

Inclusive Postsecondary Sex Education Using Inquiry-Based, Peer-Led Learning (Practice Brief)

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Abstract

Sex education in the United States is rarely comprehensive and inclusive, and individuals with disabilities are typically left out of sex education programs and conversations. When they do have access to sex education, it tends to focus on abuse prevention while ignoring sexual expression. The dearth of sex education available for disabled young adults has led to a need for self-directed sex education programs at the postsecondary level. Such a program, named Included, is inclusive of students with and without disabilities. Through flexible eight-week sessions, Included encourages students to ask questions, find reliable answers, and create content to share on Instagram. Included consists of weekly small and large group meetings. Large group meetings aim to evaluate content created by small groups and develop group members' identities as sex educators. Small group meetings aim to promote peer-led creation of material related to sexuality topics of interest. Grounded in the principles of inquiry-based learning, this peer-led program provides a structure for individuals to develop an understanding of diverse topics in sexuality while developing sex educator skills. From continuous improvement efforts and a community-based participatory research project, we learned that group members gained competence in sexuality topics and facilitation skills. The collaborative nature of the project encouraged an ongoing evolution of practices to increase the groups' effectiveness and inclusivity. Included is a promising emerging practice encouraging access to self-directed sex education at the postsecondary level for students with disabilities.

Keywords: postsecondary, sex education, inclusion, peer-led learning, inquiry-based learning

According to the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), sex education is a lifelong process of receiving information about sexuality through a variety of formal and informal sources (SIECUS, 2018). The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in collaboration with a variety of global health organizations, states that the aim of comprehensive sex education is to enable young people to develop healthy and respectful sexual lives (UNESCO, 2018). Unfortunately, only 60% of students in general education and 47% receiving special education under the autism designation receive sex education in school (Holmes et al., 2022). Furthermore, even when students receive sex education in school, it is likely to be insufficient. In the United States, there are National Sex Education Standards that were developed through a collaboration between

multiple public health organizations in 2012; however, only about 40% of districts have adopted the standards (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). Thus, many students, particularly students with disabilities in postsecondary education, are likely to need additional sex education.

Because of the high rates of sexual assault among college students and federal mandates that specifically address sexual violence prevention, many university-based sex education programs target self-protective skills and assault prevention (Feina et al., 2016). In focus groups with university students, Feina et al. (2016) identified that students (a) find assault prevention programs to be inadequate and (b) want comprehensive sex education; these findings are corroborated by previous research (Hubach et al., 2019). Although there is no one accepted definition of comprehensive sex education, a review of the literature found four

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consistent components of emphasis: positive sexualities and respectful relationships; rights, participation, and agency; sexual and reproductive health concerns and practices; and gender equality and power relations (Miedema et al., 2020). When offered at the college level, comprehensive sex education is usually offered as a credit-bearing course (Manning-Ouellette & Shikongo-Asino, 2022). In terms of sex education outside of coursework, a review of 413 higher education websites found that 29% offered any type of sexual health program, and of these programs, 38% had a peer educator component (Shigeto & Scheier, 2023).

Peer-led sex education is an alternative model to the standard teacher-to-student model in which members of similar ages are trained to increase their knowledge and skills so that they may be role models and trusted sources of information (Sun et al., 2018). A systematic review of peer-led sex education on college campuses found this type of sex education increased knowledge of sexual health topics and the use of condoms and HIV testing (Wong et al., 2019). For college students with disabilities, peer-led sex education may be critically important as parents and educators may hold patronizing beliefs about their sexuality (Frawley & O'Shea, 2020). Furthermore, for many college students with disabilities, particularly autistic students, college can be a time of social isolation, and it can be difficult to find a disability community (Frost et al., 2019).

Depiction of the Problem

The lack of diversity in sex education is a persistent area of concern. A systematic review of 39 articles on the role of sex education found substantial evidence to support education that is inclusive of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and additional identities (LGBTQIA+) as well as a social justice approach to sex education; however, most of the examples of inclusive curricula came from Europe (Goldfarb & Lieberman et al., 2021). In the United States, there has been increasing public scrutiny of LGBTQIA+ identities, with over 500 anti-LGBTQIA+ bills being introduced in 2023 (American Civil Liberties Union, 2023). A lack of inclusive sex education affects students with disabilities in two primary ways. First, many disabled students have queer identities and thus need inclusive sex education and support for their intersectional identity (Miller et al., 2019). Second, LGBTQIA+ inclusive sex education is just one form of inclusion—when sex education is heteronormatively restricted, it precludes many expressions of sexuality, including the sexual expression of cisgender, heterosexual disabled

people (Callen, 2022). Taken together, the extant research suggests a need for inclusive sex education at the postsecondary level.

Setting and Participants

This project takes place at the University of Delaware and describes a registered student organization (RSO). The group is composed of disabled young adults and non-disabled peers. We do not require participants to disclose their disability identity, but many have chosen to disclose either when joining the group or during their time as a member. Each group in Included has always had at least one participant who openly identifies as having an Intellectual disability and one participant who identifies as Neurodiverse. We recruit from the certificate program for students with intellectual disability, the autism student support program, the disability resource office, a disability-centric scholars program, undergraduate research assistants, flyers, and word of mouth. These efforts attract students with and without disabilities, but all students have an interest in disability. A core feature of Included is its co-created nature, in which equal power dynamics among participants are strived for—neither formally nor informally is there an instructor–student dynamic, but rather a community working together to research and produce sex educational content and disseminate it online.

Description of Practice: Included

Included is an Instagram-based peer-led program that dismantles the typical principles of sex education by encouraging self-guided, inquiry-based learning. Derived out of the need for inclusive and diverse sex education for young adults with disabilities, Included promotes the exploration of a wide variety of topics about sexuality. Included has evolved to be an eight-week program held twice a year, in accordance with fall and spring semesters. Participants are asked to dedicate two hours weekly to attend one large group and one small group meeting and participate in the inquiry-based learning process. Many participants continue with the program over multiple semesters. Included started as a Zoom-based program because of COVID-19 and maintained a hybrid format because we found this format increased accessibility.

Regarding development, Included was initially conceptualized by a neurodivergent undergraduate student who was interested in developing a sex education program for students with disabilities. Graduate students and a faculty member provided support in the first two semesters but that support faded once

the program was established. It is now a registered student organization (RSO) on campus. Each aspect of the program will be described in greater detail.

Theoretical Background: Inquiry-Based Learning

Inquiry-based learning is a pedagogical practice commonly used in science education in which students are (a) self-directed, (b) engaged in authentic research, and (c) moving through cyclical phases of exploration (Pedaste et al., 2015). Inquiry-based learning has a strong history of effectiveness, especially when compared to didactic instructional approaches (Lazonder & Harmsen, 2016). Additionally, inquiry-based learning aligns with the values of the Included program. As the goals of Included are to position each member as an educator and a leader, inquiry-based learning provides a method for achieving that goal. Inquiry-based learning is also developmentally appropriate—as all members of the group are young adults, expository approaches towards sex education may reinforce the infantilizing stigma surrounding disability and sexuality (de Wit et al., 2022).

Large Group Structure

During an eight-week session of Included, large group meetings are a staple feature that occur weekly for one hour. There are two primary goals of large group meetings: evaluating content created in small groups (discussed in the small group structure section below) and developing identities as sex educators. Developing identities as sex educators included group building activities, professional development and skill building, guest speakers to further knowledge on topics of interest, and discussions of relevant topics.

Reviewing Posts. One primary goal of large group meetings is to evaluate content created in small groups, which is a dynamic task. The evaluation process involves input from all group members on accuracy, accessibility, and inclusivity. During the review session, we collectively ensure that each post is supported by credible and accessible sources and that these sources are cited through hyperlinks. Additionally, we evaluate the posts for accessibility, including aspects of the text (e.g., font, text size, color), usage of plain language, and using images to aid learning (e.g., not overly decorative). Lastly, one primary goal of Included is to create and provide posts on sexuality that are inclusive to all individuals. Therefore, a major focus of the evaluation process is to alter the material to be inclusive of all genders, sexualities, ability status, and ethnicities. For example, when writing a post on menstruation, we collaboratively discussed

using terms such as “people who menstruate” rather than gendered terms and how these terms promote inclusivity. Figure 1 is an example of an Included post about LGBT+ terminology.

Developing Identities as Sexuality Educators. Large group sessions focused on identity development have incorporated workshops on adding Included to one’s resume, discussions on topics such as “Can caregivers and guardians tell disabled people they can’t date?” and guest speakers on topics that the group has directly expressed interest in (e.g., self-advocates discussing their experience with sexuality). Professional development skills typically arose from group members’ ideas or questions, such as how to use social media in a professional way. Group discussions were also generated by group members and typically aligned with current events. The group discussed the overturn of Roe versus Wade in 2022 and subsequently produced a post about abortions. Additionally, following a traumatic sexual assault on campus, the group discussed the event, brainstormed how to use their platform to fight against domestic violence and sexual assault, and created a post about sexual assault that both educated Included members and the broader community. Lastly, the group members expressed interest in inviting community members to speak to the group about various topics. Guest speakers enabled the group to learn about diverse topics and make connections within the community. One speaker from Planned Parenthood of Delaware became a great resource for future posts and other opportunities for members.

Small Group Structure

Small group meetings facilitate the creation of content, foster strong connections between members, and provide a safe space for learning. Small groups consist of three-five group members with and without disabilities. Like large group meetings, small groups were offered in a hybrid fashion to promote accessibility. Included evolved to designate separate virtual and in-person small groups, which allowed members who have a strong preference for virtual or in-person learning to be put in a group with a format that is comfortable for them. Each small group worked at a different pace, and new small groups sometimes took time to fall into the rhythm of working together. Because the evaluation process is cyclic, one post could take multiple weeks to evaluate and edit before it would be ready to be uploaded to social media.

Small groups follow a three-step process: (a) brainstorming questions about sexuality, (b) finding answers with peers, and (c) creating an Instagram post on the topic (using Canva—a free online graphic

Figure 1

Example of an Included Post About LGBT+ Vocabulary (Originally in Color)



design tool). This process allows for inquiry-based, peer-led learning focused on helping the learner transition to the provider of knowledge. In each small group, members are first asked to brainstorm different ideas in the domain of sexuality that they are interested in researching. After agreeing on a topic and specific question(s) to investigate, small groups progressed to finding reliable answers. In some cases, the process of finding reliable answers proves to be challenging for members due to a variety of barriers. Many individuals are not familiar with evaluating websites and sources based on reliability, accuracy, and accessibility. This has been overcome through sharing progress with the large group and getting peer feedback. Lastly, small groups use Canva to create an Instagram post with accessible and valuable information on the topic they research. Canva allows members to share posts with one another, creating an opportunity for members to work on posts collaboratively.

The use of Instagram allows Included participants to learn about material that interests them and share such content with others, strengthening participants' identities as both students and sex educators. During the creation of Included, the social media platform Instagram was chosen deliberately due to its widespread use on college campuses, accessibility features (e.g., alternative text for images, emphasis on images rather than text), and community of disabled users. As a group, we created an Instagram account that a group facilitator was responsible for managing. The facilitator was responsible for posting content created and approved by the group. Included did not require participants to have Instagram accounts nor have experience with social media. However, we found that many of our participants, with and without disabilities, were already using Instagram.

Leadership Structure

The leadership structure of Included has evolved throughout the program. All members work together, share ideas, and hold ownership of the content created within the group. While the main goal of Included is to level power dynamics and promote equity, it has proved to be important to identify facilitators to answer questions, organize meetings, and lead recruitment efforts. In large group meetings, the program facilitator is responsible for formalizing an agenda for each meeting, creating a visual resource (i.e., PowerPoint), sending materials to participants prior to the meeting time, and facilitating conversation and activity throughout the meeting. To ensure the success of all participants, the facilitator sends out a detailed agenda for meetings in advance, including all discussion questions or topics that an individual may be asked about, sending multiple reminders of upcoming meetings, and securing accessible technology for members. By performing these “behind-the-scenes” tasks, the facilitator takes the burden of preparation from group members, allowing for more energy to be spent within the group.

Within small groups, we strove to actively dismantle power differences between neurodiverse and neurotypical individuals. For this reason, the large group facilitator is not included in small groups. However, logistical tasks are necessary to make the small groups functional. Thus, we identify one small group member to coordinate meeting times and locations/Zoom links for their group. One of the small group facilitators, who identified as having an intellectual disability, shared that this role was helpful in learning how to set up a meeting and that he felt more responsibility in his group.

Evaluation Methods

Included has engaged in continuous improvement efforts, and through these efforts, has evolved significantly throughout the years as we embraced adaptations and incorporated innovative ideas and perspectives into values and programming. One strategy we have used is distributing surveys that ask members to assess their current feelings about the group and detail any problems or ideas they have had. The facilitator plans changes in response to this feedback and then brings those changes back to the large group to ensure that they adequately meet the needs and expectations of all members. Additionally, we conducted a qualitative, interview-based community-based participatory research project (Author cite, 2023). We identified that members felt they gained a greater sense of competence about human sexuali-

ty topics as well as skills related to running a group, such as facilitation, research, and instruction. For example, one participant shared, “Being able to explain it to other people has been really helpful, because I’ve been learning to actually talk about it in a way that’s understandable.” They go on to say, “I like looking into things, and I like finding out what other people are curious about. I don’t know. I just like informing myself while informing others.” Together, these quotes show how the members of Included learned through the inquiry-based learning process. Members felt like they learned how to be more accessible and inclusive, but ableism still operated within the group. For example, one participant commented,

You might have people who are just saying yes, even though maybe it’s not being presented in a way that’s understandable or it’s just the easiest option at the time to be like, ‘Yeah, that’s a great idea,’ and not really think through what [the] idea means and how that will affect the content that they’re creating.

The quote highlights how the community-based participatory research project allowed members of the group to identify and process power dynamics between those with and without disabilities.

Although the participatory research project allowed for a systematic evaluation of participants’ experiences with Included, it did have several limitations. First, it only highlighted the perceptions of members and did not have any external evaluations of students’ learning. The analysis of perceptions may have been influenced by the lived experience of being part of the group as the community-based approach meant the members of the research team were also part of the program. Additionally, we did not measure the effectiveness of the learning materials produced by Included. Finally, we did not compare Included to other approaches of sex education nor within group differences between participants with and without disabilities.

A unique element of Included is the interaction with others outside of the group via Instagram. Included has grown throughout the years, acquiring around 170 followers. Additionally, Instagram has a feature in which one can deem their profile a “business account,” allowing the owner to view analytics including how many accounts a post reaches. Included became a business account in December 2022. After this date, our posts reached between 70 and 135 profiles, with an estimated 40% of profiles reached being accounts that did not follow us. Our most popular post, reaching 135 accounts, detailed several types of relationships including platonic, romantic, open, and casual.

Implications and Transferability

We hope that Included provides an alternative model to more traditional forms of sex education. To that end, we have made all resources developed for Included freely available online (asdsexed.org). Included was developed to be developmentally appropriate and authentic for emerging adults—a period in which sexual identity is a central developmental task and there is an increasing need for autonomy (Olmstead, 2020). Furthermore, Included provides a model for inclusive campus programming in which students with disabilities come together with those without disabilities as leaders and experts. The format contrasts much of the campus programming in which non-disabled students act as peer mentors while maintaining a position of power and authority that mirrors broader social power inequalities (Morris et al., 2024).

The topics that the students self-selected were not necessarily aligned with the curricular choices prioritized by universities, which primarily focus on sexual assault prevention and, to a lesser extent, sexual health (Shigeto & Scheier, 2023). Other research has suggested that students want a broader range of topics at the college level, including the diversity of sexual behavior and identity, relational and ethical aspects of sexuality, sexual empowerment, the mechanics of sex, and sexual physiology (Astle et al., 2021). Included adds to this literature by providing evidence that students with disabilities are also interested in diverse topics and the specific diverse topics that might be of interest to students. The breadth of topics students want information on is valuable information for disability resources and Title IX offices for both these offices to fulfill their missions of ensuring all students on campus can participate fully and safely. Because of Included's innovative approach, the faculty advisor was asked to meet with the developer of the sexual misconduct prevention training (which is mandated for all incoming students) to help ensure its accessibility.

We acknowledge that Included's reliance on Instagram may not be accessible or appealing to some individuals. Included's peer-led, inquiry-based model of sex education does not require the use of social media to disburse content. An alternative to creating/posting content on social media could be sharing information in large group meetings. That said, the added element of creating content for social media is intriguing to many of our members. Our members have enjoyed the creative aspect of creating content, the social nature of posting on Instagram, and becoming sex educators by sharing information with a public audience.

The social media landscape is quickly and constantly evolving, so we advise that future facilitators of programs like Included survey members on preferred social media sites and accessibility features.

The next steps for Included are to consider issues of sustainability and expansion. At this time, the shared leadership model has ensured that the program could continue once the original developer graduated, but given the student-led nature of the program, challenges with sustainability and expansion will need to be explored over time. At this time, Included has only been implemented on one campus, and educational outcomes have not been examined in comparison to other types of sex education programs. Included provides a model for peer-led and inquiry-based programming as opposed to the instructor-led, didactic forms of sex education often provided in university settings. Future research should explore the relative efficacy of these types of models. Additionally, we have made efforts to share our programming materials with others in hopes of a similar program being implemented on a different college campus. In addition to posting free Included materials and a manual online, included information has been shared with other inclusive postsecondary programs via presentations at conferences. The creator of Included is also pursuing a graduate education at a different university and plans to implement Included during her academic career.

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