

Explore the Social Experiences of College Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

Han Wang, M.Ed

*Department of Educational and Developmental Science
University of South Carolina*

Wenrong Guo, MAT

*Meadow Glen School
Lexington School District One*

Abstract

This study explores the social experiences of college students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) enrolled in an Inclusive Postsecondary Education (IPSE) program. Using semi-structured interviews and visualization techniques, nine students shared their perspectives on the quality and types of relationships they have formed. Findings show strong, familial bonds within the program and more limited, yet meaningful, connections outside—typically through clubs and faith-based groups. Some students spoke about the complexities of pursuing romantic relationships and maintaining friendships beyond the program. The study calls attention to the need for more inclusive social opportunities and peer engagement across the broader campus community.

Keywords: postsecondary education, intellectual and developmental disability, social inclusion, qualitative research.

Plain Language Summary

- This study explores how college students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) build friendships and find belonging on campus.
- **What we did:** We interviewed nine college juniors and seniors enrolled in an inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) program, asking them directly about their social lives.
 - Students also sketched their own social circles before each interview.
- **What we found:** Students described deep, family-like bonds within their IPSE program, often calling peers "brother" or "sister."
 - Friendships outside the program were rarer, typically forming through faith-based groups where students felt genuinely welcomed.
 - Classrooms were rarely mentioned as places where friendships started.

- Some students recalled feeling shy or facing hurtful comments due to their disability, yet most said they wanted more friends and would welcome new chances to connect.
- **Conclusion:** Real friendships for students with IDD don't happen automatically—they grow in intentional, welcoming spaces.
 - Everyday campus life, especially the classroom, remains largely out of reach.
 - Colleges serious about inclusion must do more than open the door. Concrete steps include:
 - involving alumni as mentors, training club leaders to reach out to students with IDD, and
 - redesigning classroom activities to encourage peer collaboration—so that belonging extends beyond the IPSE program into campus life as a whole.

Social inclusion is significant in shaping quality of life through the establishment of meaningful relationships and a genuine sense of belonging (Naylor & Cowie, 1999; Rimmerman, 2013). Developing strong social relationships plays an essential role in improving mental health, reducing loneliness, and enhancing personal growth and active participation in community life (Tregaskis, 2004). For students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), social inclusion is not only related to academic success but is also vital for emotional health and community integration (Amado et al., 2013; Strayhorn, 2018; Wehmeyer, 2013).

Individuals with IDD face distinct barriers to social inclusion, including negative social attitudes, inaccessible physical and social environments, and limited support systems (Eisenman et al., 2013; Prince & Hadwin, 2013; Strayhorn, 2018). Postsecondary education settings have unique social structures characterized by greater independence, peer-driven interactions, and decentralized social opportunities, which may create additional challenges for students with IDD when navigating social relationships and campus life. Therefore, it is critical to examine how social inclusion operates within postsecondary contexts because campus environments can either reinforce or reduce the social barriers experienced by students with IDD (Osterman, 2000; Rossetti et al., 2018[MOU1.1]).

Inclusive Postsecondary Education (IPSE) programs have expanded rapidly over the past decade (Becht et al., 2020). These programs improve employment outcomes (Moore & Schelling, 2015), expand social networks, and increase campus engagement (Lee & Taylor, 2022). Research on IPSE programs has continued to grow, focusing on identifying key program elements, exploring student success, and assessing effective implementation (McEathron et al., 2013; Whirley et al., 2020). Historically, students with IDD were rarely encouraged to attend college because many assumed they could not manage college-level coursework without substantial support (Thoma et al., 2011[MOU2.1]). Legislation in the past two decades, including the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA, 2008), has promoted access to higher education through initiatives such as Transition Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability (TPSID) grants (Grigal & Papay, 2018). These programs aim to provide students with a full college

experience through adapted coursework, vocational training, and social skill development specifically designed for individuals with IDD (Rooney-Kron et al., 2022[MOU3.1]). Inclusive postsecondary programs allow students to pursue academic and professional goals while becoming active members of their communities (Aylward & Bruce, 2012[MOU4.1]).

Despite these positive developments, students with IDD continue to experience challenges in postsecondary settings (Lee & Taylor, 2022). Many have limited contact with nondisabled peers and report social isolation (Grigal et al., 2012). Such isolation is often linked to stigma, peers' lack of awareness, and institutional practices that are not yet fully inclusive (Osterman, 2000).

Although a substantial body of research examines academic success and career preparation within IPSE programs, relatively few studies focus specifically on social inclusion (Lombardi et al., 2016). Yet meaningful social experiences—particularly the development of genuine peer relationships—are crucial for emotional well-being and long-term community participation. Scholars emphasize the importance of structured supports, such as peer mentoring and organized social opportunities, in helping students with disabilities feel connected (Grigal & Papay, 2018). Peer mentoring, in particular, is recognized as an effective means of building friendships between students with and without disabilities, narrowing social gaps, and fostering a more inclusive campus culture (Carter et al., 2019[MOU5.1]; Grigal & Papay, 2018[MOU6.1]). For these reasons, IPSE programs serve as a valuable context for exploring how students with IDD engage in and sustain social inclusion during college. In addition to peer mentoring, other strategies—such as inclusive student clubs, social events, and shared learning activities—are also found to promote meaningful interactions between students with and without disabilities (Carter & McCabe, 2021). Faculty and staff play equally important roles in shaping inclusive campus culture. Training programs that prepare educators and personnel to engage students with IDD can ensure that inclusion extends beyond classroom participation to extracurricular and social domains (Scott et al., 2024).

Despite these promising efforts, attitudinal bias among nondisabled peers, faculty, and institutional systems remains a major barrier to full inclusion (Shogren et al., 2015). Research indicates that while many students express positive attitudes toward people with disabilities in general, they often fail to translate those attitudes into friendships or daily interactions (Siperstein et al., 2007). This gap suggests a need for initiatives that not only raise awareness but also create opportunities for meaningful social contact—for instance, through service-learning courses that pair students with and without IDD in shared activities (Grigal & Papay, 2018).

Previous studies have explored the social lives of students with IDD in postsecondary programs, particularly regarding how friendships develop within those programs. Spruit and Carter (2021) examined students and alumni of IPSE programs and described how they viewed friendship structures within their networks. Building on this foundation, the current study further investigates the quality and resilience of these relationships, focusing on friendships that extend beyond program boundaries into the broader campus community. While Spruit and Carter (2021) emphasized the value of

friendships within IPSE spaces, this study adds a new perspective by examining how students with IDD form relationships with nondisabled peers outside formal program contexts. Understanding the extent to which students with IDD engage in campus clubs, student organizations, and off-campus communities provides insight into their overall social integration.

This study also examines the challenges and supports that shape students' social experiences and sense of belonging from their own perspectives. By contributing to the growing literature on inclusive postsecondary education, this research aims to inform future practice and program development toward more inclusive and supportive college environments. The findings may offer practical strategies for universities, faculty, and disability service providers to foster social opportunities and improve the quality of life for students with IDD in the long term. The following are the two research questions guiding the study:

1. What are the types and characteristics of interpersonal relationships among students enrolled in the IPSE program, both within and outside the program?
2. In what ways do students in the IPSE program experience challenges in their social lives and how do these experiences shape their sense of belonging and interpersonal relationships?

Method

This study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews and social connection visualization. This approach was particularly appropriate for this study because the research questions focused on students' lived experiences, emotional connections, and personal interpretations of belonging—phenomena that could not be fully captured through quantitative measures alone (Creswell & Poth, 2016). It also aligned with the research goal of amplifying students' voices and allowing them to describe their social worlds in their own terms rather than relying on secondhand reports from staff or caregivers (Nind, 2017). Because some students had difficulties with verbal communication, visualization tools were included to enhance expression. These tools included participant-created social network maps and visual drawings that allowed students to represent relationships using names, initials, symbols, or simple sketches. Prior research demonstrated that individuals with IDD responded well to visual formats that supported communication and comprehension (Wu, 2021). Similarly, Andradi (2022) found that visual interfaces facilitated social connections among individuals with intellectual disabilities by bridging communication gaps. The visualizations created by participants varied widely, ranging from structured diagrams to free-form drawings, and helped participants communicate the nature, frequency, and significance of their relationships in ways that felt comfortable to them. The semi-structured interviews then allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' personal perceptions and experiences. Thematic analysis was applied with open coding to identify themes emerging directly from the data.

Interview Protocol

The interview protocol was developed specifically for this study. The research team first conducted a comprehensive literature review on the social lives of college students with IDD to identify current challenges and research priorities (Amado et al., 2013; Grigal & Papay, 2018; Lombardi et al., 2016; Strayhorn, 2018; Tregaskis, 2004). Based on these findings, the team designed an initial interview guide that addressed the research questions and incorporated follow-up prompts suitable for narrative inquiry (Craig, 2011; Murray, 2009). Two professionals working in IPSE programs reviewed the draft protocol and provided feedback. Their suggestions resulted in multiple rounds of refinement of the protocol. The final protocol contained 18 items organized into four sections addressing social experiences within the IPSE program, social experiences outside the program, social supports received, and feelings of connection and belonging. For example, participants were asked questions such as “Can you share a particular experience where you formed a meaningful connection with someone inside the ... program?”, “Can you share a particular experience where you formed a meaningful connection with someone outside the ... program?”, and “Can you describe how you feel when you're on campus or in your classes? Do you feel comfortable and welcome in the spaces you're a part of?”

Each section contained specific items and related probes. For example, when participants discussed social relationships in the program, follow-up questions included, “Can you tell me about an interaction with a peer or staff member that was especially meaningful to you?” or “How often do you socialize with peers outside class?” When exploring belonging, students were asked, “Have there been any times when you felt especially connected or disconnected?”

The Social Connection Visualization procedure began with a five-minute educational video, *Different Types of Relationships* (Wagner, 2020), which illustrated concepts such as boundaries and support using simple graphics. After watching the film, students created personal visualizations of their social networks. All participants completed this visualization activity during the interview process, regardless of their level of verbal communication ability. The activity served as a tool to help students identify and represent their social networks before discussing them in the interview. They were encouraged to use initials, symbols, or drawings to represent the people in their lives and to organize them by relationship type (e.g., family, peers within the program, peers outside the program, mentors, paid staff). This approach helped reveal both the structure and scope of students' relationships and enabled researchers to identify potential areas of social isolation or inclusion (Epskamp et al., 2012; Marriott et al., 2021; McCarty et al., 2007; Wu et al., 2019).

Participants and Procedures

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling from an IPSE program at a university in the southeastern United States. Eligible participants were juniors or seniors with documented IDD, as they had more extensive experience in both academic and social aspects of the program. Nine students participated in total (four females, five males, four seniors, five juniors).

Interviews were conducted in a quiet campus setting to ensure that participants felt comfortable and relaxed. The data collection process began with the short educational film and the visualization exercise described above. Students were given approximately five minutes to complete their visualizations, with the option to modify them later during the interview. They were told that there was no right or wrong way to represent relationships—the goal was to depict their experiences authentically.

The semi-structured interviews that followed lasted 30–40 minutes. Interviewers referred to participants' visualizations throughout the discussion, asking clarifying questions such as, "Can you tell me more about this person you drew here?" or "Why did you place this person close to or far from yourself?" This process helped students elaborate on the significance of each connection and facilitated richer, more detailed narratives.

Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent. All names used in transcripts were pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. Students were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

The interview data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach allowed themes to emerge directly from participants' responses without being driven by pre-existing theoretical assumptions and was well suited for identifying and interpreting patterns in complex qualitative data (Guest, 2012).

To ensure accuracy and strengthen understanding, real-time member checking occurred throughout the interviews. Interviewers summarized participants' answers after each question and asked for confirmation or clarification as needed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After all interviews were completed, each participant received a summary of their transcript to review. For participants with reading difficulties, audio versions of the summaries were also provided to ensure accessibility (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Feedback could be shared via email, voicemail, or other preferred formats, allowing flexibility for diverse communication needs (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Interview recordings were then transcribed and cleaned to remove extraneous content and improve clarity (Saldaña, 2016). The first author and an independent researcher with no prior contact with the program served as the two coders. Each independently reviewed the transcripts and participants' visualizations, applying open coding to identify meaningful data units. Through this process, 50 distinct codes were generated to represent key ideas expressed in the data (Charmaz, 2006).

Codes were then grouped into larger categories based on conceptual similarity. The categories included Types of Relationships, Relationship Descriptions, Friendship Values, Clubs and Organizations, Sense of Belonging, Challenges and Barriers, and Types of Support and Support Needs.

To ensure consistency and accuracy, the coders discussed discrepancies and referred back to transcripts and visualizations as needed (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Consensus was reached through iterative negotiation until both coders agreed on the final list of codes and categories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A third researcher, who was not involved in data collection or coding, reviewed the coding and theme development process. This external review helped reduce potential bias and enhance analytical rigor (Anfara & Mertz, 2014).

Finally, codes and categories were synthesized into overarching themes. These themes were reviewed and refined to ensure that they accurately represented participants' perspectives and fully captured the dynamics of social inclusion for college students with IDD (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013). Multiple researchers were engaged in the coding, analysis, and interpretation of the data to ensure diverse perspectives and enhance analytic rigor throughout the analytic process (Brantlinger et al., 2005).

Although the visualizations were not coded in the same manner as transcript data, they were examined holistically to identify relationship patterns, levels of perceived closeness, and types of social contacts. These observations were then triangulated with interview data to verify accuracy and provide additional clarity when participants described their relationships verbally. The alignment between drawn networks and narrative responses further strengthened the credibility of the findings and supported our interpretation of their social experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Positionality

The first author was the interviewer and also served as an instructor within the IPSE program, having worked closely with students for more than three years. The second author served as a supervisor and had overseen the program for over a decade. This familiarity helped build trust and rapport, which enabled more authentic and insightful data collection. Additionally, as an Asian woman, the interviewer brought cultural sensitivity and cross-cultural understanding to interactions with participants. However, insider knowledge may have introduced potential bias in interpreting the data. Familiarity and personal investment could have led to the unintentional minimization of program challenges. Similarly, the instructional role could have created power dynamics that might have influenced participants' responses due to social desirability bias. To mitigate these risks and enhance the credibility of the findings, the research team included diverse perspectives and cross-checked interpretations throughout the analytic process. Importantly, an independent coder external to the program reviewed the data analysis procedures, which helped identify and address potential biases in interpretation.

Ethical Considerations

This study received approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) before data collection began. The purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits of participation were explained to all participants in detail. Procedures regarding audio recording and data handling were also clearly described. Written informed consent was

obtained from the participants, who were also assured that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any point without penalty. Participants were informed that all personal identifiers would be removed and that confidentiality would be protected in all reports and publications.

Findings

This section presents the study's findings in relation to the research questions. Drawing on participants' interview narratives and their social connection visualizations, the analysis examines how students described their relationships, where these relationships were formed, and how they navigated social experiences on campus. The findings are organized into themes that reflect the structure of students' social networks and the meanings they attributed to their relationships.

Research Question 1: Types and Characteristics of Interpersonal Relationships Among Students

The nine participants represented a small but diverse group, including one Pacific Islander student, one Asian student, and seven White students. Visualization data revealed that participants' social networks ranged from 5 to 16 total connections, based on the number of relationships each student drew in their social connection visualizations. These totals were based on the number of relationships each participant included in their social connection drawings. The visual maps helped students remember who was meaningful to them, including connections they might otherwise have forgotten to mention.

Family and peers within the IPSE program consistently served as important sources of support. Most students identified at least two family members and two friends within the program. Friendships with non-disabled peers were also common, though the level of closeness varied. For example, Josse identified seven non-disabled peers, while Conner identified five. Romantic relationships were rarely reported, mentioned by only two students. Paid staff members also played meaningful roles in several students' social support systems.

Students usually attended club activities on their own, with program-assigned social engagement coaches or peer mentors offering initial accompaniment and follow-up support when needed. Faith-based organizations were identified as the most common spaces where students formed friendships with non-disabled peers. Interest-based clubs were mentioned less frequently but still served as additional avenues for peer connection. Employment and internships provided opportunities for engagement in professional contexts. Unexpectedly, university classes were not typically cited as places to build friendships, suggesting ongoing challenges in academic inclusion.

"Like Family": Deep Bonds Among IPSE Peers

Students in the IPSE program often described their peer relationships using familial terms, reflecting bonds that extended beyond typical college friendships. Andy shared, "I called J my brother because he's with me all the time. We never break up, and brothers

stick together until I graduate. Then, when he's graduating, we'll be back together again." Ellen echoed this sentiment,

He's like a brother. Yeah, he became a little brother to us." Aaron's reflection went a step further, describing a recently graduated peer as, "M was a big brother to me. Like the father of all of us. He is a mentor.

Female participants also highlighted the depth of their friendships. Bethany and Olivia, who are roommates, each described the other as their best friend. Bethany shared, "Olivia is a very close friend of mine, like a sister. While she is away, I miss her a lot... We help each other." Olivia similarly described Bethany as her "closest companion" on campus. This illustrated how students relied on one another not only for companionship but also for emotional guidance and informal mentorship.

Cassidy offered a different perspective on friendship development, "We were roommates before, but while we lived together, we were not close. Now, we are not roommates, but it is funny—we've become close friends. She calls me every once in a while, and we talk and laugh." This shift suggested that physical proximity may initiate but does not necessarily sustain meaningful connections. In contrast, continuity and emotional availability appeared more central to maintaining friendships. Josse added nuance by describing a friendship that included conflict but endured through mutual care: "We get on each other's nerves, but we still love each other and hang out." Such candid portrayals suggested that these friendships were not idealized; rather, they were grounded in acceptance and reconciliation. Even students who described themselves as socially reserved found meaningful companionship in the program. Cassidy, who noted that "socializing is not my thing," still reported having a peer she considered a good friend.

Faith and Interests: Friendships Beyond IPSE

Many students described forming friendships outside the IPSE program through faith-based groups, which provided both social and spiritual connections. These spaces—such as Chi Alpha, Baptist Collegiate Ministry (BCM), and YMCA—offered consistent weekly gatherings, often organized around small groups, where students felt seen, supported, and included. Josse, for example, met nearly all of her non-disabled friends through such groups. She recalled, "M loves Jesus and loves to serve people. She always picked me up from my apartment to go to the events. She is my small group leader... very sweet." She also shared, "H always prays for me. When I feel sad, I can talk with her and she will pray for me." Ellen and Aaron shared similar experiences. Ellen said, "I met A through R... The three of us always joke around and are part of the same small group. We go to his apartment, read the Bible, and learn about Joseph, Matthew, Noah, and Jesus." She continued, "One time, after reading the Bible, we acted out scenes. I remember pretending to be Mary, giving birth to Jesus. It was funny, we had a lot of fun." These groups offered more than just a shared faith—they created emotionally safe spaces where students could be playful, vulnerable, and connected.

Aaron also described several close connections built through Chi Alpha. "I met P, a small group leader, at Chi Alpha church during my sophomore year. A senior introduced

me to him. We hang out together a lot.” He added, “T [small group leader] comes over to our place. We hang out, play card games. T is a really close friend, almost like a brother.” These leaders often served as relational anchors, initiating contact, maintaining weekly communication, and creating emotionally rich, stable friendships. Students frequently emphasized how these faith-based spaces differed from other college groups, offered consistency, personal attention, and a sense of spiritual belonging that was hard to find elsewhere.

Some students also formed friendships through interest-based clubs, though these tended to vary more in emotional depth. Andy joined a car club, where he met non-disabled peers. Aaron participated in a band, but noted that the connections were more casual, “We are acquaintances, not close friends, but they were friendly and familiar faces.” Ben, who has many hobbies, found more meaningful relationships through his involvement in fishing and diving clubs. He spoke warmly of H, the diving club president, “H drove me to buy diving gear and taught me a lot about diving. I think of her as a mentor.”

Shared interests were mentioned by several students, especially male participants, as a helpful starting point for building friendships. Four of the nine participants explicitly mentioned that finding “like-minded” peers helped them feel included. However, while interest-based clubs provided opportunities for socializing, it was the faith-based communities that stood out in terms of emotional closeness, regular interaction, and long-term connection. For many students with IDD, these groups offered not just inclusion but transformation, and turned acquaintances into mentors and casual gatherings into deeply valued friendships (Carter & McCabe, 2021).

Navigating Connection: How Students with IDD Understand Mentorship, Romance, and Friendship

Although many program staff held formal leadership roles, students rarely described them as mentors. Instead, mentoring relationships often developed naturally. Ben said, “She’s more than just a friend to me, like a mentor. She’s in the same year as us but not in our program. Basically, she’s like a leader.” Bethany shared, “L is a leader in my small group. She’s very supportive and a great friend.” Josse described M, an alumnus of the program, as, “assuring us on campus, like a mentor.” In these examples, mentorship was not something assigned—it emerged from shared time, trust, and encouragement.

Romantic experiences were mentioned far less often. Only two students brought up relationships of this kind, and both involved partners who also had IDD. Ben explained, “We met in high school, and then we went to college separately. It was kind of hard because she went to college in a different state, and I’m here...” Andy commented, “I haven’t got any luck with girls, unfortunately.” While romance was not a major topic across interviews, those who did mention it described both the emotional importance and the challenges of maintaining such relationships.

When talking about friendship, students defined it in different ways. Some felt that closeness came from spending time together often and being emotionally open. Others

believed that shared interests or regular routines were enough. Olivia explained, “Something I enjoy that connects us,” while Andy described a friend as “the sports guy, because we always go to the game early... football season, soccer, or baseball.” A few students talked about honesty as something they really valued: “Being honest is a strong one... We keep being kind to our other people. If they have any questions, honesty is important.”

Research Question 2: Challenges and Supports Affecting Social Experiences and Their Impact

Challenges in Socializing: Shyness, Fear of Rejection, and Limited Opportunity

Six out of nine students described challenges initiating social interactions, often linking this difficulty to shyness, fear of rejection, or simply not knowing what to say. Ellen shared, “Sometimes, I get shy or nervous when talking to new people. I might stutter or not know what to say.” Aaron also stated, “I feel nervous, like meeting new people is hard. I don’t always know what to say.” Bethany expressed a similar struggle, “When I meet people for the first time, I get very shy.” Ellen reflected, “I’ve never started a conversation with anyone, I stuttered.” This illustrated the depth of discomfort some students feel when trying to connect.

Two students described experiences of judgment or rejection from peers, particularly related to their disabilities. Ellen recalled that some people on campus could be “mean and judgmental... especially towards people with disabilities.” Aaron shared a similar perspective, explaining that although he tried to treat others with respect, “sometimes they don’t care.” He also noted that some peers appeared supportive on the surface but did not genuinely understand people with disabilities, stating, “Sometimes people can be fake, like, ‘Oh yeah, I care,’ but they don’t.” In some cases, students also encountered explicitly harmful language; as Josse explained, “People use words like the R-word and stuff like that.”

Together, these reflections show that social hesitation among students with IDD is rarely due to a lack of interest. Instead, it often results from a combination of internal anxiety, prior negative experiences, and structural limits on opportunity. Despite wanting to form connections, students must navigate complex emotional and environmental barriers to do so.

Seeking Connection: Social Needs, Support, and Belonging

Despite the social challenges they described, eight out of nine students expressed a clear desire to expand their social circles and form new friendships. Their comments reflect a recognition that meaningful relationships take effort and opportunity, both of which they were eager to pursue. Olivia said, “If I have opportunities, I would like to make more friends.” Aaron added, “I need to go to clubs and organizations more because that’s how I can meet new students... I need to make new friends.” Cassidy reflected, “If I have time, I would like to make friends outside of the program.”

This desire was often shaped by past experiences of loneliness, particularly during early transitions to college. Conner recalled, "I was kind of been lonely my freshman year since I didn't know where I could go." Bethany described feeling isolated when a roommate was away, "I felt terribly lonely when my roommate was gone." These reflections show that while students with IDD may hesitate in initiating new relationships, they are deeply aware of the value of community.

Nearly all students expressed a sense of belonging to the university community for various reasons, including residential proximity, a friendly environment, and the accessibility of resources and support through their academic program. "Yes, I belong here. This is the home... live in my home state." "I'm feeling I'm surrounded by a cool community of people, and everybody seems to really like me." "I have a lot of friends here, stuff, clubs, or events." "If I haven't gone to this University, I probably don't know or be who I am today." "College really helped me help myself and be more open to myself." "I live on campus, it will be the safe place for me." These supports—ranging from campus staff to spiritual communities—provided students with multiple entry points into connection. Students felt most able to grow socially and emotionally when relationships were built on trust, care, and sustained involvement.

Discussion

Although students in this study described meaningful friendships within their IPSE program, this research also explored how they socialized beyond the program and what environments supported deeper, more integrated peer interactions. Rather than focusing on the number of relationships, the study emphasized the quality, context, and emotional significance of these connections. Notably, while most students felt most comfortable forming friendships within the program, some reported meaningful relationships outside of it, particularly in structured, purpose-driven settings such as religious and interest-based clubs. Previous research had tended to highlight the frequency of social contact and its link to well-being (Sun et al., 2020). In this study, we examine how relations come into being, why they are meaningful, and how they contribute to students' general sense of being included. Previous research indicates that both quality and quantity are important (Kuczynski, 2022), but our results suggest that for students with IDD, the quality of relationships provides the most enduring value.

Two findings addressed the importance of relational contexts in shaping students' social experiences. First, university classes were rarely mentioned as spaces where friendships developed, suggesting that academic settings may provide fewer opportunities for sustained social interaction. This observation aligns with prior research emphasizing the importance of structured and intentional social supports for students with IDD (Carter et al., 2016; Grigal & Papay, 2018). Second, relationships formed within the IPSE program itself often functioned as stable emotional anchors for students. Participants frequently described these connections using familial language, suggesting that peer relationships within the program contributed not only to companionship but also to identity development and a stronger sense of belonging. This interpretation is consistent with previous research indicating that consistent peer relationships play an

important role in shaping belonging and identity development among college students with IDD (Carter et al., 2016).

Prior research has demonstrated that peer mentoring plays a significant role in supporting students with disabilities in navigating college life, expanding social networks, and enhancing their sense of inclusion on campus (Carter et al., 2016; Grigal & Papay, 2018). In many of these studies, mentors were typically recruited and trained by the institution and often compensated for their role, which reflects a structured and program-driven model of social support. In the current study, however, when students spoke of mentorship, they weren't defining it in terms of official roles or staff titles, but rather as individuals who spoke to them personally and regularly, whether it was in their church group, peer networks, or program alumni. Paid support workers were not usually perceived as serving this purpose. This differential pointed out that mentorship, in the lives of students with IDD, is highly relational and develops out of trust and mutual engagement rather than institutional role or job title (Eisenman, 2023; Heron et al., 2023).

Also, the manner in which students defined friendships indicated a variety of definitions and expectations. Some viewed close friendships in terms of having frequent conversations, emotional sharing, and mutual support, while others defined friendships in terms of having preferred interests or regular casual social encounters, like watching sports or playing games together. This diversity indicates that students with IDD develop and experience friendships in ways that suit their personalities, levels of comfort, and social history.

Lastly, this study spoke directly to students themselves, not using reports by parents or staff. A growing body of scholarship has emphasized the importance of including individuals with IDD as experts in their own experiences to more accurately understand their social realities (Bigby et al., 2019; Smith Hill et al., 2025). This study also challenged the assumption that students with IDD were unable to think about their social lives in meaningful ways. When provided the opportunity and the support, students were able to provide insights that deepened the knowledge of how inclusive environments thrive. Incorporating students' voices into the conversation serves to do more than bring in another perspective. It provides a complete and more accurate image of what social inclusion can and ought to look like in higher education.

Implications

One potential direction is to promote increased alumni engagement in student life. In this study, students referred to graduated peers as significant mentors who provided emotional support, guidance, and modeling of social behaviors. This implies that the inclusion of alumni in leadership or peer support initiatives may deepen students' social lives and facilitate the transition in and through college life.

Future research should look more closely at the structure and practices of student organizations on university campuses to determine the best practices for including students with IDD. We discovered that having a representative from the organization, like the leaders of the small groups, reach out to students with IDD on a regular basis is a

good strategy. But more identifying work is needed, such as determining the specific elements of organizations that are effective at promoting inclusion. It could help institutions develop and replicate such models.

Also, student leader development in student organizations is necessary. When students with IDD were invited into club activities by peers or group leaders who maintained regular contact, they were more likely to feel included. Training programs in inclusive practices, accessible communication, and diverse member engagement strategies could be offered to student leaders and club officers by universities. Building up these pipelines of leaders could create ripple effects on campus by contributing to larger-scale structural change.

Aside from student organizations, the classroom itself is a neglected potential site of social integration. In this research, none of the participants indicated that they had become close friends with their non-disabled peers in the academic classes. Instructors can develop collaborative learning strategies that facilitate interaction among the students with and without disabilities, like peer-assisted discussions or cooperative projects. Moments of collaborative engagement, when carefully conceived, can result in genuine connections across the lines of ability.

What is more, there is a need for social awareness education across the broader campus population. Discrimination continues to exist. Inclusion is not the mere lack of exclusion, but rather needs active knowledge, empathy, and effort. Institutions of higher learning have a mandate to deliver awareness training both to peers and professors, closing the gap between surface-level tolerance and true inclusion.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the sample consisted only of junior and senior students, which may limit the applicability of findings to students earlier in their college experience. Second, the small sample size—only nine participants—means that the findings should be interpreted with caution and may not be generalizable to a broader population. Third, although the university is not affiliated with any religion, its location in the U.S. Bible Belt means that faith-based student organizations are highly visible and widely attended. As a result, the strong role of spiritual communities observed in this study may reflect regional cultural influences and may not fully generalize to universities in other geographic contexts. Finally, although multiple strategies were used to minimize the impact of power dynamics between the researcher and participants, it is still possible that students' responses were influenced by the perceived authority of the researcher.

Conclusion

While friendships within inclusive program settings were most commonly described as close and supportive, students also found opportunities for connection beyond the program—particularly in structured, value-based environments. These spaces offered consistency, shared purpose, and interpersonal roles that supported deeper engagement. At the same time, social anxiety, limited opportunities for interaction, and experiences of

discrimination continue to shape students' social worlds, especially in more unstructured or mainstream settings. Romantic relationships were rarely described, and friendships with non-disabled peers outside organized settings remained limited. These patterns suggest that inclusion is not automatically achieved through access alone—it must be actively supported.

For universities seeking to promote more inclusive environments, this study points to the value of designing intentional spaces that foster trust, shared experience, and continuity. There is a need for institutional strategies that go beyond legal compliance to cultivate genuine belonging. Supporting students with IDD requires not only removing barriers but also building communities that recognize their contributions and create space for relationships to grow.

Declarations

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