

Social Peer Programs in College: Exploring the Program Impact on Students With and Without Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

Lindsay S. Athamanah, Ph.D., CCC-SLP  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1192-1393>

Hannah Frala, Ed.S.

Tamyia Sanders, M.S.W.

University of Missouri - St. Louis

Abstract

One way that students with and without disabilities can socialize with one another and build friendships is through social peer programs in inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE). Social peer programs for college-age students with and without disabilities at IPSE programs have demonstrated positive social outcomes for students without disabilities. However, exploring how social peer programs impact students with disabilities is limited. This study explores how participation in a university-wide social peer program impacted the lives of both students with and without disabilities.

Keywords: Social peer programs, inclusive postsecondary education programs, friendship, students with intellectual and developmental disabilities

Plain Language Summary

- This study looked at how joining a peer program at a university affects students with and without disabilities
- **What we did in this study:** We talked with eight students with and without disabilities about their experiences in a peer program.
 - We wanted to learn how these programs help students make friends and feel included on campus.
- **Findings:** Students said the peer program helped them in many ways.
 - They made new friends and felt more confident.
 - They also said they learned more about the unfair treatment people with disabilities sometimes face.
 - Students believed these programs could make a difference in the larger community.
 - They felt the program helped people connect and change how people without disabilities think about disability.
- **Conclusion:** Peer programs at colleges help students in positive ways. The study also suggested that students with disabilities should be involved in creating these programs.

Despite nearly 30 years of federally mandated transition services, youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) still experience poor post-school outcomes in independent living, employment, and postsecondary education attendance, when compared to their peers without disabilities (Winsor et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2023). With the passage of the Higher Education Act in 2008, inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs for students with IDD have increased at colleges and universities nationwide, improving educational and employment outcomes. Higher education provides a unique and inclusive context for students with and without IDD to build friendships, socialize, engage in the campus community, and build social networks while still receiving adult guidance and support (Bumble et al., 2019; Gibbons et al., 2018). For individuals with IDD, participation in higher education improves overall health, employment, education, attitudes, and relationships (Corby et al., 2020; Grigal et al., 2021; Plotner & May, 2019). For individuals without IDD, learning, working, and socializing with those with IDD in an integrated higher education environment can improve their attitudes about disability, build vital advocacy skills, enhance interpersonal skills, and increase their understanding of disability (Athamanah et al., 2020; Carter et al., 2019; Farley et al., 2014).

Inclusive Postsecondary Education Programs

There are over 350 IPSE programs for students with IDD across the United States (Think College, n. d.). These programs are at 2-year community colleges, 4-year colleges or universities, as well as technical and vocational/trade schools, with programs lasting one to four years. Postsecondary education provides opportunities to engage and socially interact with a variety of people. It is a place where students, both with and without disabilities, can improve their social capital through social networks and interpersonal relationships (Wilt & Morningstar, 2020). Attending a postsecondary education program provides students with IDD an equitable opportunity to develop authentic friendships with other students with disabilities and those without. However, simply including those with IDD on campus does not guarantee that others will interact, change their attitudes and perspectives about disability, or promote an inclusive campus community (Griffin et al., 2016). A concerted effort to provide opportunities for social interaction through formal social peer programs in higher education is warranted (Harrison et al., 2019).

Social Peer Programs in IPSE Programs

Social peer programs have effectively improved students' social skills, from preschool through high school (e.g., Carter et al., 2016; Gunning et al., 2019; Kaya et al., 2015). Building on this success, social peer programs have been integrated into IPSE programs to assess whether they can continue to positively impact students with and without disabilities at the postsecondary level. There are several types of social peer programs, such as mentoring programs that provide academic, social, and independent living support to students with IDD by students without disabilities, as well as programs that focus on building friendships among students on campus (Athamanah et al., 2020; Krech-Bowles & Becht, 2022).

Students without disabilities have a variety of reasons for participating in a social peer program in postsecondary education, such as, that it aligns with their values or future

career plans, personal ties to people with disabilities, or wanting to give back to the community (Carter et al., 2019; Reeves et al., 2025). Another reason students without disabilities may join social peer programs is that they are paid or offered college credit. Regardless of reasons for joining, many students without IDD (e.g., mentors, undergraduates, peers) report that participating in a social peer program has impacted their own personal development (e.g., professional learning, confirmation of profession), improved their patience, transformed their perceptions of individuals with disabilities, and broadened their friendship networks (Athamanah et al., 2020; Carter et al., 2019; Farley et al., 2014; Griffin et al., 2016; Harrison et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2020; Reeves et al., 2025; Wilt & Morningstar, 2020).

Studies have identified the benefits of social peer programs for students with IDD as valued connections with those without disabilities, increased confidence to attend community events with peers, and increased social connections (Eisenman, 2023; Spruit & Carter, 2021; Wilt & Morningstar, 2020). Although there has been an increase in research on the impact of social peer programs at IPSE programs on the participants without disabilities, there remains a dearth of research on the perspectives and experiences of students with IDD in social peer programs.

Current Study

IPSE programs continue to develop rapidly, and this growth demands a response by researchers to help identify best practices for promoting an equitable and inclusive campus community for those with and without IDD. Social peer programs for students with and without IDD address this call by providing opportunities to learn and work together in supportive and inclusive educational environments. These programs focus on building supportive relationships among individuals to enhance academic or social interactions, whether formal or informal, in educational or community settings (Griffin et al., 2016). Thus, this study aimed to explore the insights and experiences of eight students in a social peer program at a midwestern university. This study was guided by the following research question: *What are the experiences and perceptions of students with and without IDD participating in an inclusive social peer program when in college?*

Method

Using an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021), this study explored the phenomena of a social peer program through the lived experiences of eight participants, four students without IDD and four with IDD. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) examines the lived experiences and the meaning-making that occurs related to said experiences (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). This approach constructs a narrative that allows the reader to simultaneously appreciate the similarities among participants' experiences and the individual's experience. As Smith and Fieldsend (2021) explain, "...the aim is to produce an analysis that speaks to both convergence and distinctiveness in participants' experience" (p. 149). Further, this research design was chosen to capture participants' experiences in their own words (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Marshall et al., 2021).

Researcher Positionality

All three authors have experience working with and supporting students with disabilities in educational settings, including postsecondary education. The first author is a white female associate professor of special education trained as a speech-language pathologist with over 25 years of experience working with individuals with disabilities. Additionally, she is the co-director of the UMSL Social Peers program. The second author is a white female graduate student in school psychology, with a master's degree in educational psychology. She was a preschool teacher at a school for students with disabilities and developmental delays. The third author is an African American female graduate with a master's degree in social work. She completed her concentration practicum as a coach supporting students with IDD at the university's IPSE program. The authors were not individuals with disabilities or undergraduate students.

Participants

The University Institutional Review Board approved all study activities. Participation in the program research was completed separately from program recruitment. Once students were accepted into the program, information about the research was distributed via email. Participation in the research was voluntary and did not impact their engagement in the program. Students who volunteered to participate in the research were provided with informed consent documents, and their consent was collected prior to the study's commencement. Parental consent was obtained if the students with IDD were not their own guardians, followed by obtaining assent from the student to participate in the study. Pseudonyms were given to each participant to ensure confidentiality.

Students with Disabilities

At the University of Missouri-St. Louis (UMSL), the IPSE program houses three programs for students with IDD: *Succeed*, *Succeed Plus*, and *Link*. These programs are designed to help students gain independence in academics, vocational experiences, and student relationships. The research participants with IDD were enrolled in *Succeed*, a 2-year academic program, and graduated with a Chancellor's Certificate. Each research participant participated in a pre-program interview at the beginning of the academic year, one focus group in the middle of each semester, and a post-program interview at the end of the academic year. Unfortunately, there was only one dyad in which both students participated in the research. Students' names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Ryan. Ryan is a White, 19-year-old student with IDD in his first year of the university's IPSE program. Ryan identifies as male and uses he/him pronouns. He joined the UMSL Social Peers program to meet new people, make friends, and become more involved in social organizations. He participated in the first year of the program.

John. John is a White, 20-year-old student with IDD in his second year of the IPSE program at the university, studying cybersecurity and information technology. John identifies as male and uses he/him pronouns. He joined the UMSL Social Peers program

to meet new people with similar interests on campus. He also participated in the first year of the program.

Briella. Briella is a White, 18-year-old student with Other Health Impairment/Intellectual Disability (OHI/ID) in her first year of the IPSE program at the university. Briella identifies as female and uses she/her pronouns. She joined the UMSL Social Peers program to make new friends and get to know other students. Briella participated in the second year of the program.

Bella. Bella is a White, 19-year-old student with OHI in her second year of the IPSE program. Bella identifies as female, uses she/her pronouns, and is a wheelchair user. She joined the UMSL Social Peers program because she thought it would be fun and because she loved the university and its people. Bella also participated in the second year of the program.

Students without Disabilities

Sarah. Sarah is a White, 22-year-old sophomore studying social work. Sarah identifies as agender, uses she/her pronouns, and has a disability (not IDD). She joined the UMSL Social Peers program to meet new people and participate in opportunities that mimic social work activities. Sarah participated in the first year of the program.

Diana. Diana is a White, 22-year-old junior studying early childhood education. Diana identifies as female, uses she/her pronouns, and has minimal interaction with individuals with disabilities. She joined the UMSL Social Peers program as an excellent opportunity to have fun and apply her classwork knowledge to authentic experiences. Diana also participated in the first year of the program.

Jenny. Jenny is a White, 22-year-old junior studying social work. Jenny identifies as female, uses she/her pronouns, and works in an autism clinic. She joined the UMSL Social Peers program to connect with a broad range of students on campus. Jenny participated in the second year of the program.

Talia. Talia is a White, 21-year-old senior studying biology. Talia identifies as female, uses she/her pronouns, and has a classmate with a disability. She joined the UMSL Social Peers program to learn more about disability advocacy, and because her previous interactions with those with disabilities have been enjoyable. Talia participated in the second year of the program.

The UMSL Social Peers program

The UMSL Social Peers program is an inclusive social peer program embedded in the IPSE program for undergraduate students with and without IDD on college campuses, grounded in the Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Fisher et al., 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2000). According to the SDT, satisfying three basic needs (i.e., autonomy, competence, and relatedness) can help explain a person's motivation and engagement. Therefore, if meeting these three needs on a college campus through an inclusive social peer program,

individuals without disabilities may naturally increase their motivation to socially engage with people with IDD outside of school. The program encourages inclusion and fosters student connections with one another and the campus community (Athamanah et al., 2020, Fisher et al., 2020).

Undergraduate students are recruited by flyers, in-class presentations, informational tables, and word of mouth throughout the academic year. Potential participants complete an online application, which includes basic demographic information, availability, and interests. Students with and without disabilities attend a social gathering to meet others before they are paired, and before the program officially starts.

The UMSL Social Peers program includes four components: (a) training, (b) monthly large group social events, (c) weekly one-on-one meetings (optional), and (d) connecting with a peer coordinator for support and guidance (required if meeting one-on-one). First, all students must participate in the Disability Awareness and Expectations Training, developed by the program's co-directors. This training provides general information about disabilities, how to engage socially as college students (e.g., identifying common interests and connecting), and the program's expectations (e.g., meeting weekly and attending social events). The training also emphasizes a non-hierarchical relationship between the students with and without IDD, specifically focusing on building friendships and promoting an inclusive campus community.

Next, students participate in monthly on-campus social events. The University of Missouri-St. Louis is a commuter campus. Thus, students are usually only on campus for classes, with a small number residing in the campus dormitory. As a result, the program identifies monthly social events on campus on different days and at different times to accommodate students' schedules. Students are encouraged to attend as many monthly social events as they wish, but are not required to do so.

Third, students have the option to participate in a weekly one-on-one meet-up with a peer. One student with IDD and one student without IDD are paired (student dyads) based on interests, age, availability, and sometimes gender. Student dyads are required to meet weekly for 30 minutes to socialize, either in person (e.g., at the campus dining hall, at the library to study, in between classes) or virtually (e.g., via a virtual call or video game play). Scheduling time to meet is difficult for most students, so we assist by identifying open times throughout the week.

Finally, students who choose to meet weekly with another student must meet weekly in person or virtually with a peer coordinator. A peer coordinator is a graduate student in either the mental health counseling or school psychology program. They check in with both students in the dyad to answer questions, problem-solve, and support them through the program.

Data Collection

Data were collected over two implementation cycles of the UMSL Social Peers program. One cycle equates to one academic year. The students had to participate in the weekly one-on-one meet-up to participate in the research. In the first cycle, there were nine dyads in the program ($n = 18$). In the second cycle, there were four dyads in the program ($n = 8$). Although each student was given the opportunity to participate in the research, only four students with IDD and four students without IDD completed the research requirements. The program had repeat participants with IDD, but none without IDD, and none of the repeat participants participated in the research.

Each research participant engaged in a pre- and post-program individual semi-structured interview with the first author or a graduate student trained in interview techniques. Additionally, research participants engaged in one focus group per semester. The protocols were developed a priori to gather information on each student's experience with disability as well as their lived experience in the program. By implementing pre- and post-program interviews, we were able to discuss changes in students' perceptions of people with disabilities from before to after the program. Students with and without IDD were split into groups to provide an opportunity to discuss their experiences and the program openly, while allowing the researchers to capture insights into their experiences (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Groups ranged in size from 2 to 4 members. Eight students without IDD dropped out of the research during the program (seven in the first cycle and one in the second cycle), and their data were not included in the final data set. The interview protocol included questions such as *"What were some of the benefits of participating in the social peer program for yourself and your peer?"* and *"How have your perceptions of people with IDD been influenced after completing the social peer program?"* The focus group protocol included questions such as *"How do you feel interacting with your peer in a social setting?"* and *"Why do you think the perceptions of people with IDD are changing or not changing while in the social peer program?"*

Pre-program interviews averaged 28 minutes (range 13-73 minutes), post-program interviews averaged 27.5 minutes (range 12-71 minutes), and focus groups averaged 25 minutes (range 21-34 minutes). Data were gathered across two years of the program. In the first year, Ryan and John participated in the focus group for students with IDD, and Sarah and Diana participated in the focus group for students without IDD. In the second year, Briella and Bella participated in the focus group for students with IDD, and Jenny and Talia participated in the focus group for students without IDD. Interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by a transcription service.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed by all authors, who initially read the transcripts and then conducted a thematic analysis using a triadic coding scheme to identify the main themes and topics that emerged from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). First, researchers coded data independently and cross-checked each other's codes before refining the specified codes. Then, a second iterative round of coding (i.e., focus or axial coding) was conducted, further developing the categories, making connections within the data, and defining the

properties of the data. Finally, an iterative round of coding (i.e., selective coding) was conducted to integrate and refine the main and sub-themes of the data.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of our findings, we used three strategies, including writing field notes and memos, data triangulation, and member checks (Anney, 2014; Brantlinger et al., 2005). Positionality is complex and dynamic in researcher-participant relationships (Merriam et al., 2001). Thus, the authors wrote field notes and memos and engaged in open dialogue to discuss participant data during data collection and analysis. Multiple sources of data were collected (e.g., interviews and focus groups), and multiple investigators analyzed the data to demonstrate credibility and rigor (Anney, 2014; Brantlinger et al., 2005). The authors met to discuss disagreements and to refine codes, clarify themes, resolve disagreements, and reach consensus (i.e., revise codes and discuss reasons for the codes) throughout the coding process. After the final themes were identified, member checks were conducted by sending the themes to each participant via email to validate and provide feedback on them (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Despite emails being sent to each research participant, only two students without IDD responded, agreeing with the themes.

Findings

Two main themes, with sub-themes, emerged from the data, guided by the protocol questions, to describe the experience and impact of the social peer program on students with and without IDD. Themes are presented in no particular order. They are (a) *Impact on Self*, and (b) *Impact within Society* (see Table 1). Each theme and sub-theme is presented with contextual descriptions and direct quotes from the students.

Impact on Self

Students with and without IDD reported that the UMSL Social Peers program impacted their personal lives by providing opportunities to engage in social experiences, build friendships, expand their knowledge about disability, and increase their confidence to interact with others with and without disabilities. Students with and without IDD enjoyed the program and were pleased to see a program like this on a college campus. Two sub-themes emerged, addressing how this experience influenced their lives.

Engaging in Social Experiences and Building Friendships

Each student shared how the program personally impacted them and their social experiences, including them getting more involved on campus, building communication skills, and diversifying their friend group. Students with and without IDD discussed how the program helped them get "... more involved in stuff on campus, at UMSL." They also described how the program provided "... that extra person that you can go talk to," as well as a chance to "network with someone that works in the field." In addition, students without IDD noted how participating in this program improved their understanding of how different yet similar college life was for students with IDD compared to their own

Table 1*Experiences of Students with and without ID*

Main/subtheme	Definition	Important quotes
Impact on Self		
Engaging in Social Experiences and Building Friendships	Participants discussed how participating in the program encouraged engaging socially and developing friendships with those with and without IDD.	"I got to make hopefully a lifelong friend that I can reach out to anytime and can talk to whenever I'm bored. That's what I did last night. I reached out to her because I was bored, and we wanted to meet anyway." - Bella "I learned more about her and then we got to know each other pretty well and what we all have in common and that she does fitness and I am trying to get on a fitness plan. So that was cool." - John
Developing Knowledge and Increasing Confidence	Students discussed how participating in the program built their disability knowledge and disability awareness. They also stated that this new knowledge helped increase their confidence when working and socially engaging with students with and without IDD.	"I think if you meet the right person and you're paired with the right person, and then they can be also paired with another person in the future, that could be one way to help them socialize with other people with disabilities." - Briella
Developing Knowledge and Increasing Confidence	Students discussed how participating in the program built their disability knowledge and disability awareness. They also stated that this new knowledge helped increase their	"I feel like I kind of have a little bit more confidence to go up to people and stuff. I think that's kind of how it helped me. If you have a little bit more confidence to go up and talk to new people and get to

Main/subtheme	Definition	Important quotes
	confidence when working and socially.	know them, maybe something like that.” - Ryan
Impact within Society		
Community Connections and Changing Perspectives	Students discussed how participating in the program helped bring disability to the forefront in the campus community. They were insistent that if programs like ours were on more college campuses, others not involved in the program may potentially change their perspectives about disability and make true connections due to being exposed to those with IDD.	“I think it comes down to the fact that some people don't have the opportunity to do something like this and think that students with disabilities shouldn't do normal things, if that makes sense. So, I think it just opens the campus' eyes like, oh, there are students like this who go here. And it's okay for them to participate in the same things that we are.” - Diana “If anything, I'm gaining, like I said, a better perspective. And even if it wasn't with Bella and it was more of a group thing, I think that would still be beneficial.” - Talia
Disability Discrimination in the Community	Students felt that participating in the program could potentially decrease disability discrimination because it provided opportunities for those with and without IDD to interact and build those without disabilities' experience engaging with disability.	“And I think now I can be more empathetic that way and understand why they do certain things or approach topics with them in a different way and stuff like that, instead of just viewing, "Oh, this is happening because of their disability." It's not always that streamlined I feel.” - Talia “I know I have seen instances where they maybe are talked down to or just looked at different if they present themselves in a different way or show

Main/subtheme	Definition	Important quotes
Disability Discrimination in the Community	Students felt that participating in the program could potentially decrease disability discrimination because it provided opportunities for those with and without IDD to interact and build those without disabilities' experience engaging with disability.	that they have disabilities. So, I guess that plays a big factor into how they are communicated with in the general public." - Jenny

experience. The students felt the program provided an opportunity to meet and get to know college students they might not have met otherwise. Jenny, a junior in social work, reflected on how the program helped diversify her friend group:

I think that it's helping me diversify my friend group. Prior to this program, I have very similar friends as me, but now I meet up with Francis [a student in the program but not the research]. She's introducing me to some of her friends. So, just gaining different perspectives in different types of relationships.

Students believed that being part of the program built their friendships and sense of community on campus. John, a second-year student with IDD, said the program gave him a chance to "... have someone to talk to every week," because life was busy for his friends and family. Similarly, Talia, a senior biology major, expressed that she wanted to make sure her peer had "... a safe space outside of her regular friend group to voice her concerns or even just feel like a regular college student," and that this was an opportunity to set aside time for friendship. Furthermore, the program is focused on building relationships between students with and without IDD. There is an active push not to have hierarchical relationships (e.g., mentor and mentee) because both students can learn from each other. Sarah, a sophomore studying social work, recounted when she realized the program was aimed at friendship rather than mentoring those with disabilities:

What I appreciate and what I didn't realize until talking with some other people in the program was that this was one of the first times that this was about not mentoring, but rather just peer support, just interacting as peers. I appreciated that because I know that it's very easy for people to come in with the idea of a mentoring mentality. I like that it was all about peers, making genuine connections versus trying to guide someone.

Developing Knowledge and Increasing Confidence

Students without IDD felt the program helped them develop their knowledge of disability. They shared that they joined the program to learn more about intellectual disabilities and autism and to gain a "better understanding" of disability. Additionally, the students with disabilities felt the program helped improve their confidence in engaging with other students and teachers. Students reported, "... it's an opportunity to gain better perspectives of people you don't typically think about, especially in a society that kind of pushes people to the side." Moreover, students reflected that building this friendship helped with their academics and confidence and improved their mental health. Sarah indicated that the program supported her in her college career:

I think it has helped me with my academics, at least overall, maybe not with the actual concepts I've learned, but just the idea that this is supplying me with social interaction, with genuine connection that makes me feel connected to the community and helps me stay healthy mentally so that I don't burn out and crash.

Both students, with and without disabilities, noted that the program increased their confidence in socializing and interacting with others. It provided a chance to build their

communication skills and to get out of “their bubble” to make new friends. Ryan, a first-year student with IDD, reflected that the program built his confidence to interact with others such as his professors to “... be able to advocate for myself and ask the instructor or professor questions if I'm confused on something and I don't know what to do and if I'm struggling,” as well as with other students because he “... can easily make new friends and get to know new people.”

Impact within Society

The second theme that emerged from the data was how students felt that programs like this can build connections in their communities, specifically their college community, and could potentially change disability perspectives of those without IDD. As the students continued to consider the impact the program had on their own lives, they became more aware of the discrimination those with disabilities experience in society. Two sub-themes were identified across the data.

Community Connections and Changing Perspectives

The students discussed the potential that programs such as the UMSL Social Peers could build community connections between people with and without disabilities. They felt the program “opens up the eyes of the campus,” helping connect students, benefiting the campus environment, and promoting inclusivity. Jenny hoped that the students with disabilities in the program would “... feel comfortable enough socializing within our community and meeting others outside of campus or the program.” Additionally, students believed these programs could help normalize inclusion on campus. Talia talked about how her experience could impact other college students:

It was more normalized. I don't want to say they aren't welcome on campus. I don't think that's true. But I think people just seeing me interact with Bella in just a normal manner is good, just because it destigmatizes going out of your way to do that.

The students with disabilities appreciated the fact that this program was at UMSL and could help those without disabilities to “... become more aware of all the different people like this on the campus,” to build communication skills with those with disabilities, and “... to learn a bit more about other people with disabilities.”

The students felt that programs like this could potentially change the perspectives of those without disabilities. They reflected on how the program can help other students become more aware of different types of people on campus, as well as promote authentic, genuine acceptance and interactions to foster change. Students noted that social peer programs can foster connection and interaction, leading to positive relationships among people from different backgrounds. Briella shared that being at college for the first time can be “... nerve-wracking at first because you don't know what's out there. It could be too much or too little, but you just don't know.” Still, being part of the UMSL Social Peers program helped her change her perspective of others, and “... going out of your comfort zone is so important.”

Disability Discrimination in the Community

Whereas “disability discrimination” was not a topic we addressed in the interview or focus group protocols, this sub-theme emerged as students with and without IDD reflected on the program and understanding disability. They recognized that people with disabilities have been discriminated against and that the UMSL Social Peers program was an opportunity to decrease issues surrounding discrimination. Students with IDD recalled their life experiences with discrimination because their interactions with those without disabilities have not always been positive. However, they felt that by participating in a program like this, students without IDD could build their experience engaging with students with disabilities and therefore potentially decrease discrimination in the future. Bella, a second-year student with an Other Health Impairment, recounted a time when she dealt with discrimination by those without disabilities:

Because I feel like whenever I go to places like a mall or something, I feel like everybody's looking at me, and I feel judged by them. I don't know what's going inside their head or if they're saying anything bad about me to other people. And so that makes me a little frustrated when I see people just staring at me or don't come up and say hi to me, or ask me what's wrong, or happened to my legs and stuff. That makes me upset when I get those questions all the time.

However, with this program, she believed people without disabilities could change their perspectives through experience because “... the students here can be nicer to people with disabilities.” Briella, a first-year student with OHI/ID, also experienced disability discrimination in the past. She stated, “... people can judge people by what they look like or how they sound, and that probably could affect your environment.” However, Briella felt this program could help her build the confidence to meet and provide opportunities for those without disabilities to get to know those with disabilities, because “... not everyone has the chance to get to know people with disabilities.”

Students without disabilities also remembered times when they saw people with disabilities discriminated against, including by employers. Sarah talked about a time when an employer “... said some very nasty things, they were very unprofessional, and that they didn't see a disability as something to take into consideration, they saw it as flaws.” She felt the program could offer a sense of understanding for those without disabilities and decrease their judgment of others. She said, “We aren't here to monitor, to censor, to control another person's experiences. To do so would be really inefficient. It would be demeaning.” Also, Talia observed disability discrimination in the workplace: “I think it's more so of a company problem where they'll narrow in on the disability and then write them off immediately because of that, which I don't think is fair.” She concluded that this program helped her identify different ways people with disabilities may be discriminated against in the workplace, and she will “... continue to push [not to dismiss employees with disabilities]. I feel like they get the right to be independent because they deserve that.”

Discussion

This study explored the insights, experiences, and impact of participating in the UMSL Social Peers program for college students with and without disabilities. Data were gathered from pre- and post-program interviews and focus groups, which reflected students' lived experiences and their thoughts on how the program impacted their lives. Themes that emerged from the data focused on how the program impacted the students themselves (*Impact on Self: Engaging in Social Experiences and Building Friendships and Developing Knowledge and Increasing Confidence*) and on their community (*Impact within Society: Community Connections and Changing Perspectives and Disability Discrimination in the Community*). This is one of the few studies that explores students with disabilities' perspectives and lived experiences in a social peer program.

First, both students with and without disabilities felt they personally benefited from participating in a social peer program. They shared similar experiences, such as increasing their campus involvement, building social skills and relationships, and focusing on friendship-building. Students without disabilities improved their knowledge of IDD and increased their confidence to engage with people with disabilities in society (Athamanah et al., 2020; Reeves et al., 2025). In addition, students with IDD increased their confidence when talking to professors or advocating for accommodations, and they appreciated that social peer programs encouraged peers without disabilities to learn more about disability. Similar to previous findings, the students felt they could meet and interact with students they may not have met without the program (Athamanah et al., 2020), and the program fostered those interactions (Butler et al., 2016; Farley et al., 2014). One way students with and without disabilities meet and develop long-lasting friendships is through social peer programs (Josol et al., 2023). In fact, a set of peers from the program became roommates after the program and are still friends to this day. Therefore, implementing social peer programs into college IPSE programs may have lasting impacts beyond graduation (Spruit & Carter, 2021).

Next, students felt that social peer programs on college campuses could impact the broader community. Although programs may be small, students feel that when college students see students without disabilities interacting positively with students with disabilities, it leaves a lasting impression (Carter & McCabe, 2021; Griffin et al., 2016). Thus, connecting students in environments experiencing similar life milestones, such as attending college or living independently, can enhance the campus community and promote "normalization" and inclusivity. This finding aligns with research that shows how social peer programs can help normalize disability in society and encourage acceptance and awareness from others (Athamanah et al., 2020; Farley et al., 2014; Griffin et al., 2016). Research exploring the types of social peer programs embedded in college IPSE programs and their impact on the campus as a whole is needed.

Although students without disabilities have previous experiences with individuals with IDD, social peer programs can be eye-opening to the disability experience and the discrimination that people with disabilities endure. Additionally, these programs can support students with disabilities in sharing their life experiences and how they impact their lives. This encourages students to reflect on their biases and on how programs like

these could change people's perspectives on disability. Social peer programs have the chance to bring awareness of the lives and experiences of individuals with disabilities to people without disabilities in a social, safe environment. Further, these programs can encourage building stronger community connections among individuals with and without disabilities.

Finally, this is one of the few studies to include individuals with disabilities' voices on how the social peer program impacted their own lives. Much of the research on social peer programs only includes students without disabilities' lived experiences and motivations within these programs (Athamanah et al., 2020; Carter et al., 2019; Griffin et al., 2016). Additionally, social peer and mentoring programs may be developed without feedback or guidance from people with disabilities. As researchers, it is our ethical obligation to include people with disabilities in the development and research of social peer programs and to incorporate their feedback and suggestions for revision. The potential impact of current social peer programs may be limited because they are not programs designed for and by college-age students with and without disabilities.

Implications for Practice

This study highlighted a few implications of practice for IPSE programs. Embedding social peer programs for students with and without disabilities in IPSE programs should be standard practice. There is growing research demonstrating the positive impact of participating in social peer programs on students with and without disabilities toward building disability knowledge, increasing social confidence, and developing authentic friendships. In addition, program development personnel should work with students with disabilities to develop social peer programs and determine the impact of these revised programs on the lives of students with and without disabilities. The true potential of social peer programs on inclusion and social acceptance may yet be determined. Finally, personnel should explore how social peer programs can build advocacy skills and enhance students' civic engagement in their communities. If social peer programs are a common way for people with and without disabilities to meet each other (Josol et al., 2023), then including these factors may improve the overall participants' civic mindfulness.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size was small ($n = 8$), with only four students with and four without IDD participating. Next, all students were White, 75% were female, and all students without disabilities were female. These data do not provide a holistic picture of how students from different backgrounds or male students without disabilities would experience the impact of the program. Thus, the generalization of findings is limited. Finally, only one pair of student peers (Talia and Bella) participated in the research. We presented the research opportunity to all participants, including the peers of those in the study, but we were unable to recruit additional dyads. Thus, we were unable to hear both students' experiences and identify similarities, differences, or how they each interpreted the program's impact on their lives.

Conclusion

The findings in this study provide additional evidence of the positive impact that social peer programs have on college-age students with and without disabilities. Social peer programs embedded within IPSE programs are crucial in providing equitable college experiences for students with IDD. An essential part of attending college is developing friendships, which can be complicated for students. Thus, programs similar to the UMSL Social Peers can allow students with and without IDD to socialize in supportive and integrated environments. In addition, this study is relevant to researchers and educators working with diverse college-age students. It explores an inclusive social peer program from the lens of the students with and without IDD. This information is vital when identifying and developing programs to improve student social outcomes.

Declarations

The authors declare that they have no relevant or material financial interests that relate to the research described in this paper.

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