

Inaugural IPSE Association Research Symposium: Help Us Write Our Next Chapter

Misty Vetter Parsley, Ed.D.
IPSEA President

April Regester
IPSEA Association

On May 20, 2026, at the inaugural Inclusive Postsecondary Education (IPSE) Association Research Symposium, Dr. Meg Grigal of Think College delivered a landmark pronouncement during her opening keynote: “IPSE Research is no longer emerging!” Her presentation, “From Access to Belonging: The Evolution and Future of Inclusive Postsecondary Education Research,” set the stage for a day of vibrant scholarship featuring 30 researchers from across the field who were attending the Southeast Postsecondary Education Alliance (SEPSEA) annual conference. Dr. Grigal charted the history of IPSE research through four distinct chapters. Chapter 1 explored the early research from the 1970s-2000, where we saw emerging practices and the consideration of college options for students with intellectual disability (ID). Chapter 2 considered the expansion and legitimization that occurred from 2001-2010 due to the passage of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) and the establishment of the federally-funded Transition Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID). Chapter 3 demonstrated a shift towards empirical outcomes and rigorous evidence from 2010-2020, establishing inclusive higher education as a legitimate policy and practice domain. Chapter 4 focused on the present, outlining a fully rooted field demonstrating that IPSE research impacts not only students with ID, but also faculty, peers, and future employers.

Grounding the day’s discussions in participatory methodology, Dr. Rebecca Smith Hill from the University of South Carolina delivered a keynote titled “Redefining ‘Expert’: Centering Lived Experience in Research.” Dr. Smith Hill reminded researchers that “the work is not to speak for the students. The work is to find accessible ways for them to be heard.” Dr. Smith Hill highlighted photovoice narratives, sorting activities, and accessible interview techniques as vital tools for elevating student voices.

A final keynote by Dr. Carly Gilson from Ohio State University provided a personal perspective on how research and practice continuously inform one another, addressing the reciprocal questions: Can research be a catalyst for change? and Can change be a catalyst for research? Drawing from two institutional examples, Dr. Gilson demonstrated how research justifies and refines implementation. Dr. Gilson concluded her keynote with the following advice to researchers: Lead with the need and let the research follow, identify and fill critical gaps, seek collaborative partnerships, and stay engaged in the field’s rapidly expanding body of literature.

Beyond these foundational keynotes, the symposium featured two dynamic sets of lightning presentations that highlighted practical innovations, systematic reviews, and outcome-focused research across IPSE. Presenters shared research on topics such as social belonging, health, and student life. Mike Huesmann from Marshall University from

the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill examined how IPSE resident advisors support social connectedness, while Stevie Levite presented on leveraging student values to increase community participation. Dr. Susan Hedges from Appalachian State University demonstrated how wearable technology can empower young adults with ID to self-monitor and improve their health. In addition, researchers shared their synthesis of the literature and intervention reviews. Dr. Rebecca Smith Hill and Dr. Chelsea VanHorn Stinnett from Think College presented a scoping review of mental health strategies for college students with ID, complemented by Khaled Alsherhi's of UNC Greensboro systematic review of challenges and interventions for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Lastly, researchers discussed staff preparation, credentials, and long-term outcomes. Spenser Norris from Georgia State University addressed interprofessional team preparation, and Dr. Betty Patten from Auburn University presented on sexuality and relationship education. Exploring pathways beyond college, Dr. Katie Abrams from University of Iowa shared research that highlighted microcredentials as mechanisms for inclusive success and closed out the talks with findings on a study that explored employment and living outcomes for individuals with IDD.

The symposium also featured the unveiling of the SEPSEA and Florida Atlantic University (FAU) Research Brief Collaboration, an initiative led by Dr. Rebecca Smith Hill, Dr. Jerry Alliston from University of Southern Mississippi, Gwen Carey from Florida Atlantic University, and Christian Zimmerman from the Florida Center for Students with Unique Abilities, aimed at translating complex scholarship into accessible research for IPSE professionals. During lunch, symposium attendees engaged in targeted table discussions around four key topics: centering the self-advocate, holistic student support, accessible research, and defining "success" in IPSE programs. The afternoon also included a brief World Cafe-style community conversation led by SEPSEA representatives to support the development of collaborative Research Affinity Groups in the field.

The first IPSE Association Research Symposium was a day of knowledge-sharing and collaboration. With more than 500 peer-reviewed studies, the field of IPSE research is thriving, but there is still significant room for growth. As highlighted throughout the symposium, future research must continue to evaluate the impact of program accreditation, broaden participatory research models, conduct longitudinal studies on life after college, and strengthen authentic inclusion and belonging. As you explore the articles in this issue, we invite you to reflect on our field's current chapter: Who else needs to be a part of the research? What new questions should we be asking? And as Dr. Grigal summarized in her keynote, what can you contribute and how will it help to write what comes next?