Promoting Friendships in Inclusive College Courses

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Undergraduate students tend to reflect positively on their social experiences in college the most.

College students who had social supports in their undergraduate years also tend to have more life satisfaction and higher levels of gratitude.

Kon et al. 2015
How do individuals with IDD describe their social experiences?

Comparison: Out of 21,411 individuals aged 18+ surveyed in person, 98% of individuals without disabilities have at least one friend.

PEW Research
How do individuals with IDD describe their social experiences?

COMPARISON: 98% of young adults without IDD have more than one best friend their age, and over 78% have 1-5 close peer friends. PEW Research

How do individuals with IDD describe their social experiences?

Individuals with IDD between 23-34 experience more loneliness than those between 18-22.

**WHY?**

**Do you ever feel lonely? 2018-2019**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses of Young Adults with IDD 18+</th>
<th>Yes, often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>No, not often</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>57%</td>
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Aggie ACHIEVE, launched in fall 2019, is designed with a twofold mission:

- provide an **inclusive** and **immersive** college education;
- equip young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities for employment in the community.

Aggie ACHIEVE supports students in key domain areas:

- Academics
- Career development
- Independent living
- Social skills
Inclusive Coursework

• 15-20 courses from TAMU course catalog current available to Aggie ACHIEVE students
  • Most are taken for zero-credit except employment internships and PEAP courses
  • Participating departments include: Educational Psychology, English, Animal Sciences, Entomology, and Performance Arts
• Students will receive Certificate in Interdisciplinary Studies from Texas A&M University
We sought to explore:

1. How do peers define friendships and social inclusion?
2. What factors are associated with higher levels of comfortability and preparedness for inclusive college classes?
3. What promotes friendships between students with and without IDD in inclusive college classes?
Participants

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>50%</td>
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<tr>
<td>non-College of Education</td>
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<td>Age 17-21 years</td>
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<td>Junior</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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</table>
Sequential Explanatory Mixed Methods Study

**Quantitative:**
- Online Survey
- 34 respondents
- Random sampling from 5 inclusive college classes across disciplines
- 1 month to complete the survey
- Analyzed using survey validation, descriptives, chi-square, and regression

**Mixing:**
- Linked research questions
- Linked survey and focus group questions
- Purposeful maximum sampling
- Blended Analysis

**Qualitative:**
- Focus group with 8 participants
- Zoom interviews (1 hour long)
- Gift card incentive
- Grounded theory analysis

**Blended Analysis Findings:**
A grounded theory of inclusive and reciprocal friendships
How do peers define friendships and social inclusion?

**Friendships:**
- Trust
- Reciprocal
- Equity based
- Enjoy communicating with
- Supportive
- Have shared interests with
- Sense of companionship

**Social Inclusion:**
- Destroying barriers
- Equal opportunities for access
- Making things accessible
- Welcoming others
- Seeking unity
- Ensuring no one gets left behind

“A friend is someone who sticks by your side through thick and thin no matter what, when, or where they are there, no bias no judgements”

“Providing equal access to opportunities and resources for people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized.”

“Someone who will always be there and show up for you. COVID has made this really hard to create new friendships.”

“Not only is everyone welcome, but everyone is equally appreciated.”
What factors are associated with higher levels of comfortability and preparedness for inclusive college classes?

- College of Education students
- Prior Experience
- Knowledge of IPSE program on campus
- Age of the students
What promotes friendships between students with and without disabilities?

- Campus Climate/Campus Culture
- Communication: Expectations of friends vs. actions towards them
- Prior experiences with interacting with individuals with IDD
- Classroom Environment
- Self-Reflection/Self-Growth
Campus Climate/Campus Culture

Overall culture of the college campus defined by students' attitudes/mindsets regarding inclusion and diversity, perceptions of representation of diversity on campus, and experiences shared by peers.

“No matter what subject it is or whatever comes up, it's not always just for disabilities awareness, but whether it's something like political or something social or whatever it is the A&M campus does a good job. That community in that environment, like able to talk through things and agree to disagree or share views and help each other understand different ways.”

“We see so many posters out there that say to join this organization or join that organization. But, I don't see anything that states where students with ADHD can go to take a test. That's something that I personally have struggled with. We need to hear about places that are open for us, opportunities for us, because it's hard to find them on our own.”
Communication: Expectations of friends vs. actions towards them

Internal expectations of friendships as indicated by peers and the external actions taken towards forming those friendships.

“I would say that the most important part of having a friendship is trust. But personally, if I consider someone a friend, it's because I've talked to them and that I find it at least relatively easy. I mean, talking for me is like my number one thing.”

If you have someone sitting next to you who missed some of the notes, you could help out, provide some of them, and you should support each other as a classroom. And you can reach out and discuss freely if you're having any issues and what specifically you could get help with.”

“I feel like every student on both sides should feel the need to take initiative. It would be great if a person with a disability and a student without a disability would both reach out to form friendships.”
Prior experiences with interacting with individuals with IDD

Experiences prior to college or early in college that contribute to the comfort level and preparedness of peers with and without disabilities to form friendships.

“I felt uncomfortable volunteering to take notes because I had never experienced or been near someone who was deaf.”

“I believe I was definitely prepared or I don't think anybody can be fully prepared, I guess, but my brother has a disability”

“Like I personally would probably like do the work for them (in a group project) because I don't want to hurt their feelings. I don't know what else is going on. I don't know what the social etiquette is”
Classroom Environment

Related to the overall classroom culture, classroom environment, instructor’s roles, and the classroom space

Instructor-led vs. Peer-led initiatives

“In a couple of group activities, I've asked everyone for their number and we will talk about coursework. But I'll also ask about their day, how they've been. That way you can get a better connection to the people in your classroom. “

“I know one of my professors, like every few classes, she'll bring someone in to talk about certain organizations or clubs or I guess groups that have like inclusion.”

“When I walked into my class, I didn't know that I was getting into the class with people who I did. And so it wasn't like something like, oh, I'm going to drop the class because they're all in there. But the professor didn't say anything about it. That's why I was kind of like a little shocked because I thought I was in the wrong class the first day.”
Self-Reflection/Self-Growth

Post-class reflection of the value of inclusion and diversity for each individual, and openness to learn about and act on building friendships.

“The college can have modules with parts teaching about the disabilities and also what you can do and what resources are available on campus. Because honestly, we don't know. I don't know. I know there's a disability department on campus, but I don't know what really else there is. And so that would be really beneficial.”

“We need additional training or a seminar because no matter where you are going in life, what your job is, you're going to deal with people with disabilities. You're going to deal with diversity. And so you might as well embrace it. And here's what you can do to, you know, make a normal relationship.”
How can we increase comfort in inclusive college classes?

Peers’ current experiences

- Uncomfort/Uneasiness/lack of appropriate social etiquette
  - Initiated by peers

- Small Talk leads to conversations
  - Initiated by peers

- Small group work leads to consistent forms of communication
  - Initiated by students with IDD

- Expanding conversations towards multiple experiences
  - Comfort & ease of interactions
Comfort and Preparedness ≠ Inclusive and Reciprocal Friendships
Moving beyond comfort and readiness towards inclusive friendships

**Preparation Stage**
- Age
- Prior Experience
- Campus Culture
- Instructor’s Role

**Action Stage**
- Communication and Taking Initiative
- Individual Decisions
- Conflict Resolution
- Social Networks

Time

Comfort

Readiness

Inclusive and Reciprocal Friendships
Recommendations for IPSE and Higher Education:

- Teaching students explicitly about reciprocal communication (i.e., sitting next to someone new, replying to group text messages, inviting a classmate to hang out after class)

- Increase the diversity of courses offered to IPSE students

- Supporting faculty with creating classroom inclusion, particularly those without a special education background

- Increase visibility of students on campus (i.e., student organizations, intramural sports, study abroad)

- Support for peers in inclusive college courses: Trainings, seminars, and leadership/mentorship development
Recommendations from Aggie ACHIEVE students for inclusive higher education programs:

- **PEAP (Physical Education courses) has resulted in more friends/more friendship opportunities.**
- **Group activities has helped with getting to know people (labs, peer review groups).**
- **Telling peers or classmates about my disability or that I am in Aggie ACHIEVE has helped with making friends.**
- **Being early, participating in class, and being physically present is important.**
- **Take initiative to know different people in class (e.g. sit somewhere different, say hi and email, reach out to group members). “Have you ever heard of Aggie ACHIEVE?”**
What’s next for me?

What are 3-5 ACTION ITEMS that you will take back to your own setting/context to INCREASE inclusive friendships in academic settings?
Thank You!

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