replacement behaviors), consequence-based approaches (e.g., positive reinforcement, verbal rewards), adult-mediated supports (e.g., peer mentoring, one-on-one coaching), and programmatic supports (e.g., self-determination training camp to promote program readiness, consultation with disability services office). Finally, respondents indicated whether their program developed a formal plan outlining individualized behavior supports for students. Over half (54.6%) reported development of formal behavior support plans, whereas fewer indicated their program did not develop formal plans (22.7%) or were unsure (4.6%). Other respondents (18.2%) noted the need for a formal plan would be based on the level of support required or indicated their program was in the process of establishing a formalized approach.

Supports Implementation

The final section of the survey addressed implementation of individualized behavior supports. When asked who was involved in supports implementation, respondents indicated the student (100%), program staff (100%), program director (86.4%), faculty hired to work specifically within the program (68.2%), family (59.1%), community support personnel (40.9%), the institution’s counseling resource personnel (36.4%), peers or other students (31.8%), faculty not hired to work specifically within the program (27.3%), behavior specialists (27.3%), disability office personnel (27.3%), and academic advisors (13.6%). One participant indicated personnel affiliated with a university autism center were involved in supports implementation, and another suggested typically the student, their coach, and the project coordinator who was a licensed mental health professional were involved. Another noted, “the ABA specialist ... is responsible for creating and overseeing the implementation of the behavior programs.”

When asked whether those who implemented individualized behavior supports received additional support and/or formal training to promote successful implementation, most responded in the affirmative (76.2%), whereas 14.3% and 9.2% indicated this was not the case for their program or were unsure, respectively. The most commonly reported approaches for supporting or formally training implementers were written materials (100%), one-to-one coaching or mentoring from program or institution personnel (75%), and workshops provided by the program or institution (56.3%). Less common approaches included online courses or materials (43.8%), websites (37.5%), webinars (25%), and attendance at externally provided professional conferences and workshops (12.5%). Respondents reported the program director (81.3%), faculty hired to work specifically within the program (56.3%), and program staff (56.3%) were most commonly responsible for providing additional training and support to those who implemented individualized behavior supports. Others included behavior specialists (31.3%), faculty not hired to work specifically within the program (18.8%), and peers and other students (6.3%).

Respondents also shared whether their program monitored and measured the extent to which individualized behavior supports are implemented as intended. Most reported implementation fidelity was monitored and measured in some capacity (90.5%), with fewer suggesting fidelity was not monitored (4.8%) or being unsure (4.8%). Similarly, when asked whether the effectiveness of individualized behavior supports was monitored and measured, most respondents responded in the affirmative (71.4%). However, slightly under a quarter (23.8%) were unsure, and 4.8% reported not measuring effectiveness. Respondents reported several different strategies for monitoring implementation fidelity and effectiveness of planned supports that fell into one of two categories: direct or indirect data collection methods. Direct data collection strategies included observations conducted by faculty and staff. Indirect strategies, which were more commonly reported, included rating scales and checklists; student self-report and input via meetings and interviews; and reports and input from faculty, staff, and parents. One program director discussed a systematic approach for tracking student progress: “The program utilizes a software called Therap. Data about the student and behaviors is input and we are able gauge the frequency of the behavior.” Another discussed ongoing assessment in collaboration with educational coaches: “If a student is identified as needing focused behavioral support, the project coordinator (a licensed mental health professional) checks in weekly with assigned educational coach(es) to review progress. Coaches log observations after each meeting with the student.”

Discussion

Despite the prevalence of challenging behavior exhibited among individuals with ID (Simó-Pinatella et al., 2019) and the increase in students with ID attending IPSE programs nationally (Grigal et al., 2019; Rooney-Kron et al., 2022), research exploring the ways in which IPSE programs make admissions decisions and plan and implement supports for students who exhibit challenging behavior is limited. The purpose of this exploratory survey study was to understand the admissions decisions for prospective students who engage in challenging behavior and individualized behavior supports planning and implementation for admitted students from the perspective of IPSE program directors. In the following sections, we highlight key findings organized by our three

research questions and implications for practice, suggestions for future research, and limitations to the study. Due to the exploratory nature of this study and our inability to determine whether the 46 participating programs were representative of the full list of IPSE programs from which we recruited, we urge readers to exercise caution when interpreting the findings and implications.

Admissions

Although limited, previous research has suggested challenging behavior may play a role in admission decisions. For example, Grigal et al. (2012) collected descriptive information on IPSE programs and found behavioral expectations were among common IPSE admissions criteria. Likewise, Papay and Bambara (2011) reported challenging behavior as a barrier to admissions for IPSE programs for students with ID, particularly for programs in which students with ID had limited access to the same resources as their peers. In the current study, most program directors reported challenging behavior as a factor that influenced admissions decisions in some capacity. Although this finding is not necessarily surprising given similar trends in inclusive K–12 settings, it is concerning that 13% of respondents reported students who engage in challenging behavior would never be considered for admissions, especially considering students with ID are more likely to exhibit challenging behavior than their peers without disabilities (Simó-Pinatella et al., 2019). One respondent stated, "...We are an academic program not a therapeutic program." This IPSE program might represent one that does not have a strong model for either student inclusion or individualized behavior supports. Thus, it seems logical IPSE programs without a strong model for student inclusion or individualized behavior supports may be a barrier affecting admission. This is troubling given that not all program directors reported reviewing either a student's IEP or BIP as part of the admissions process. Because these documents provide details on the supports students needed to be successful in educational K–12 settings, it is unclear on what basis programs make admissions decisions when these documents are not reviewed.

We also found only 8.7% of program directors reported students who exhibit challenging behavior were always eligible for admissions. Although this represents a very small number of the surveyed sample, it is promising there are IPSE programs that accept students despite the presence of challenging behavior. This might indicate these programs have a stronger model for inclusive practices and a more robust system for individualized supports than others.

Overall, there was a wide range of differences in how IPSE program directors reported admissions decisions regarding challenging behavior. Almost half of the surveyed program directors indicated student eligibility for admissions would be based on various factors related to challenging behavior (e.g., severity, recency, form). Unsurprisingly, severe, destructive, and disruptive challenging behavior (e.g., property damage, aggression) were commonly noted as factors that would result in a denial of admission. The variability of factors may be attributed to the absence of a governing legal framework, such as IDEA (2004), that protects college students' rights in admissions decisions for students with ID in IPSE programs that goes beyond the idea of access provided by ADA (1990). Aside from factors related to the form, severity, intensity, and

recency of behavior, several IPSE program directors reported their admissions decisions were based on the college or institution's student code of conduct. Although this is understandable from an admissions standpoint, it does not consider how differently students might conduct themselves if given appropriate individualized behavior supports.

Supports Planning and Implementation

In the current survey study, approximately 48% of the IPSE program directors reported their programs planned and implemented supports for students with ID who exhibit challenging behavior, with over half of these respondents indicating FBA informed the supports planning process. This is encouraging given the critical importance of ensuring alignment between individualized behavior supports and behavioral function as determined through an FBA (Jeong & Copeland, 2020). However, it is important to note only approximately half of these respondents reported using a formal plan to outline behavior supports, and a quarter indicated their programs do not measure whether supports are effective for the student.

Nearly 40% of the IPSE program directors surveyed indicated supports planning and implementation did not occur at all in their program. This is concerning, as the purpose of individualized behavior supports is to support the individual in decreasing their challenging behavior and learning new skills. Without individualized supports in place, student challenging behavior likely will persist, thus potentially limiting access and meaningful participation in various college experiences. Of the respondents, 13% reported they were unsure whether their program planned or implemented supports for students with challenging behavior. This could suggest a lack of support and training in supporting behavior change for students with ID. Professional recommendations from K-12 settings highlight the critical importance of developing formal BIPs based on FBA outcomes, as function-based interventions generally are more effective than those not aligned to function (Jeong & Copeland, 2020). For the respondents who indicated their program planned and implemented individual behavior supports, a wide range of personnel were reported as being involved in the behavior supports implementation; the highest reported involved personnel including the student themselves, program staff, and the program director. These findings align with recent recommendations for student-centered behavior supports planning (Carpenter et al., 2024). Relatedly, just over 80% reported the personnel responsible for training the implementers were the program directors. Although some program directors may have had expertise in this area, it is unlikely this is true across all program directors. One program reported having an "ABA specialist" who held a master's degree in Applied Behavior Analysis and was responsible for overseeing implementation and monitoring student behavior data. Although this is likely not the case across most IPSE programs, it might be advantageous for program directors to seek out the expertise of a professional in PBIS, such as a BCBA, to support the planning and implementation of individualized behavior supports for students in their programs who exhibit challenging behavior.

Implications

Although IDEA (2004) encourages the use of individualized behavior supports for K–12 students with disabilities who exhibit challenging behavior, this legal framework is not applicable after a student graduates or exits from their secondary education. Therefore, it stands to reason IPSE programs do not, in general, have strong models for behavior supports for students with ID. Although ADA (1990) ensures people with disabilities access to public and private settings, it offers less-intensive supports than IDEA (2004). Given that IDEA promotes behavior supports (e.g., PBIS) in K–12 settings, students with ID who exhibit challenging behaviors may experience a gap in supports upon their exit from K–12 settings, as ADA emphasizes access but not the entitlement of services. Given that there are differences in legal requirements related to challenging behavior in K–12 settings and postschool settings, it is not surprising how challenging behavior was reported by IPSE program directors (e.g., over 25% of respondents reported being unsure of or not collecting fidelity of behavioral implementation supports data). In K–12 settings, IDEA mandates educational teams create and implement a BIP based on the results of an FBA in response to a change in placement when challenging behavior is considered a manifestation of the student's disability, promoting a proactive approach to behavioral needs through IEP planning and support. School-wide PBIS programs encourage positive reinforcement and teaching of social, emotional, and behavioral skills for all students, regardless of ability. Although an exciting and challenging time for all students as they prepare for adulthood, this may be particularly challenging for students with disabilities to transition from K–12 to postschool settings. Given that students are guaranteed access through ADA, not being allowed to access IPSE programs based on challenging behavior does not seem to align with the spirit of ADA's commitment to access.

The concept of access is critical and must be considered within unique contexts. For example, once students graduate from high school or otherwise complete their secondary education, they must meet general admissions requirements for the postsecondary institution and related programs. This is also true of students with ID, as they prepare for enrollment into IPSE programs. Given the less-intensive supports of ADA (1990), this means that no proactive behavioral support systems, mirroring those in K–12 settings, are legally required to be implemented. For some IPSE programs, there may be a variety of protocols in place to assess eligibility for admission; however, as seen in the current study, only about half (47.8%) reported using a formal process for the admissions eligibility. Additionally, several (39.1%) indicated supports planning and implementation did not occur at their institution. Some IPSE programs reported using direct measures, indirect measures, or both. Perhaps, if more IPSE programs had a formalized process using direct measures, they may have a better sense of the supports needed by students to meet their needs. Further, many (39.1%) IPSE program directors also reported that the supports planning and the implementation processes for students were lacking or nonexistent. This is a notable contrast with best practice recommendations for K–12 settings (Collins & Zirkel, 2017). Along with programmatic change considerations, additional federal legislative guidance on IPSE programs and challenging behavior could be helpful. Perhaps, a revision to the Higher Education Opportunity Act (2008) could provide additional guidance for IPSE programs.

Special education teachers often report feeling ill-prepared to deliver transition services (Morningstar et al., 2018; Plotner & Simonsen, 2018; Williams-Diehm et al., 2018), and this may be especially true in relation to challenging behavior (Westling, 2009). As such it is critical that special education teachers partner with others, including professionals and families. For example, teachers may engage in vertical teaming (McDonald & Lovelace, 2010). Vertical teaming has been used across K–12 environments and may be relevant to transition services for students with disabilities exiting K–12 settings and enrolling in IPSE programs. Specifically for students with challenging behavior, it would be helpful to learn about what previous supports have been effective for the student, along with assessing how these strategies may or may not easily translate into IPSE settings. It also is critical to collaborate with students and families to understand which strategies have been helpful for them. This presents an opportunity to engage in family involvement and family engagement, both predictors of postschool success (Mazzotti et al., 2021).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

There are several limitations that should be considered when interpreting our findings. First, it is important to acknowledge that Think College states information included in their program database at the time of the study was submitted by college programs. Thus, given that our sample was limited to programs listed in this database, it is possible that we did not contact all eligible programs in the United States during the recruitment phase. We also were unable to determine whether our sample was representative of the larger population of IPSE programs and calculate a response rate due to our sampling procedures. Future researchers should ensure the sample is not only representative but also adequate in size to permit sophisticated statistical analyses to answer inferential research questions outside of the scope of this exploratory study (e.g., exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses to understand what factors influence decisions of admissions, behavior supports planning, behavior supports implementation decisions).

Other limitations relate to the design of the study, which focused exclusively on perceptions of program directors. This exploratory survey study served as an important initial step toward understanding the admissions process for prospective students who engage in challenging behavior and behavior supports planning and implementation within the context of IPSE programs; however, it will be necessary in future research to examine perceptions across a wide range of stakeholders (e.g., peers, college course instructors, individuals with ID). Although the literature is replete with examples of person-centered planning for individuals with ID and has been identified as a research-based practice for students with autism to develop future expectations (e.g., Carpenter et al., 2023; Rowe et al., 2021), research often falls short in considering the perceptions of individuals with ID, particularly in relation to behavior supports (Huntington et al., 2024). As such, we strongly encourage researchers to engage in scholarship that centers the voice of individuals with ID who engage in challenging behavior.

We encourage additional work exploring prior training and training needs among IPSE staff as it relates to challenging behavior and documented policies and procedures

of IPSE programs related to admissions and supports planning and implementation for students who engage in challenging behavior. For example, a document analysis of admissions criteria and other related resources on program websites and in program handbooks may provide additional insight. Furthermore, qualitative approaches may aid in examining how perceptions and documented policies and procedures might differ from actual practice. Likewise, qualitative inquiry that involves interview and focus group approaches would permit researchers to pose probing questions necessary to clarify and/or explain outcomes of this exploratory study. For instance, we learned programs reviewed a wide range of information during the admissions process and while planning individualized behavior supports (e.g., most recent IEPs and BIPs, observational data) but were unable to determine how this information was used to inform decision making. Collectively, these different methodological approaches would offer the field a more comprehensive understanding of how and why challenging behavior influences admissions decisions and the ways in which students' behavioral needs are addressed in IPSE programs, thus potentially informing future programmatic work focused on promoting more inclusive and person-centered experiences for individuals with ID who aspire to attend college.

Conclusion

Rooney-Kron and colleagues (2022) voiced the sentiment that because of the increase in students with disabilities pursuing postsecondary education opportunities, it is critical that IPSE programs make important decisions surrounding supports and services. They emphasize that these supports should take into consideration student dignity of risk. We believe this should extend to including behavioral supports and services to support students who exhibit challenging behavior. We encourage novel and continued collaboration among families and professionals in the fields of K–12 education, higher education/IPSE programs, PBIS (e.g., BCBA), pre-existing national technical assistance centers, and professionals' organizations toward the common goal of supporting students who exhibit challenging behavior as they transition into IPSE settings.

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Supplemental Table 1

Survey Items and Response Options

Survey item	Response options/format
1. Admissions	
1.1 To what extent are students who have engaged in CB prior to applying to your program eligible for admission?	Always/Sometimes/Never/It depends, please describe/Unsure
1.2 Which of the following behaviors may result in denial of admission? Check all that apply.	Physical aggression/Property damage/Self-injurious behavior/Elopement/Verbal aggression/Disruptive verbal behavior/Disruptive physical behavior/Nonparticipation/non-compliance/Stereotypical behavior/None of the above/Other, please describe/Unsure
1.3 To what extent does your program make admissions decisions based on prospective student's type of CB (e.g., physical aggression, self-injurious behavior)?	Always/Sometimes/Never/It depends, please describe/Unsure
1.4 To what extent does your program make admissions decisions based on the intensity of prospective student's CB (e.g., severity of behavior)?	Always/Sometimes/Never/It depends, please describe/Unsure
1.5 To what extent does your program make admissions decisions based on the extent of interference of a prospective student's CB (e.g., the degree to which the CB interferes with student learning or social experiences)?	Always/Sometimes/Never/It depends, please describe/Unsure

1.6 Which of the following do/does your program review during the admissions process in relation to CB? Check all that apply.	Most recent IEP/Most recent BIP/Most recent re-evaluation/Summary of Performance/Medical records/Direct observations conducted by your program for the purpose of admissions/Previously collected observation data/Letters of recommendation/Family reports/None of the above/Other, please describe/Unsure
1.7 Does your program plan and implement individualized behavior supports for students in your program?	Yes/No/Unsure
2. Individualized behavior supports planning	
2.1 What would prompt your program to plan IBS for a student in your program?	Open-ended
2.2 What type of information is used to inform the development of IBS for students in your program? Check all that apply.	Preference assessment to understand student preferences and what motivates a student/Functional behavior assessment to understand why CB occurs/Record review (e.g., IEP, previous behavior support plan, psychological evaluations, educational evaluations, medical records)/Other, please describe/Unsure/Our program does not use assessments for planning IBS
2.3 What type of functional behavior assessment approaches does your program use when planning for individual supports? Check all that apply.	Rating scales/Interviews with student, staff, faculty, etc./Observation of student in locations where CB occurs/Experimental functional analysis in locations where CB occurs to confirm or disconfirm hypothesis about why CB occurs/Other, please describe
2.4 Please describe the IBS that have been identified for students in your program related to CB.	Open-ended

2.5 When students in your program require IBS related to CB, does your program develop a formal plan outlining the behavior supports?	Yes/No/Other, please describe/Unsure
3. Individualized behavior supports implementation	
3.1 Who is involved in the implementation of IBS for students in your program? Check all that apply.	Student requiring behavior supports/Family/Faculty not hired specifically to work within the program (e.g., professors, adjunct instructors)/Institution administrator/Faculty hired specifically to work within the program/Program director/Program staff/Peers, other students/Behavior specialists/Disability office personnel/Institution counseling resource personnel/Academic advisor/Institution administrators/Community support personnel/Other, please describe/Unsure
3.2 Do those who implement the IBS receive additional support and/or formal training to promote successful implementation?	Yes/No/Unsure
3.3 What types of supports and/or formal training does your program provide to those who implement IBS? Check all that apply.	Providing written materials/Online courses or modules/Workshops provided by the program and/or institution/Workshops provided externally/One-to one coaching or mentoring from program and/or institution personnel/Attending professional conferences/Websites/Webinars/Other, please describe/Unsure
3.4 Who provides additional support and/or formal training to those who implement IBS? Check all that apply.	Faculty not hired specifically to work within the program (e.g., professors, adjunct instructors)/Faculty hired specifically to work within the program/Program director/Program staff/Peers, other students/Behavior

	specialists/Institution administrators/Other, please describe/Unsure
3.5 Does your program monitor and measure the extent to which IBS are implemented as intended?	Yes/No/Unsure
3.6 How does your program monitor and measure the extent to which IBS are implemented as intended?	Open-ended
3.7 Is the effectiveness of the IBS monitored and measured in your program?	Yes/No/Unsure
3.8 How is the effectiveness of the IBS monitored and measured in your program?	Open-ended

Note. CB = challenging behavior, IBS = individualized behavior supports.