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Special Issue

Inclusive Postsecondary Education for Students with Intellectual Disability: Leveraging University Systems for Access, Support, and Success

AHEAD
Association on Higher Education And Disability®

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16810 Kenton Drive, Suite 220
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[1]*Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston*

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From the Guest Editors

Inclusive Postsecondary Education for Students with Intellectual Disability: Leveraging University Systems for Access, Support, and Success

Meg Grigal[1]
Clare Papay[1]
L. Danielle Roberts-Dahm[1]
Rebecca Lazo[1]

Over the past two decades, opportunities for students with intellectual disability to apply to and enroll in postsecondary education have expanded significantly in the United States (Grigal et al., 2025b; Myers & Smith, 2025). Once largely excluded from postsecondary institutions, students with intellectual disability now have increasing access to inclusive courses, campus resources, and credential pathways (Becht et al., 2020; Grigal et al., 2024b). This growth has been accompanied by the development of dedicated inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs that intentionally integrate these students into broader campus academic, social, and administrative systems to ensure meaningful participation and support. There are now more than 350 colleges and universities enrolling college students with intellectual disability (Think College, 2025). Successful participation in these programs requires students with intellectual disability to not only access classes but also to use multiple university systems, including disability services, admissions processes, mental health supports, and campus-wide resources.

This special issue aims to broaden the current knowledge base in IPSE, emphasizing research and practice that illuminates how higher education systems can and do support students with intellectual disability. The issue includes an important new white paper from AHEAD, four peer-reviewed articles, and a practice brief that together reflect diverse perspectives on how existing university structures, systems, and resources can be used to support access to and beneficial outcomes for college students with intellectual disability. The collection offers readers insights into both the systemic infrastructure that supports inclusive postsecondary education and the practical strategies employed by administrators and staff to promote student access, engagement, and success.

The AHEAD White paper provides an updated statement of support for collaboration between disability resource office (DRO) professionals and IPSE programs and the students they enroll. This update builds on the foundational white paper published in 2011, which demonstrated AHEAD's early commitment to supporting success for college students with intellectual disability (Thompson et al., 2011). This new white paper, "Advancing Inclusive Postsecondary Education for Students with Intellectual Disability" by Levins, Mitchell, Nolting, Stubbs, Weir, and Berberi (2026), shares important definitions of IPSE-related terms, describes the academic practices used in these programs, describes available funding sources, and offers examples highlighting the range of program models. It also summarizes research about the impact IPSE programs have on students with and without disability, faculty, and staff, and underscores the critical role DRO personnel can have in creating "…a campus culture of disability inclusion as a norm rather than the exception…" (p. 9). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it states very clearly that students with intellectual disability enrolled in postsecondary education have the right to access disability services. This messaging is critically important to share with disability resource professionals, as not all college students with intellectual disability are able access these services (Grigal et al., 2025a). We continue to be grateful for the consistent support AHEAD's leadership and its members have offered those seeking to advance the implementation and outcomes of IPSE practices.

[1] *Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston*

Building on the important foundation offered by the white paper, this special issue next offers an examination of disability services and campus supports (Grigal, Papay, Roberts-Dahm, Scott, & Weir), exploring the critical role of DROs in providing accommodations, support, and programmatic access for students with intellectual disability. This study draws attention to differences in institutional approaches, highlighting how colleges and universities with and without dedicated IPSE structures meet the needs of students with intellectual disability. This information was obtained using a survey distributed to DRO professionals in the US, gathering information about DRO professionals' awareness of dedicated IPSE programs on campuses, documentation requirements, provision of supports in academic classes, and support provided for students with intellectual disability to access DRO services. Grigal et al. found the presence of a dedicated program on a campus leads to more support available for students with intellectual disability, including more support from the DRO. They also found that DROs at campuses without dedicated programs are increasingly serving students with intellectual disability in some capacity, providing all typical services. Access to most campus-wide supports was also found to be available to college students with intellectual disability, regardless of the presence of a dedicated program.

Next, admissions practices are explored in a study by Myers and Ducett, which investigates eligibility criteria and admission processes across IPSE programs. These authors capture 222 distinct admissions requirements, including both eligibility requirements and admissions processes. This research highlights the ways program requirements, ranging from guardianship and documentation to academic thresholds and behavioral assessments, can either reduce or inadvertently intensify barriers to college access. By examining these criteria through lenses of Inclusive Postsecondary Education, Disability Studies in Education, and DisCrit, the study illuminates opportunities for more equitable admissions practices.

Ford and Gorman contribute a practice paper focused on Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) as a framework for postsecondary inclusion. This tiered approach aligns core, supplemental, and individualized interventions with available university resources, providing a decision-making framework to assess student readiness and match supports to student needs. Through case studies and practical examples, the authors demonstrate how MTSS can be intentionally integrated into higher education systems to improve student access, retention, and outcomes.

The issue further includes a scoping review of IPSE research (Myers, Soldovieri, Ducett, Borowski, Martin, Wallis, Jackson, Powell, & Valez) that catalogs nearly five decades of empirical and conceptual work in the field. This review traces the evolution of research focus, from early focuses on program development and descriptions to more outcome- and support-oriented studies. The scoping review identifies gaps and recommendations for future inquiry. This study demonstrates that the field of research in IPSE is no longer emerging but is now well established. The authors document the methodological characteristics as well as the volume and thematic frequency of studies over time. They offer suggestions for future research on including students' voices, the need for longitudinal studies, and deeper examination into social belonging. This synthesis also examines how IPSE research has been influenced by educational policies.

Finally, Hill and Stinnett examine the landscape of research on mental health strategies for students with intellectual disability. Their scoping review aims to identify research findings on how to support the mental health needs of emerging adults with intellectual disability effectively in college settings. The review found limited research on college-specific mental health support strategies, and, in broadening their review beyond college settings, they found many mental health support strategies that have been researched for use with adults with intellectual disability require the use of a trained and licensed professional. Noting these as limitations of the research base, the authors encourage program professionals to build their own capacity to support student mental health needs and to engage proactively with the campus mental health center to access trained and licensed professionals

Together, the white paper, the research articles, and the practice brief in this special issue highlight the importance of leveraging university systems, including disability services, admissions offices, mental health resources, and programmatic infrastructure to create inclusive, equitable, and supportive environments for students with intellectual disability. Across these contributions, several themes emerge. First, inclusive higher education is not solely about course access; it requires intentional integration of supports across multiple university systems. Second, administrators and staff across many departments play critical roles as facilitators, collaborators, and advocates within institutional structures. Third, both research and practice benefit from systemic approaches that balance individual student needs with programmatic consistency and institutional capacity. Finally, while progress has been made, ongoing evaluation, research, and knowledge translation remain

essential to sustain and expand effective inclusive postsecondary practices.

It is our hope that this special issue provides JPED readers with a comprehensive understanding of how universities can support students with intellectual disability. By centering systemic strategies and evidence-informed practices, the collection illustrates how inclusive higher education can be both achievable and sustainable, ultimately fostering greater access, engagement, and success for students with intellectual disability in diverse postsecondary contexts.

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About the Guest Editors

Meg Grigal received her B.A. in psychology from Rutgers University, her M.Ed. in transition and supported employment from UNC Charlotte, and her Ph.D. from the University of Maryland. Her experience includes working as a special education teacher, and as a researcher, evaluator, and technical assistance leader in inclusive higher education. She is currently the director of Think College, the principal investigator of the Think College National Coordinating Center and the Think College Inclusive Higher Education Network, a senior research fellow, and the Inclusive Postsecondary Education Team Lead at the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Her research interests include transition to college, inclusive higher education and employment for people with intellectual disability. She can be reached by email at: meg.grigal@umb.edu.

Clare Papay received her M.Ed. and Ph.D. degrees in special education from Lehigh University. She is currently Senior Associate for Inclusive Postsecondary Education at Think College at the Institute for Community Inclusion, UMass Boston, where she conducts research and provides technical assistance on higher education for students with intellectual disability. Clare is the co-Principal Investigator for the National Coordinating Center for the TPSID model demonstration program and for the Think College Inclusive Higher Education Network: A Technical Assistance and Dissemination Center, both funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education. She is also co-Principal Investigator for the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR) funded project "From College to Career (FCTC): Strengthening Employment Outcomes after Postsecondary Education for People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD)." She serves as co-editor for the Journal of Inclusive Postsecondary Education (JIPE) and as a special advisor to the board of the Inclusive Postsecondary Education (IPSE) Association. Clare can be reached at clare.papay@umb.edu.

L. Danielle Roberts-Dahm received her Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction with a focus on special education from the University of South Florida. Her experience includes serving in a range of roles from direct support to program development and leadership within postsecondary programs for students with intellectual disability. She is currently a Program Director at the Institute for Community Inclusion, UMass Boston. Danie serves as the Project Coordinator of

the Think College National Coordinating Center for the TPSID model demonstration program and the Think College Inclusive Higher Education Network: A Technical Assistance and Dissemination Center, both funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education. Her research interests include various aspects of postsecondary education for students with intellectual disability. She can be reached by email at: danielle.dahm@umb.edu.

Rebecca Lazo received her B.A. degree in English Language & Literature from Rutgers University–Camden. Her experience includes working as an acquisitions editor for Brookes Publishing for nearly 15 years with a focus on special education, transition, and employment for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. She is currently the manager of the knowledge translation and dissemination team at Think College at the Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston. She can be reached by email at: Rebecca.Lazo@umb.edu.

Introduction to AHEAD White Paper

Katy Washington, J.D., Ph.D.
President, AHEAD Board of Directors

On behalf of the AHEAD Board of Directors, I am pleased to offer our full endorsement of *Advancing Inclusive Postsecondary Education for Students with Intellectual Disability.* This paper represents an important contribution to the work of ensuring that students with intellectual disability are welcomed, supported, and encouraged in going to college and in reaping the lifelong benefits of college education.

AHEAD's commitment to disability equity in postsecondary education invites us to reckon with educational systems that have long excluded intellectually disabled people, and to develop more flexible and inclusive approaches to learning. The research and recommendations introduced in this paper confirm what we already know: communities are strengthened when everyone has the opportunity to participate and to grow.

What becomes evident across research findings is this: when students with intellectual disability have access to inclusive academic programs, peer connections, advising, and meaningful employment experiences, they thrive. Outcomes are consistent and compelling: students complete programs at higher rates, gain workforce skills, participate in campus life, and maintain meaningful employment at rates far exceeding national averages. These successes are not exceptions; they are a manifestation of what is possible when institutions believe in people and invest in inclusive design.

As disability resource professionals, we play a key role in expanding opportunity and fueling achievement. Our respect for disabled people and their experiences, our deep and varied expertise, our relationships, and our leadership on matters of educational equity are vital to students' success and institutional transformation.

As President of AHEAD, I encourage you to dive into the paper and begin imagining not *whether* but *how* to engage in the worthwhile work of building a more inclusive future together. We thank the paper's authors for leading the way by creating a resource that will be useful to AHEAD's diverse community of professionals.

Advancing Inclusive Postsecondary Education for Students with Intellectual Disability (AHEAD White Paper)

Craig Levins[1]
Michelle L. Mitchell[2]
Paul D. Nolting[3]
Aimee Stubbs[1]
Cate Weir[4]
Tammy Berberi[5]

Introduction

The vision of AHEAD is "disability equity in postsecondary education," and its mission is to "advance professional practice that operationalizes an expanded concept of disability access" (AHEAD Strategic Plan, 2023). The participation of intellectually disabled people in an inclusive postsecondary education that results in fulfilling opportunities, including meaningful employment, is integral to AHEAD's purpose and project. In advocating for equal access and participation for students with intellectual disability, AHEAD upholds protections afforded by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), as well as provisions in the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) of 2008. Through the professional development of its members, AHEAD challenges harmful stereotypes and champions opportunities for people who have been denied the many lifelong benefits of postsecondary education, key components of the AHEAD Public Policy Platform (2022). These advocacy efforts establish AHEAD as a research hub and a public thought leader in the field of inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE), operationalizing specific goals in its strategic plan. Since the publication of the *Students with Intellectual Disability and Campus Disability Service* (2011), more than thirty articles have appeared in AHEAD's quarterly *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, and opportunities to develop skill sets central to advancing inclusive postsecondary education—such as universal design—have been offered on a regular basis.

Background

People with intellectual disability have been systematically excluded from higher education for most of its history. Viewed as incapable of learning or benefiting from education after high school, they have had limited opportunities for a college education. The HEOA laid the groundwork for expanded, inclusive access to a quality higher education and forged a pathway from secondary school to IPSE and employment. As a result, in part, of federal funding authorized by the HEOA for model demonstration Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID), the number of programs for students with intellectual disability has grown significantly. Since 2010, more than 5,200 students have participated in 126 TPSID programs at colleges and universities in 34 states (Think College, 2025c). Despite extraordinary growth in IPSE over the past fifteen years, demand far exceeds the availability of options for students with intellectual disability:

- TPSID programs serve only a fraction of the estimated 8,000 students per year who pursue postsecondary education through a dedicated program for students with intellectual disability (Think College, 2025a).
- Intellectually disabled students also pursue college independently thanks to open enrollment.
- Nonetheless, only 2% of intellectually disabled people in the United States pursue postsecondary education (Association of University Centers on Disability, 2023).

[1] Broward College; [2] Lehigh Carbon Community College; [3] State College of Florida and University of South Florida; [4] University of Massachusetts Boston, Think College; [5] AHEAD

Purpose

This paper provides an overview of increased access and opportunities for students with intellectual disability in postsecondary education since the passage of the HEOA. Research and data collection that has been conducted since that time enables AHEAD to:

- Provide an overview of the inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) landscape.
- Summarize what has been learned through more than fifteen years of data collection and research.
- Equip disability resource professionals with information and resources to support students with intellectual disability and advocate for the development of inclusive postsecondary education programs.

Definitions

Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary (CTP) Program

Under Title 34 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Section 668.231(a), a comprehensive transition and postsecondary program for students with intellectual disability is defined as, a degree, certificate, or non-degree program that—

(1) Is offered by a participating institution;
(2) Is delivered to students physically attending the institution;
(3) Is designed to support students with intellectual disabilities who are seeking to continue academic, career and technical, and independent living instruction at an institution of higher education in order to prepare for gainful employment;
(4) Includes an advising and curriculum structure;
(5) Requires students with intellectual disabilities to have at least one-half of their participation in the program, as determined by the institution, focus on academic components through one or more of the following activities:
(i) Taking credit-bearing courses with students without disabilities.
(ii) Auditing or otherwise participating in courses with students without disabilities for which the student does not receive regular academic credit.
(iii) Taking non-credit-bearing, nondegree courses with students without disabilities.
(iv) Participating in internships or work-based training in settings with individuals without disabilities; and
(6) Provides students with intellectual disabilities opportunities to participate in coursework and other activities with students without disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2025a).

CTP status opens access to federal student aid for eligible students, even when they do not have a standard high school diploma and are not matriculated towards a postsecondary degree. (Think College, n.d.)

Credentials

An increasing number of states are discontinuing alternative diplomas in favor of a single, standard diploma for all graduating high school students, removing an administrative barrier to equitable participation in postsecondary education (Achieve & National Center on Educational Outcomes, 2016). While IPSE programs generally do not require a regular diploma for admission, having one opens possibilities that are not otherwise available, such as pursuing a postsecondary degree.

Upon completion of a dedicated program for students with intellectual disability, students are typically awarded a certificate that is specific to their program and based on participation in inclusive and specialized courses as well as credit-bearing and non-credit-bearing experiences. Many programs also feature the possibility of completing an industry credential—Certified Guest Service Professional or Forklift Safety Training, for example—and/or micro credentials that suit a student's interests and skill sets. Such decisions can improve employment outcomes and result in higher pay (Grigal et. al., 2024).

Inclusive Postsecondary Education (IPSE)

Inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) may refer to educational opportunities for intellectually disabled people, including (but not limited to) CTP and TPSID. IPSE may also refer to the field of study examining how to include, support, and enroll people with intellectual disability in higher education so they can achieve their desired post-school outcomes. The terms "inclusive postsecondary education" and "inclusive higher education" (IHE) are often used interchangeably.

Student with Intellectual Disability

Title 34 Section 668.231 (b) defines a student with an intellectual disability as a student—

(1) with a cognitive impairment characterized by significant limitations in
(i) Intellectual and cognitive functioning; and
(ii) Adaptive behavior as expressed in conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills;

(2) Who is currently, or was formerly, eligible for special education and related services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (20 U.S.C. 1401), including a student who was determined eligible for special education or related services under the IDEA but was home-schooled or attended private school (U.S. Department of Education, 2025a).

Throughout this paper, a mix of person-first and identity-first language—"student with intellectual disability" and "intellectually disabled student," respectively—affirms the status of intellectually disabled people *as students* in postsecondary education, acknowledges disability as an aspect of identity per the AHEAD Statement on Language, and reflects a variety of respectful usage norms in the disability community and among stakeholders.

Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability (TPSID)

Awarded every five years since 2010 (and renewed in 2025) by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, TPSID grants are model demonstration grants awarded to colleges and universities to create or expand inclusive, high-quality postsecondary programs for students with intellectual disability. The TPSID grant program also includes funding for a national coordinating center that advances inclusive postsecondary education through technical assistance, data collection, and research. Think College at the Institute for Community Inclusion, UMass Boston, has been the recipient of that grant since 2010 (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Key Features of Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability

IPSE programs, including (but not limited to) TPSID and CTP, are designed to support intellectually disabled students in accessing inclusive academic, career, and independent living experiences in college settings. Program staff typically include a director and professionals who coordinate these areas of focus, as well as peer mentors. Peer mentors, who may be paid or unpaid, work with students in a variety of ways. They may attend classes, live nearby in the residence hall, tutor, assist with daily planning, go on lunch or workout dates, attend campus activities, or work alongside students in a job on or off campus.

IPSE programs exist at all sorts of postsecondary institutions, from community colleges to public flagship universities and private liberal arts colleges. Programs often feature an alternative application and admissions process, a comprehensive program of study outlining program goals, student support, and articulated outcomes. The availability of unique pathways and supports in no way changes the spirit or specific provisions in support of maximally inclusive college experiences for intellectually disabled students (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2025a & 2025b). Theoretically, once a student is accepted to an IPSE program, they are a member of the campus community. In practice, inclusion varies from one campus to another. Trends among TPSID programs suggest that inclusion efforts improve over time and that more inclusive experiences result in better outcomes (see Outcomes below).

A few structural decisions can facilitate inclusion. Programs are often co-located among similar, student-facing offices and use a schedule that follows the campus academic calendar. Where residential options are available, students are increasingly likely to live on campus among their peers (Grigal et al. 2024). Students are encouraged to take as many courses in the regular curriculum (i.e., inclusive courses) as they are able; they often take classes that are unique to the program, devoted to academic, independent living, and employment skills. Specialized skills courses coordinate with existing services for all students, such as academic success, peer tutoring, and career services.

Students enrolled in IPSE programs have the same rights and responsibilities—and are held to the same expectations—as all students. With accommodations and adjustments, intellectually disabled students must meet standards set forth in campus policies pertaining to satisfactory academic progress and the student code of conduct, as well as any technical standards for their program of study. IPSE programs differ from other non-degree credential programs in several ways:

- Students take typical college courses alongside other students but may audit, take as pass/fail, or participate differently than a student earning college credit for the course.
- If students are auditing or otherwise not earning typical college credit, academic modifications and/or fundamental alterations may be allowed. Such modifications are made by arrangement with an individual instructor.
- When students take a college course, they earn credit towards their program credential, whether or not they are taking the course for college credit.
- The ratio of integrated college classes and specialized classes varies from program to program, and may vary among students in the same program.

- Courses that are exclusively for students in the program also count toward credential completion.
- Student engagement and career exploration activities may also count toward credential completion.

The most important feature of dedicated programs is, of course, students themselves. To review first-person accounts of the experiences of students with intellectual disability—an emerging genre—is to realize how similar they are to students who may seem more familiar. Like others their age, they are doing a lot of "adulting": taking classes, making friends, working one or more jobs, learning how to manage money, going to football games, learning how to cook and do their own laundry, and making plans for the summer (See Minnesota Inclusive Higher Education Consortium, News and Events).

Paying for College

Like all college students, students with intellectual disability can access a variety of funding sources to pay for college:

- Students who are enrolled in an approved CTP Program can access Pell Grants, Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants (SEOG) and Federal Work Study to pay for typical college costs and components of a course of study, including audited and other non-credit activities (U.S. Department of Education, 2025c).
- Vocational rehabilitation agencies may provide financial assistance for tuition and fees, transportation, assistive technology, and other expenses.
- Several states offer funding to support students enrolled in inclusive higher education programs (Think College, 2025b).
- Donor funds may also be available.
- Under IDEA Part B, local educational agencies (LEA, i.e. secondary schools) may use funds to support participation in postsecondary programs for eligible students with intellectual disability.
- Students enrolled in a dedicated program are not eligible for federal student loans.

Outcomes

The evaluation protocol developed through the TPSID program established a standard set of benchmarks that have been used across three TPSID cohorts to date. The longitudinal dataset includes more than 4,000 students spanning three grant cohorts (Cohort 1 spans 2010-2015, Cohort 2, 2015-2020, and Cohort 3, 2020-2025). A growing body of research demonstrates that inclusion in campus life supports program completion and positive outcomes. Data analyzed by Grigal et al. (2024) suggests that students who access federal student aid, complete more inclusive courses, meet with regular academic advisors, live on campus among all students (where on-campus housing is available), and access disability services are more likely to complete their program than students who have fewer inclusive opportunities. Between 2010 and 2023, as campus practices supporting inclusion increased, so did rates of program completion, from an average of 67% in Cohort 1 to 76% midway through Cohort 3 (the most recent data available).

Inclusive experiences result in better employment outcomes, as well: An average of 29% of Cohort 1 students had a paid job at exit or within 90 days compared to an average of 46% midway through Cohort 3. Follow-up surveys of program alumni confirm similar trends: 59% of students in Cohort 2 report having paid employment one year after program completion. This figure rose to 66% at two years and 67% at three years after completion (Grigal et al., 2024). This employment rate compares quite favorably to an overall employment rate of only 17% among all intellectually disabled people (National Core Indicators, 2024).

Sample Programs

These programs were selected to highlight the diversity of both program structures and options available to students. All five are approved Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary (CTP) Programs, where eligible students can access federal student aid.

Inclusive Education Services, U. Central Florida

Florida is home to more than 30 programs for students with intellectual disability and one of three U.S. states with its own technical assistance center, the Florida Center for Students with Unique Abilities (FCSUA), which provides support to programs throughout the state and administers a scholarship program. The two-year Inclusive Education Services (IES) program at the University of Central Florida offers three industry credentials: education, hospitality, and social services. Each concentration features res-

idential options and on-campus work experience followed by a capstone internship in the fourth semester.

InclusiveU, Syracuse University

Founded in 2014, InclusiveU features a voluntary peer mentoring program and residential mentors, access to more than one hundred academic programs, a dual-enrollment program for area high-school students, admission for international students with intellectual disability, and an inclusive two-week study abroad program to Italy. Upon completing five inclusive courses in an area of study and work experiences undertaken in the final year of study (if not earlier), students receive a certificate from the College of Professional Studies.

Next Steps Program, Vanderbilt University

A four-year program of individual pathways, this program emphasizes service, leadership, public speaking, and advocacy. The first two years focus on foundational academic, career exploration, and college skills. While students are expected to work throughout all four years, years three and four feature an increased focus on developing career interests through on or off-campus employment. Next Steps is developing a variety of registered apprenticeships that result in an industry credential.

Success, Engagement, Education, Determination (SEED) Program, Lehigh Carbon Community College

The SEED Program offers comprehensive direct services beyond accommodations typically provided to support students with disabilities. Three tracks of support are available for a supplemental fee: the Academic track, the AAchieve track, for students with autism, and the Career Track/XISC. The first two are for degree-seeking students and result in a credential or associate degree; completion of the Career Track results in a flexible, 32-credit Program Certificate. Scholarships are available.

University Participant (UP) Program, Western Carolina University

Founded in 2007, Western Carolina University is the first IPSE program to achieve program accreditation from the Inclusive Higher Education Accreditation Council (IHEAC). The program focuses on skill development in five areas: personal development, community participation, vocational preparation, social participation and learning, and participation in three to four inclusive courses. At the end of the second year, students are awarded a university-approved Certificate of Accomplishment for meeting 80% of their goals each semester. Institutional grants and scholarships may be available.

The Role of Disability Resource Professionals

Disability resource professionals have long been at the forefront of educational innovation, developing strategies and advancing equal opportunity in response to changing student populations, technologies, and learning modalities. In the past decade alone, professionals have led adaptations to support universal online learning and to meet the needs of new disabled populations who would be unwelcome or unable to persist in an environment less receptive to their needs. These efforts have a life-changing impact on students who benefit from them, including students with intellectual disability.

Once they have been accepted into an IPSE program or enrolled in a course, students with intellectual disability have a right to access disability services. Disability resource professionals determine appropriate accommodations, introduce relevant assistive technologies, and connect students to vocational rehabilitation and other available resources. The disability resources office has the skill and infrastructure to communicate expectations to faculty and to campus, ensure compliance with civil rights protections afforded by Section 504 and the Americans with Disabilities Act, and confer legitimacy upon the unique experiences of disabled students on campus.

The proportion of intellectually disabled students seeking accommodations through the disability resource office has increased over time and correlates with positive outcomes. In the 2023-2024 academic year, more than three-quarters of TPSID students sought accommodations through the disability resource office on campus (Grigal et al., 2024). Most of these students (94%) also received support from others, including faculty, TPSID staff, and peer mentors (Grigal et al. 2025).

More broadly, disability resource professionals advance a campus culture of disability inclusion as the norm rather than the exception, paving the way for better experiences for all students. According to the AHEAD Program Domains (2021) disability resource professionals:

- Provide leadership and collaboration in framing a commitment to disability access and equity as an integral aspect of their institution's culture (Domain 1)
- Advise and educate the campus community about disability and inclusive practices (Domain 2)

- Provide services, strategies, and accommodations to mitigate the barriers faced by individual disabled people (Domain 3)
- Administer office operations guided by a mission and with access to appropriate resources (Domain 4)
- Enhance their professional knowledge and skills (Domain 5)

These domains suggest a variety of ways that disability resource professionals can engage with inclusive postsecondary education:

- Model respect and a strengths-based disposition for intellectually disabled people. (Domain 2)
- Provide equal access to accommodations, assistive technology, vocational rehabilitation, and other resources managed by the campus disability resource office. (Domains 3 and 4)
- Offer opportunities for others to learn more about universal design, transition planning, and other areas relevant to disabled student experiences. (Domain 1)
- Learn more about IPSE and build relationships. (Domain 5)
- Work with others on campus who are interested in IPSE. (Domains 1 and 4)

Disability resource professionals possess ease and fluency with disability, an understanding of civil rights protections, relationships with local stakeholders, and unique navigational knowledge that is tied to disabled experiences on campus. These skills provide a strong foundation for working effectively with students with intellectual disability.

Learning Opportunities

For professionals who have not had occasion to interact regularly with intellectually disabled young people, learning more about their experiences in college is a great way to do so and the following resources are a good starting point:

- *Creating our own lives: College students with intellectual disability,* a webinar including four student speakers, hosted by the Minnesota Inclusive Higher Education Consortium. Based on the book of the same name, co-edited by Michael Gill and Beth Myers (2023).
- *My college life: Students with intellectual disability share their lived experiences***,** a webinar sponsored by the Association of University Centers on Disability.
- A series of ten blog posts by students with intellectual disability encouraging others to apply to college, featured by the Minnesota Inclusive Higher Education Consortium. Posts are featured in the News and Events menu.

Skill areas related to IPSE, such as transition planning, universal design for learning, academic coaching, academic success, peer support, and career preparation feature regularly in AHEAD professional development opportunities, as do opportunities dedicated exclusively to intellectual disability. Explore resources on these topics in the AHEAD Learning Library.

As the technical assistance center serving IPSE programs, students, and families, Think College makes a wealth of learning opportunities available, including the following:

- Online courses, recorded webinars, and a calendar of events both online and in-person (see TA & Training menu)
- An archive of brief publications including, for example, annual reports about TPSID student outcomes; "Insight Briefs," about a timely topic in IPSE; "How to Think College," action briefs about how to implement an aspect of IPSE; and the "Plain Language Series"

A professional who enjoys learning through personal connection and networking might be inspired to learn what is happening at the state level, including legislative and policy advocacy and information about activities hosted by a regional affiliate. They might also decide to join the new national member organization, the IPSE Association. Somone who is ready to work with others, locally, to develop an IPSE program might engage in some "backwards engineering," sharing Tools for Preparing for Program Accreditation with others on their campus to begin imagining possibilities (Weir, 2024).

Benefits of IPSE Programs

Research confirms that inclusive postsecondary experiences benefit everyone involved: faculty, peer mentors, and, of course, the students themselves. In one study, over 90% of degree-seeking students surveyed consistently "strongly agreed" or "agreed" with a variety of prompts affirming inclusion in campus life for students with intellectual disability. Given that public-school students interact with intellectually disabled peers throughout their school day, this acceptance comes as no surprise. In the same study, nearly two-thirds of faculty surveyed on the same campus

viewed favorably the idea of modifying their teaching to provide an equal opportunity for learning for all students, and three-quarters of faculty and students agreed that students with intellectual disability should be granted opportunities to learn at the university (Gibbons et al., 2015).

In another study about teaching inclusive courses, faculty noted the positive influence the auditing students and their peer mentors had on the learning environment. One instructor remarked that the intellectually disabled student "brought joy to the classroom" (p.366); another noted how the student made everyone feel more comfortable asking questions. Instructors acknowledged that teaching an inclusive course prompted positive growth in their teaching and noted growth in students as well, particularly in terms of multicultural awareness. (Burgin et al., 2017).

In another qualitative study, one peer mentor highlighted that their experiences working with students with intellectual disability made them "more compassionate, more considerate of others, better students, and happier" (p. 291). Another student claimed that being a peer mentor gave her "the most diverse group of friends [she] ever had" (p.291). For a subset of this group of peer mentors, working with intellectually disabled students is what motivated them to stay in school and clarify their own plans (Ryan et al., 2017).

Students in dedicated programs are also thriving thanks to the choices they have made. For example, Jose Peacock spent the summer before his first year in the REACH Program at the University of Iowa working for the Conservation Corps, where he "got trained on how to use a chainsaw to cut down a tree safely, identify and remove invasive plant species, and manage prescribed fires, which are important for conservation." Peacock is waiting to get into a course about food production, maintains his job at the Minnesota Science Museum, and works on campus, setting events, in the Student Union. He has a lot of wisdom for future college students:

> I advise someone new to college to get involved with clubs, sports, and friends. Try to get as much into personal activities as you possibly can. Go to a football or basketball game—I wish I had gone to a Caitlin Clark game for her last year at the University of Iowa. Getting involved helps with the homesickness. A first-year student right out of high school might experience that, so just get involved. You can even keep the door to your room open for people to say "hi" (Peacock, n.d., para. 3).

Another student, Jeanne Hauff, began college at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. As she wrote her post, she was looking forward to transferring to the Augie Access Program at Augustana University to continue studying mass media. She writes, "For anyone interested in college, I would tell them to follow their interests and their strengths. College is possible, so get ready!" (Hauff, n.d., para. 8). It is increasingly clear that students with intellectual disability share the same developmental and aspirational goals as all college students. Given the opportunity, they are quite adept at creating meaningful experiences with their peers.

Conclusion

In response to a variety of pressures, higher education has been evolving to meet the needs of every student: Instructors are using UDL strategies in their classes and, having realized the benefits to all learners of communication tools and technologies that used to be considered exceptional, they are adopting and producing accessible course materials designed to engage a broader diversity of students. Institutions are likewise relying upon universal design to rethink a variety of student services and opportunities: Offices such as student success, counseling and wellness, and career services, which traditionally functioned on a drop-in model, now offer regular workshops and skills courses, both credit-bearing and non-credit-bearing. At some institutions, academic coaches and peer mentors are regularly assigned or available. To better meet the needs of students whose lives require flexibility, co-curricular opportunities often count as credits towards a degree, and clearer and more efficient pathways to employment, such as credentialing, exist alongside conventional degrees. As this diversification of options and outcomes continues to gain momentum, it is becoming easier to imagine and to realize the many benefits of inclusive postsecondary education for campus community.

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About the Authors

Craig Levins serves as Associate Vice President for the Division of Institutional Accessibility at Broward College, where he has designed, implemented, and now leads the college's Comprehensive Transition Program (CTP): The Seahawk NEST Academy, and the Broward College Transition Deferment Program supporting neurodivergent high school students transitioning to college.

Michelle L. Mitchell, M.Ed., has served over twenty years as a Disability Learning Specialist at Lehigh Carbon Community College. Confronting inequities faced by people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, she advances cultural change, champions liberation, and builds sustainable partnerships that expand inclusion across two- and four-year campuses.

Paul D. Nolting, Ph.D., Learning Specialist and faculty emeritus at the State College of Florida and the University of South Florida, is a national authority on disability assessment, accommodations, and course substitution policy. He has advised more than 100 campuses, presented nationally for 25 years, and is lead author for the Mathematics and Disabilities Handbook.

Aimee Stubbs is a private consultant and Senior Director Emerita of Accessibility Resources at Broward College, bringing over 32 years of experience in teaching, guidance counseling, ADA and Section 504 compliance, training, leadership, and consulting across adult, secondary, and postsecondary education. She holds advanced degrees in Varying Exceptionalities and Counseling.

Cate Weir, M.Ed., Program Director, Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston (retired) worked for more than 25 years in postsecondary education for students with intellectual disability and coordinated the Think College National Coordinating Center. Her expertise in inclusive postsecondary education includes program standards, accreditation, person-centered planning, and developing statewide initiatives. She can be reached by email at: Cathryn.weir@umb.edu.

Tammy Berberi earned a Ph.D. from Indiana University and an MPA from the UMN Humphrey School of Public Affairs. Before joining AHEAD as Director of Research, she taught at the University of Minnesota Morris for 22 years. Current research interests include disability empowerment and language access in rural communities. Berberi can be reached at tammy@ahead.org.

Disability Services and Campus Supports for College Students with Intellectual Disability

Meg Grigal[1]
Clare Papay[1]
L. Danielle Roberts-Dahm[1]
Sally Scott[2]
Cate Weir[1]

Abstract

Opportunities for students with intellectual disability to access higher education in the United States are now more widely available than ever before. Some institutions have developed dedicated programs that support students with intellectual disability to access courses, prepare for employment, and pursue credentials, and many institutions enroll students with intellectual disability even without a dedicated program. Disability resource offices (DROs) are responsible for ensuring students with disabilities, including those with intellectual disability, have equal access to higher education through necessary accommodations and supports. Yet little is known about how DRO professionals support students with intellectual disability and how support differs between institutions with or without a dedicated program. This study sought to address this knowledge gap through a survey of DRO professionals associated with the Association on Higher Education and Disability, the leading organization for professionals engaged in disability services in higher education. Findings of the survey offer implications for supporting students with intellectual disability in higher education settings.

Keywords: disability services, intellectual disability, postsecondary education

Postsecondary education options for students with intellectual disability in the United States have increased in the past 15 years due to federal legislation, funding, and advocacy (Grigal et al., 2021). A national directory of existing postsecondary options lists 359 colleges and universities enrolling students with intellectual disability in the U.S. as of December 2025 (Think College, 2025). About three-quarters of these programs enroll only adult college students; 14% enroll only high school students receiving college-based transition services, and the remainder enroll both types of students. The majority of these college programs are hosted at public colleges and universities (n = 298), and almost half of these programs can offer eligible students with intellectual disability access to financial aid via their status as approved comprehensive transition and postsecondary (CTP) programs.

A CTP program is a degree, certificate, or nondegree program to support students with intellectual disability to continue academic, career, and independent living instruction offered by an institution of higher education (IHE). CTP programs approved by Federal Student Aid in the U.S. Department of Education can offer eligible students access to Pell Grants, Supplemental Education Opportunity Grants, and federal work study funds (Federal Student Aid, n.d.; Grigal et al., 2012; Madaus et al., 2012). These postsecondary education programs focus on academics, campus living, and employment preparation, as well as supporting students to engage in campus clubs, organizations, events, and activities. In most cases, students' courses of study result in the attainment of one or more credentials and ultimately prepare them for employment.

The Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA; Public Law 110–315) passed by the U. S. Congress in 2008 had a significant impact on postsecondary education access for students with intellectual disability (Madaus et al., 2012). It authorized federal funding for a new type of model demonstration project, called

[1] *Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston;* [2] *Association on Higher Education and Disability*

the Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability (TPSID) program. TPSID grants were awarded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, and grantees were charged with setting up or expanding model postsecondary programs focused on academic enrichment, socialization, independent living skills, and integrated work experiences leading to employment. Between 2010 and 2025, across three 5-year funding cycles, 126 institutions of higher education in 34 states have engaged in TPSID grant activities, enrolling almost 5,000 students with intellectual disability who have taken nearly 60,000 college courses (Grigal et al., 2025).

Enrolled students access college courses for audit and credit; engage in career development and paid employment; and access campus organizations, events, and, when available, campus housing. As part of required evaluation activities, the TPSIDs grantees reported whether students accessed Disability Resource Office (DRO) and the services they received from this office. Findings suggest students are requesting services from DRO, with higher rates of DRO engagement in programs implemented in 2-year institutions of higher education (Papay et al., 2017).

The programs funded through the TPSID initiative represent approximately one-third of the postsecondary education programs nationwide enrolling transition-age youth and/or adult college students with intellectual disability (Think College, 2025). Whether through federal grant funding, state funding, or other means of support, these postsecondary programs are developed by college and university faculty and staff, often in collaboration with leadership from local school systems, community agencies, and, in some cases, families of students with intellectual disability. The development of a dedicated program for students with intellectual disability requires substantial planning and collaboration with the university or college, involving leadership and representation from multiple departments (Baker et al., 2018; May, 2023). Dedicated programs for students with intellectual disability often include an alternative application and admissions process, program of study, program goals, student supports, and articulated outcomes (Plotner & Marshall, 2014). Most dedicated programs result in a credential or certificate awarded to enrolled students with intellectual disability who complete their program of study, but not necessarily a degree (Weir, 2024).

Course Access and Enrollment Options

The best source for information about course access and enrollment options for students with intellectual disability attending a dedicated program comes from data collected from programs funded by the TPSID model demonstration program. In this dataset, course enrollments fall into two categories: academically inclusive and specialized (Grigal et al., 2025). Academically inclusive courses are defined as typical college courses attended by students with intellectual disability alongside other college students without intellectual disability. Specialized courses are courses designed for and offered only to students with intellectual disability, often focusing on topics such as life skills, social skills, or career development. In the 2023-2024 academic year, 551 college students with intellectual disability enrolled in 4,583 college or university courses (both inclusive and specialized) in the 40 TPSID programs. Sixty-three percent of these enrollments were in academically inclusive courses. Forty-five percent of course enrollments were in courses offering credits that could only be used toward a TPSID credential, 32% were for standard college/university credit, 21% were audited courses, and 1% were in not-for-credit or non-credit courses (Grigal et al., 2025).

However, not all students with intellectual disability attending college take part in a dedicated program. Colleges and universities without a dedicated program may also enroll students with intellectual disability, often through open admissions or enrollment policies. In these instances, students with intellectual disability enroll using a typical admission process, have access to the courses allowed by their student status, and are eligible to receive reasonable accommodations and supports from university offices such as the DRO, student tutoring or writing center, or other university departments. There are no current public data available documenting which colleges and universities without a dedicated program have enrolled students with intellectual disability.

Current Knowledge of DROs' Engagement with IPSE

Although the increase in dedicated postsecondary education programs for students with intellectual disability has presumably led to increased interactions between these programs and DROs, little is known about this collaboration and the resulting supports received by students, especially beyond what is known about campuses with a TPSID program (Papay et al., 2017). Guidance on dedicated program development and implementation emphasizes the need for collaboration with other offices on campuses (Baker et al., 2018; May, 2023; Plotner & Marshall, 2014), including the DRO, but it is not clear the extent to which this is occurring. Further, it is not clear who (dedi-

cated program staff or DRO staff) is providing needed support to students. Additionally, research has not addressed how the presence of a dedicated program impacts the provision of services and supports for students with intellectual disability, and how DROs support students with intellectual disability.

In 2010, just as funding for model demonstration programs became available, leading to an increasing number of students with intellectual disability attending college, the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) published a white paper offering the following guidance to its membership: "Once accepted into a college program (including ones designed for students with intellectual disabilities) or enrolled in a course, students with disabilities have a right to access services" (Thompson et al., 2011). This guidance further suggested DRO professionals needed to define their relationship with existing or developing dedicated postsecondary education programs serving students with intellectual disability, focusing on articulating points of collaboration for the delivery of accommodations, campus access, and technology usage. This white paper attempted to clarify the rights and responsibilities of college students with intellectual disability, whether they were enrolled through a dedicated program or not.

Few studies have examined the engagement of college students with intellectual disability with DROs. One early study conducted by Kardos (2011) established a baseline regarding the prevalence and types of supports and services offered by the DROs through a survey of AHEAD members in leadership roles. Kardos (2011) examined practices supporting adults with intellectual disability to participate in regular college classes at two and four-year colleges and universities. She found that adult students with intellectual disability took college classes for credit and used the same supports available to any students with a disability, offered at no cost by DROs. These students also followed the same procedures as any other student with a disability. The most common supports provided by these offices to adults with intellectual disability were tutoring and counseling. This study was conducted prior to the broad implementation of the TPSID program and other emerging dedicated postsecondary education programs, and there was no mention of a dedicated postsecondary program as part of this analysis.

Olson (2021) surveyed students with intellectual disability enrolled in TPSID programs related to the most chosen and helpful accommodations, assistive technologies, and supports while in college. Through an electronic survey, students identified the accommodations they have utilized, whether they were helpful, and provided open-ended comments on why the accommodation was helpful. Students with intellectual disability reported the following accommodations as most used and helpful: use of a computer on tests, extended time for assignments and tests, a quiet area for testing, tests read aloud, and an alternate format for materials. Most of the accommodations reported as helpful were associated with testing. Notes and outlines from the instructor were also identified as commonly used accommodations reported, though these were not top-ranked as helpful. The findings from this study related to commonly used and helpful accommodations reinforce findings from previous studies on accommodations for students with disabilities (Kurth & Mellard, 2006; Newman & Madaus, 2015; Zafft, 2006; Zafft et al., 2004). Olsen's (2021) study did not indicate how students were supported to receive the accommodations, nor the collaboration between the TPSID program staff and the DRO related to the provision of accommodations.

With the continued development of dedicated postsecondary education programs for students with intellectual disability, the relationship with DROs continues to expand and evolve. A survey of faculty from five universities about the factors they believe were most important to the success of students with intellectual disability in their classes indicated that support from the office of disability services was the most important factor (Graves et al., 2020). Recent studies have examined different stakeholder groups, including faculty, dedicated program staff, and students with intellectual disability (Brewer & Movahedazarhouligh, 2021), and reviewed the literature related to benefits and barriers of postsecondary education for students with intellectual disability (Lee & Taylor, 2022). However, little attention has been given to a critical aspect of students' integration on campus—the interaction and collaboration between DROs and postsecondary education programs for students with intellectual disability to support this student population.

In the spring of 2025, colleges and universities responded to a voluntary survey about programs for students with intellectual disability conducted annually to update a public directory of dedicated programs overseen by Think College at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Findings indicated students enrolled in these programs had access to disability/accessibility services at 264 of 356 programs (74%) (Think College, 2025). However, it is unclear the extent to which the DROs have knowledge about or collaborated with dedicated program staff, or the services utilized by college students with intellectual disability in these programs, since respondents to

this survey are typically dedicated program staff, not DRO professionals.

The TPSID data offer the most recent and specific information about the engagement of dedicated postsecondary education programs for students with intellectual disability and DRO offices. However, these programs do not represent the full spectrum of postsecondary programs as they are receiving federal funds to implement these programs and are obligated to align their practices with funding requirements, which emphasize inclusive course access. In the 2023-2024 academic year (the most recent data available), there were 22 TPSID grantees implementing 40 programs at 39 college and university campuses in 16 states, enrolling 557 students (Grigal et al., 2025). Ninety percent of these programs reported that students with intellectual disability accessed the DRO.

Seventy-nine percent of students attending TPSID programs in 2023-2024 received support or accommodations from the DRO on their campus (Grigal et al., 2025). Therefore, approximately 20% of the enrolled students with intellectual disability did not receive support from the DRO. Among the students who received support or accommodations from the DRO, only 6% received all of their support from this office. The remaining 94% also received support or accommodations from TPSID staff, faculty, peer mentors, and others.

The growth of dedicated postsecondary education programs for students with intellectual disability in the US has led to increased interactions between these programs and DROs on college and university campuses. What is not yet evident in the literature is what supports students with intellectual disability are receiving while on campus, and from whom—whether DRO, a dedicated program, or both. Further, it is not yet evident if or how the presence of a dedicated program for students with intellectual disability changes the provision of services from the DRO or the level of collaboration between DROs and dedicated programs. The present study seeks to address this gap in our knowledge base by answering the following research questions of DRO professionals who report that students with intellectual disability have enrolled and participated in credit or non-credit college classes at their institution:

1. To what extent do DRO professionals report that their institution has a dedicated program for students with intellectual disability?
2. To what extent do DRO professionals report that their office has the same documentation requirements for students with intellectual disability as for any students registering with their office, and does this percentage differ based on whether there is a dedicated program or not?
3. To what extent do DRO professionals report that the DRO office is providing the primary support for students with intellectual disability in standard college classes when there is a dedicated program compared to when there is no dedicated program?
4. To what extent do DRO professionals report that additional supports are provided to students with intellectual disability to access DRO processes and services by the DRO or the dedicated postsecondary education program?
5. To what extent do DRO professionals report that campus-wide support services are available to students with intellectual disability enrolled in college classes, and does availability differ when there is a dedicated program or not?

Methods

An electronic survey was developed and administered to disability resource professionals across the country. The participants, survey instrument, and procedures are described below.

Participants

Participants in the survey were the directors or lead administrators of campus-based disability resource offices. The membership roster of AHEAD was utilized for a convenience sampling of this population. AHEAD is a professional organization of postsecondary disability resource and affiliated professionals with over 4,100 members at the time of survey administration (J. Johnson, personal communication, March 9, 2022). The AHEAD roster was reviewed to identify a single point of contact for each institution of higher education represented within the membership. The lead administrator of the disability resource office, typically identified with the professional title of director or coordinator, was invited to participate in the survey (N = 1,118). Although we attempted to contact one representative per institution, there may have been more than one response per institution due to forwarding or sharing of the survey invitation.

Of the 1,118 disability resource professionals invited to participate in the study, 299 responded to the survey, reflecting a 27% response rate. An initial screening question on the survey asked respondents: "To your knowledge, have students with intellectual disability ever enrolled and participated in credit or non-credit college classes at your institution?" Re-

sponses progressed to the data cleaning stage if the answer to this screening question was "Yes."

Survey Development

An electronic survey (*Disability Resource Offices and Campus Supports for College Students with Intellectual Disability*) was developed by our research team reflecting expertise in postsecondary education for students with intellectual disability, as well as disability resource office services and programs. The team began instrument development by reviewing the 44-item survey instrument used by Kardo (2012), identifying questions aligned with our research questions that could be retained and updating language to reflect current practices and terminology. The draft instrument was developed, including a purpose statement, definitions of intellectual disability, standard college classes, and a screening question to ensure respondents came from institutions of higher education enrolling students with intellectual disability. The instrument consisted of 22 items, including a demographics section, 18 multiple-choice questions, two multiple-choice grids, and one numerical entry. Five multiple-choice items offered open-ended text fields for respondents to offer additional explanatory information. Four questions sought text responses. The array of question types allowed respondents to choose options that accurately characterized their supports and services. The text box responses provided respondents an opportunity to offer additional insight or clarification.

The draft instrument was piloted with five DRO directors with expertise in both DRO administration and postsecondary education programs for students with intellectual disability as well as by staff from the Think College National Coordinating Center. Pilot participants from two- and four-year colleges representing campuses with and without a dedicated program for students with intellectual disability were emailed the survey and a form seeking feedback on the survey navigation and directions, clarity of wording, and asking for suggestions for improvement. Based on pilot feedback, one question was added and additional response options were created for another question.

The final survey instrument comprised 23 questions using a combination of multiple-choice single-answer, multiple-choice with select all that apply options, multiple-choice grids, and open-ended question formats. Institutional demographics questions included name, type of institution (2yr/4yr/Public/Private), approximate student enrollment, application process (open or competitive), and minority-serving institution (MSI) status. The present study provides the results of the following aspects: presence of a dedicated program for students with intellectual disability, documentation requirements for students with intellectual disability, provision of support for students with intellectual disability in standard college classes, supports provided to students with intellectual disability to access DRO processes and services, and availability of campus-wide support services to students with intellectual disability. The survey was deployed in Alchemer, an online survey platform that had previously been vetted by AHEAD for accessibility and compatibility for use with a variety of assistive technologies. The survey was designed to take 10-15 minutes to complete. Institutional Research Board (IRB) exempt status was granted at the institution for members of the research team.

Data Collection

An e-mail invitation with a description of the study and a link to the survey was sent to professionals identified from the AHEAD roster. Respondents were given the option of entering a lottery to win one of three $100 gift cards upon completion of the survey. Two follow-up e-mail prompts were sent after the initial invitation to encourage survey completion. Data collection commenced at the end of May and concluded in mid-June 2022. Informed consent was given by respondents on the first page of the online survey.

Data Cleaning and Analysis

A screening question asked whether students with intellectual disability had ever enrolled in credit or non-credit classes at the institution; 200 responded yes and continued with the survey. These responses were cleaned to check for consistency with the screening question and reviewed to look for blank or duplicate responses. Responses were removed if they were entirely blank (n = 24) or if they answered fewer than 50% of the questions included in the analysis (n = 14). One response was removed due to a response to an open-ended question ("We do not have students with intellectual disabilities") that was inconsistent with the initial screening question. After data cleaning, 161 responses were included in the final analysis. Data were analyzed using the Alchemer online platform and Microsoft Excel. Given the exploratory nature of the study, descriptive statistics were reported for each of the survey items. Open-ended comments were organized and summarized by survey question and are highlighted in the discussion section.

Results

Respondents were asked to provide basic characteristics of their institution of higher education. More than two-thirds (68.3%) of respondents were from public institutions of higher education, reflecting nearly equal numbers of two-year (n = 56) and four-year (n = 54) institutions. One quarter (24.8%) of respondents reported working at a four-year private institution. More than half of respondents reported their institution had a total enrollment of between 1,000 and 10,000 students. An open-enrollment admissions process for students was reported by 62.1% of respondents (n = 100). Over one quarter of respondents (n = 47, 29.2%) reported working at an MSI, with over half of respondents at MSIs describing their campus as a Hispanic Serving Institution (n = 27, 57.4% of respondents at MSIs). The results are presented in the section that follows aligned to each of the five research questions: (1) presence of a dedicated program for students with intellectual disability, (2) documentation requirements for students with intellectual disability, (3) provision of support for students with intellectual disability in standard college classes, (4) supports provided to students with intellectual disability to access DRO processes and services, and (5) availability of campus-wide support services to students with intellectual disability.

RQ1 Presence of a Dedicated Program for Students with Intellectual Disability

When asked about the presence of a dedicated program for students with intellectual disability, more than one-third of respondents (38.5%; n = 62) indicated their campus had such a program. Slightly less than two-thirds (59.6%; n = 96) reported there was not a dedicated program, and the remaining 1.9% (n = 3) did not know if there was a dedicated program at their institution. Note that the three respondents who did not know if there was a dedicated program were excluded from comparisons between respondents with a dedicated program and those without, but were retained in analyses of the full sample.

RQ2 Documentation Requirements for Students with Intellectual Disability

Almost three-quarters of respondents (n = 118, 73.2%) reported that documentation requirements for students with intellectual disability who sought to register with the DRO were the same as they are for any other student with a disability; however, a substantial percentage (22.4%; n = 36) did not respond to this question. A small percentage (4.3%; n = 7) of respondents indicated "other" forms of documentation are used for students with intellectual disability.

More than half of respondents at institutions with a dedicated program (n = 35, 56.5%) indicated the same documentation requirements were in place for students with intellectual disability, with six respondents (9.7%) providing a response of "Other" and 21 respondents (33.9%) skipping this question. For "Other" responses, several respondents noted the DRO accepts whatever documentation is provided for admission to the dedicated program. Other participants noted more flexibility related to the recency of documentation required. Almost all respondents at institutions without a dedicated program (n = 82, 85.4%) indicated the same documentation requirements are in place for students with intellectual disability, with one respondent (1.0%) providing a response of "Other" and 13 respondents (13.5%) skipping this question. The "Other" response provided stated that self-report is the primary form of documentation used.

RQ3 Provision of Support for Students with Intellectual Disability in College Classes

Of respondents who indicated there was a dedicated program, 58.0% (n = 36) reported that support for students with intellectual disability in standard college classes was provided by both the dedicated program and the DRO, and 25.8% of respondents (n = 16) reported that support for college classes was provided only by the dedicated program. A further 12.9% of respondents (n = 8) indicated the DRO was the only office providing support in college classes and two respondents reported that another entity provided support. When there was no dedicated program, 90.6% of respondents (n = 87) noted only the DRO provided support in standard college classes, 7.3% (n = 7) indicated another entity provided support, and 2.1% (n = 2) did not answer the question. In both cases, the other entities reported to be providing academic support included TRIO programs (federally funded initiatives designed to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds in their pursuit of higher education) and student support services such as writing, tutoring, and mentoring programs in conjunction with the DRO.

RQ4 Support to Access DRO Processes and Services

The survey explored whether additional support was provided to students with intellectual disability for them to access DRO processes and services. Questions asked whether DROs or dedicated programs provide additional support beyond what is available to all students registered with the DRO for processes (e.g., processes for documentation, self-disclosure, participation in the interactive process, communication with faculty, and attending appointments with

DRO staff) or supports for services (e.g., support for scheduling tests, receiving alternate format materials and receiving class notes).

Support for Accessing DRO Processes

The survey asked about the availability of additional supports for students with intellectual disability from a list of four typical DRO processes with the following response options: "Yes, additional support is provided by DRO staff," "No additional support is provided," and then for respondents at institutions with a dedicated program, "Yes, additional support is provided by staff of the dedicated college program for students with intellectual disability" and "Yes, additional support is provided by both the DRO staff and the dedicated program staff." Results from respondents at institutions with a dedicated program compared to respondents at institutions with no program are displayed in Table 1.

At institutions with a dedicated program, respondents reported approximately equal availability of additional supports either from the DRO staff or both the DRO staff and the dedicated program for self-disclosing to the DRO, requesting accommodations from faculty, and making and attending appointments with DRO staff (between 22 and 29% of respondents reporting availability of each type of support). A slightly higher percentage of respondents noted additional support was provided by both DRO staff and the dedicated program (27.4%) than only the program for students to participate in the interactive DRO process (17.7%). Across the four listed processes, only 8.1—11.3% of respondents indicated that no additional support was provided.

At institutions with no dedicated program, between 38.5 and 51.0% of respondents reported that no additional support was available to students with intellectual disability for participating in DRO processes. Respondents most frequently indicated that additional supports were available from DRO staff for students with intellectual disability to participate in the interactive DRO process (44.8%), make and attend appointments with DRO staff (40.6%), and request accommodations from faculty (40.0%).

Support for Accessing DRO Services

The survey asked about the availability of additional support for students with intellectual disability for a list of three typical DRO services (scheduling and managing testing accommodations, requesting and receiving alternate format materials. and receiving class notes) with the same response options as above. Results are displayed in Table 2. At institutions with a dedicated program, similar percentages of respondents reported availability of additional supports either from the DRO staff or both the DRO staff and the program for all three of the listed services (between 11 and 29% of respondents reporting availability of each type of support). No additional support was reported to be provided by 9.7% of respondents for both scheduling and managing testing accommodations and requesting and receiving alternate format materials. A slightly higher percentage of respondents (17.7%) reported that no additional support was provided to students with intellectual disability for receiving class notes.

At institutions with no dedicated program, 40.0—41.7% of respondents reported that additional support was provided to students with intellectual disability for the three DRO services. Similarly, 40.6—41.7% of respondents reported that no additional support was provided to students with intellectual disability for each of the three services.

RQ5 Availability of Campus Services for Students with Intellectual Disability

Respondents were asked about the availability of services across campus for students with intellectual disability. These services include academic coaching, career services, counseling, faculty mentoring, peer mentoring, tutoring, and the writing center. Across all respondents, counseling (87.0%, n = 140), tutoring (86.3%; n = 139), career services (84.5%; n = 136), writing center (79.5%; n = 128) and academic coaching (64.6%; n = 104) were reported to be widely available. Peer mentoring (41.6%; n = 67) and faculty mentoring (28.6%; n = 46) were less frequently reported to be available, and one respondent indicated none of the listed services were available (see Table 3). Twenty-five respondents listed other available supports, including a range of academic and non-academic programming such as TRIO support services, math center, library, health and wellness services, computer lab tutors, student life, and residential programming.

Discussion

Increased development of dedicated programs for and enrollment of students with intellectual disability in postsecondary education has led to greater interactions of these students with DROs in colleges and universities in the U.S. (Papay et al., 2017). There is a documented need for DRO involvement with dedicated postsecondary education programs for students with intellectual disability (May, 2023; Plotner & Marshall, 2014). Data from federally funded TPSID programs indicate most students have access to DROs, with varying degrees of shared responsibil-

Table 1

Supports Provided to Students with Intellectual Disability for DRO Processes

Survey item	ID Program[a] (*n* = 62)		No program[b] (*n* = 96)	
	#	%	#	%
Students self-disclose to the DRO				
No additional support	5	8.1	49	51.0
Additional support provided by DRO staff	2	3.2	31	32.2
Additional support provided by staff of dedicated program	18	29.0	-	-
Additional support provided by both	16	25.8	-	-
Students participate in the interactive process with DRO staff				
No additional support	7	11.3	37	38.5
Additional support provided by DRO staff	6	9.7	43	44.8
Additional support provided by staff of dedicated program	11	17.7	-	-
Additional support provided by both	17	27.4	-	-
Students request accommodations from faculty				
No additional support	6	9.7	42	43.8
Additional support provided by DRO staff	5	8.1	38	40.0
Additional support provided by staff of dedicated program	15	24.2	-	-
Additional support provided by both	15	24.2	-	-
Students make and attend appointments with DRO staff				
No additional support	6	9.7	40	41.7
Additional support provided by DRO staff	6	9.7	39	40.6
Additional support provided by staff of dedicated program	15	24.2	-	-
Additional support provided by both	14	22.6	-	-

Note. [a]Respondents at a campus with a dedicated program for students with intellectual disability. [b]Respondents at a campus with no dedicated program.

Table 2

Supports Provided to Students with Intellectual Disability for DRO Services

Survey item	ID Program[a] (*n* = 62)		No program[b] (*n* = 96)	
	#	%	#	%
Students schedule and manage testing accommodations				
No additional support	6	9.7	40	41.7
Additional support provided by DRO staff	6	9.7	38	40.0
Additional support provided by staff of dedicated program	12	19.4	-	-
Additional support provided by both	16	25.8	-	-
Students request and receive alternate format materials				
No additional support	6	9.7	39	40.6
Additional support provided by DRO staff	8	12.9	40	41.7
Additional support provided by staff of dedicated program	9	14.5	-	-
Additional support provided by both	18	29.0	-	-
Students receive class notes				
No additional support	11	17.7	40	41.7
Additional support provided by DRO staff	7	11.3	38	40.0
Additional support provided by staff of dedicated program	10	16.1	-	-
Additional support provided by both	13	21.0	-	-

Note. [a]Respondents at a campus with a dedicated program for students with intellectual disability. [b]Respondents at a campus with no dedicated program.

Table 3

Availability of Campus Supports for Students with Intellectual Disability

Available Support Service	All responses (n = 161)		ID Program (n = 62)		No program (n = 96)	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Academic coaching	104	64.6	43	69.4	59	61.5
Career services	136	84.5	52	83.4	82	85.4
Counseling	140	87.0	53	85.5	86	89.6
Faculty mentoring	46	28.6	19	30.6	27	28.1
Peer mentoring	67	41.6	35	56.5	32	33.3
Tutoring	139	86.3	49	79.0	88	91.7
Writing center	128	79.5	46	74.2	81	84.4
None of the above	1	<1.0	0	0	1	1.0
Other	25	15.5	11	17.7	14	14.6

ity between programs and DROs (Grigal et al., 2025). However, a comprehensive study identifying the provision of supports and supports provided to students with intellectual disability on campuses or the shared support between DROs and dedicated programs, beyond federally funded programs, was lacking. The present study also sought to discern if the use of DRO processes and services and campus-wide support accessed by college students with intellectual disability differed on campuses with and without a dedicated program for these students.

Awareness of the Presence of Dedicated Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability

Nearly three-fifths of respondents reported not having a dedicated program for these students on their campus, while two-fifths confirmed the existence of such a program. A very small percentage of respondents indicated they did not know whether students with intellectual disability enrolled at their institution. This finding is encouraging as it suggests at least a general awareness among DRO staff respondents regarding the presence of dedicated programs serving students with intellectual disability, which has not always been the case (Graves et al., 2020). It is also notable as this is the first time DRO professionals have been asked to report their awareness of a dedicated program for students with intellectual disability on their campus. Previous estimates were drawn from a public directory reflecting responses reported by dedicated program staff, not DRO professionals. DROs should be connected to dedicated programs for students with intellectual disability, both when developing and on an ongoing basis to ensure coordination of supports for students with intellectual disability (May, 2023; Plotner & Marshall, 2014).

Issues with Identifying Student Enrollment

One issue identified from our findings was the difficulty some DRO staff faced when trying to confirm whether students with intellectual disability are enrolled on their campus. For example, one response comment indicated, "The DRC [DRO] does not have intellectual disability as an option on our intake [form]," but when considering the students supported through the DRO, this same respondent indicated that there was a high likelihood that "some of these would be categorized as having an intellectual disability." Other comments echoed this issue: "We just created a new category this term to track ID [intellectual disability]" and "Lack of an electronic case management system to better track, update, and report specific disabilities is problematic."

These responses suggest that not all IHEs have a reliable method to determine the enrollment of students with intellectual disability through the DRO due to limitations in the systems used to categorize students, which is consistent with earlier findings related to categorization (Harrison & Holmes, 2014; Leake, 2015). The need for this baseline enrollment data by disability category is critical for moving into deeper examination of the collaboration and provision of support for students with intellectual disability in higher education.

Eligibility Documentation Requirements

Documentation requirements to determine eligibility for disability services are largely consistent for students with intellectual disability compared to other students with disabilities, as reported by almost all (85%) respondents from colleges/universities without a dedicated program and more than half (56.4%) of institutions with a dedicated program (a percentage that is much higher when missing responses are removed from the denominator). It can be reasonably concluded that the documentation needed for students with intellectual disability does not significantly differ from that required for any other disability when seeking reasonable accommodations through the DRO, consistent with Kardos' (2011) earlier findings. It is encouraging that the documentation needed for students with intellectual disability does not differ from that required of any student with a disability.

There did, however, seem to be greater flexibility in documentation requirements when there was a dedicated program, as some respondents reported they deferred to the documentation provided to the program and did not require additional documentation from students. The comments provided by respondents indicated the ways in which the requirements might be different if there were a dedicated program at their college or university. One DRO respondent explained, "Admission into the program for students with intellectual disabilities is sufficient for many accommodations." Another comment provided a similar reflection: "Either documentation that meets our DRO requirements or, if they are enrolling in the specific program for students with ID, we just need confirmation of their participation." And finally, "We typically accept whatever is provided to the dedicated program for students with IDD." These sentiments align with recent guidance from AHEAD that states if a student with intellectual disability has been admitted to a program, they have met the legal standard for participation, and are thus eligible for reasonable accommodations (Levins et al., 2026).

Support Provision Related to Coursework

Our findings are consistent with earlier studies revealing that accommodations provided to students with intellectual disability were not substantially different than those provided to students with disabilities in general (Harrison & Holmes, 2014; Kardos, 2011). The majority of DRO professionals at IHEs with a dedicated program for students with intellectual disability on their campus indicated shared responsibility for supporting students with intellectual disability in standard college classes. About a quarter of respondents indicated that dedicated program staff provided the sole source of support, and a smaller percentage indicated only the DRO provided support in standard college classes. One respondent characterized the division of labor as such: "DRO establishes academic accommodations for their college classes and provides supplementary support. [The] program provides primary support." Another commented, "The Disability Supports office is available if/when questions are asked about how to implement certain accommodations—but most of it is completely a different program that handles [it] all." In addition, respondents without a dedicated program indicated in some cases, students also received support from TRIO programs.

Service Provision Clarity and Collaboration

There is a need for clarity and balance in the provision of services from a dedicated program and the DRO. For example, one respondent noted, "We have only had two [students with intellectual disability] apply for services with SAS [DRO office] but did not use it as the program provided the needed accommodations." Caution should be used when program staff duplicate DRO services instead of supporting students to seek these from a DRO. Program staff may possess unique expertise and deep understanding of the needs of students with intellectual disability, but directly offering services typically provided through DRO may hinder student access to available campus resources. This arrangement may also prevent DRO staff from learning how to more effectively serve students with intellectual disability. The AHEAD Program Domains (2021) suggest that DRO professionals should advise and educate the campus community about disability and inclusive practices and provide services, strategies, and accommodations to mitigate the barriers faced by students with disabilities. Greater exposure to and experience with college students with intellectual disability enhances DRO professionals' capacity to achieve both of these goals.

Additionally, a lack of engagement with DROs may eliminate students' opportunities for self-advocacy. DROs offer students with disabilities the opportunity to advocate for needed accommodations through the self-knowledge and self-identification process (Barnard-Brak et al., 2010; Bruce & Aylward, 2021; Yeager et al., 2022). While in college, these skills have applications within the academic environment, but these skills are also critical for accessing needed accommodations in future workplaces. Regardless of whether they are enrolled in a dedicated program or not, interactions with the DRO offer students with intellectual disability the opportunity to articulate their specific needs and advocate for their rights under Sections 504 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (Olson, 2021).

Conversely, when dedicated programs are present, DRO staff may also defer to program staff, allowing program staff to provide accommodations or serve in capacities typically within the DRO purview. This deferment can create confusion regarding roles and responsibilities. Baker et al. (2018) suggest, "partnering with this group [i.e., DRO] will allow you to ensure that ODS [DRO] provides the same accommodations to PSE program students as they do for typically enrolled students with a disability" (p. 24), which is an important goal for dedicated programs. Often, the provision of accommodations is necessary but not sufficient to meet the academic support needs of students with intellectual disability (Grigal et al., 2014). Respectful conversations about what can and should be provided by the DRO and what is better addressed by dedicated program staff, as well as shared responsibilities, can ensure appropriate accommodations will be paired with needed individualized supports.

Clearing Up Confusion About Accommodations Eligibility

In some instances, students not possessing a standard high school diploma may have led to concerns about whether they were "otherwise qualified" for college courses and resulted in confusion as to the appropriate accommodations or eligibility for academic accommodations in college-level courses (Sassu, 2018). In addition, many students with intellectual disability may have enrollment variations, such as not matriculating toward a standard degree but instead seeking their credentials from the dedicated program as a non-degree-seeking student. Such variations can affect how DROs perceive students' needs and access to accommodations. For example, a respondent in the present study stated, "All students are enrolled in a specialized learning certificate program, outside of the DS office [DRO], and are not traditionally admitted."

The higher likelihood of students with intellectual disability auditing courses, rather than taking

courses for credit, can further complicate the DRO's role in determining and arranging academic accommodations. This complication is highlighted by one respondent's comment: "Our college has a program specifically developed for students with intellectual disability. The only time they register with the Disability Office is if they are taking the course as a matriculated student." While this explanation may be an accurate description of the practices employed at that institution, it does not mean students with intellectual disability have to be enrolled for credit to seek DRO services. Students with intellectual disability enrolled as auditing students are eligible for DRO services (AHEAD, 2012).

Supports to Access DRO Processes and Services

DRO professionals were asked about the availability of additional support for students with intellectual disability from a list of four typical DRO processes and three typical DRO services. Responses were broken down by those with a dedicated program and those without. About a quarter of respondents from IHEs with a dedicated program indicated that additional support for students with intellectual disability was provided by both DRO staff and dedicated program staff for both processes and services. This evidence of collaboration between the dedicated programs and DRO staff is encouraging, as DRO personnel typically have support networks in place on campuses that can be an asset to dedicated programs, especially during program development (May, 2023; Plotner & Marshall, 2014). This collaboration was also evident in some respondents' comments, such as "DRO and program staff collaborate to offer orientations and supports for other on-campus events for students with IDD" and, "The Director of the DRO office also oversees the coordinator of the dedicated program, so the DRO office and dedicated program are very connected."

More respondents at IHEs with a dedicated program than respondents at IHEs with no dedicated program indicated additional supports were available, from either the DRO staff or both the DRO staff and program staff, to assist students with intellectual disability to engage in DRO processes. This finding suggests that the presence of a dedicated program on a campus leads to more support available for students with intellectual disability, including more support from the DRO. At IHEs without a dedicated program, respondents frequently reported that no additional support was provided in the areas of DRO processes. However, it was encouraging that more than two-fifths of respondents indicated DRO staff provided additional support for students with intellectual disability related to the DRO interactive processes, even when there was no dedicated program.

Respondents at IHEs without a dedicated program indicated a range of services were provided to students with intellectual disability, with several mentioning weekly check-ins and others outlining support to develop self-advocacy skills and case management support as well. This suggests DROs are increasingly serving students with intellectual disability in some capacity, providing all typical services as appropriate. There was also an indication that additional services may be offered by some DROs. For example, several respondents indicated they had weekly meetings/check-ins with students, with respondent comments providing more detail: "We intentionally create weekly meetings. Even though this is beyond our scope, we do everything we can to ensure safety and engagement."

Campus-Wide Support Availability

Campus-wide supports were those offered by entities outside of the DRO or a dedicated program and included academic coaching, career services, counseling, faculty mentoring, peer mentoring, tutoring, and use of the writing center. Availability of these supports was reported by a majority of respondents regardless of the presence of a dedicated program, except for faculty and peer mentoring. When differentiating between those with and without a program, reports of availability remained similar (with less than a 5-percentage point difference) with two specific exceptions: peer mentoring availability and access to the writing center or tutoring. For those with a dedicated program, peer mentoring had greater availability as a campus support. This is likely due to the prevalence of peer mentors being used as a support in dedicated programs. Peer mentors are typically college or university students who foster inclusion through peer-to-peer engagement in a variety of campus contexts. They may offer academic, social, or independent living support to help students with intellectual disability succeed in postsecondary education.

Data from the TPSID programs reflects significant use of peer mentors, with programs having up to 150 mentors on a campus, and these students offering an average of 230 hours of support annually for each student with an intellectual disability enrolled in the TPSID programs (Grigal et al., 2025). However, a third of respondents with no dedicated program also reported that peer mentors were available, indicating this type of support may be emerging outside of a dedicated program.

The second difference in campus support availability noted between programs with and without a

dedicated program was access to the writing center and tutoring. DRO respondents without dedicated programs indicated greater access to these types of supports, though the difference was only about 10 percentage points higher than those with a dedicated program. These supports are available to all students, with or without disability, and the use of these types of campus supports fosters greater knowledge of the presence of students with intellectual disability on campus and creates opportunities for the staff and students working in these offices to understand the needs of college students with intellectual disability. Use of these offices on campuses with dedicated programs was somewhat lower but still substantial. This finding aligns with those from the TPSID model demonstration programs; 85% of those dedicated programs offered enrolled students with intellectual disability access to tutoring services, indicating the use of this campus support was prevalent. What was not clear from our findings was whether access to these campus supports was facilitated by the DRO on campuses with dedicated programs or if program staff directed students to these support systems without interacting with the DRO.

Implications for Practitioners

With the growth of dedicated postsecondary education programs for people with intellectual disability throughout the country, there is a corresponding need for DRO professionals to understand their role both with the dedicated program staff and with the individual students with intellectual disability. DRO professionals can expand their awareness of serving students with intellectual disability by engaging with dedicated postsecondary programs directly to learn more about the supports in place and areas for collaboration, and through professional development opportunities available through organizations such as AHEAD or the Postsecondary Disability Training Institute. AHEAD's updated white paper concurs, suggesting disability resource professionals learn more about inclusive postsecondary education and build relationships with others interested in these practices (Levins et al., 2025). Similarly, dedicated program staff must also continue to advance their knowledge and understanding of the supports and services offered by DRO, as well as what is available campus-wide from other offices, to best support students with intellectual disability to utilize these services more readily.

Our findings reflect that at colleges and universities without a dedicated program, students with intellectual disability were more likely to receive support from the DRO and other campus offices, such as the writing center, tutoring center, or from TRIO services. Colleges and universities with dedicated programs should review their existing use of the DRO and other campus services, and whenever possible, expand student use of established supports. This ensures dedicated program staff are not supplanting existing services on campus. Collaborating with these other support structures also provides the opportunity for staff in these offices to learn more about the goals of the dedicated programs and effective support for enrolled college students with intellectual disability. Additionally, dedicated program professionals can capitalize on the DRO staff's expertise in accommodations, strategies for self-disclosure, and knowledge of campus resources. Further, dedicated program staff can share their expertise in serving students with intellectual disability with other campus departments to build capacity for meeting these students' needs.

Implications for Research

There is considerable room for additional research exploring the role and relationship between dedicated programs for students with intellectual disability and DROs. It can be very difficult to assess the extent to which students with intellectual disability are enrolled on college campuses and receiving services from the DRO. There is no current federal data source reflecting the level of enrollment of college students with intellectual disability. The DRO staff can only know about college students who have sought accommodations from their office. Therefore, additional research with colleges and universities outside of the DRO purview could potentially solicit additional information about the level of enrollment of people with intellectual disability in colleges and universities without dedicated programs.

Part of the challenge with this issue is that students are not required to self-identify either as having a disability when applying to college or at the disability resource office. Ensuring student privacy regarding their personal disability information is critical. However, without any data on the enrollment of individuals with intellectual disability, it becomes difficult for the Department of Education or other potential funders of research to understand the level of need for additional services, supports, and research on college students with intellectual disability. Smaller samples for future research on engagement with DROs could focus on approved comprehensive transition and postsecondary (CTP) programs approved by Federal Student Aid, as these programs are specifically designed to enroll students with intellectual disability. Students' perspectives are an additional line of needed research. Qualitative research studies, as well as participatory action research, could help shed light on students' lived experiences, the issues that matter to

them, and discern how DRO and other campus supports are sufficient or effective in helping them learn.

Limitations

This study had several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the study relied on self-reported data and therefore may not be fully reflective of how students with intellectual disability are supported to access higher education at respondents' institutions and the presence of a dedicated program. Additionally, there are many more potential respondents from institutions with dedicated programs for students with intellectual disability than those included in the sample (and potentially more respondents from institutions without a dedicated program), suggesting these responses may not be representative of the full array of program offerings at institutions across the nation. Third, it is possible some respondents may not have understood the terms used in the survey. For example, although we made every effort to provide definitions, there may have been a misunderstanding about the definition of intellectual disability and what constituted a dedicated program, and therefore, some questions may have been answered incorrectly. Fourth, the analysis of data was complicated somewhat by high numbers of "don't know" or skipped responses. Almost a quarter of respondents indicated that they did not know about documentation requirements for students with intellectual disability, and three respondents did not know if there was a dedicated program on their campus. This finding suggests that some DRO professionals may not know about processes in place for supporting students with intellectual disability. Thus, there is the potential for some survey responses to reflect inaccuracy. Finally, we did not collect demographic information regarding the years of experience the responding DRO professionals had in their positions, so we are unable to discern if this information may have impacted results.

Conclusion

Continued expansion of dedicated postsecondary programs for students with intellectual disability through federal and state investments requires colleges and universities to continue to explore, differentiate, and clarify how these dedicated programs and DROs need to work together. Our findings demonstrate that the presence of a dedicated program provides college students with intellectual disability with amplified support both from the dedicated program staff and from the DRO office. However, our findings also demonstrate that there is greater capacity for support outside of the DRO that some dedicated programs may not be utilizing to their full extent. It is evident that DRO professionals working in colleges and universities without a dedicated program seek to meet the needs of students with intellectual disability. Without the structured supports and services offered by the dedicated program staff, though, some supports are limited. Continued collaboration, communication, and reflection about the practices that best serve college students with intellectual disability are necessary.

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About the Authors

Meg Grigal received her B.A. in psychology from Rutgers University, her M.Ed. in transition and supported employment from UNC Charlotte, and her Ph.D. from the University of Maryland. Her experience includes working as a special education teacher, and as a researcher, evaluator, and technical assistance leader in inclusive higher education. She is currently the director of Think College, the principal investigator of the Think College National Coordinating Center and the Think College Inclusive Higher Education Network, a senior research fellow, and the Inclusive Postsecondary Education Team Lead at the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Her research interests include transition to college, inclusive higher education and employment for people with intellectual disability. She can be reached by email at: meg.grigal@umb.edu.

Clare Papay received her M.Ed. and Ph.D. degrees in special education from Lehigh University. She is currently Senior Associate for Inclusive Postsecondary Education at Think College at the Institute for Community Inclusion, UMass Boston, where she conducts research and provides technical assistance on higher education for students with intellectual disability. Clare is the co-Principal Investigator for the National Coordinating Center for the TPSID model demonstration program and for the Think College Inclusive Higher Education Network: A Technical Assistance and Dissemination Center, both funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education. She is also co-Principal Investigator for the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR) funded project "From College to Career (FCTC): Strengthening Employment Outcomes after Postsecondary Education for People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD)." She serves as co-editor for the Journal of Inclusive Postsecondary Education (JIPE) and as a special advisor to the board of the Inclusive Postsecondary Education (IPSE) Association. Clare can be reached at clare.papay@umb.edu.

L. Danielle Roberts-Dahm received her Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction with a focus on special education from the University of South Florida. Her experience includes serving in a range of roles from direct support to program development and leadership within postsecondary programs for students with intellectual disability. She is currently a Program Director at the Institute for Community Inclusion, UMass Boston. Danie serves as the Project Coordinator of the Think College National Coordinating Center for the TPSID model demonstration program and the Think College Inclusive Higher Education Network: A Technical Assistance and Dissemination Center, both funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education. Her research interests include various aspects of postsecondary education for students with intellectual disability. She can be reached by email at: danielle.dahm@umb.edu.

Sally Scott, Ph.D., holds a doctorate from the University of Virginia. With over 30 years' experience as faculty member and director of disability resource offices, she served as AHEAD's Director of Research, 2014-2024, and received the Association's inaugural Distinguished Career Contributions to Postecondary Disability Research Award in 2024. She can be reached at drsallyscott@gmail.com.

Cate Weir, M.Ed., Program Director, Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston (retired) worked for more than 25 years in postsecondary education for students with intellectual disability and coordinated the Think College National Coordinating Center. Her expertise in inclusive postsecondary education includes program standards, accreditation, person-centered planning, and developing statewide initiatives. She can be reached by email at: Cathryn.weir@umb.edu.

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Admissions Practices in Inclusive Postsecondary Education

Beth Myers[1]
Katie Ducett[2]

Abstract

This study examines the eligibility requirements and admissions processes of Inclusive Postsecondary Education (IPSE) programs in the United States to explore how these structures influence access to higher education for students with intellectual disability. Drawing on frameworks of Inclusive Postsecondary Education, Disability Studies in Education, and DisCrit, this research examines what admissions criteria are used in a subset of IPSE programs, and how program criteria may reduce or intensify existing barriers to college for students with intellectual disability. Utilizing survey responses from IPSE program directors and analyses of the websites of IPSE programs participating in TPSID Cohorts 2 and 3, the study documents 222 distinct admissions requirements. These findings reveal a range of criteria, including guardianship status, documentation of disability, financial prerequisites, academic thresholds, and behavioral assessments. While some requirements appear routine, others may disproportionately burden students with intellectual disability. Although the study identifies patterns of exclusion, it also highlights variability across programs, suggesting opportunities for reform. Limitations include a relatively small sample size and inconsistent demographic data, which limit conclusions about the impact of admissions practices on student diversity. This research addresses a critical gap in the IPSE literature and provides insights to promote more equitable admissions practices. Recommendations for future research are also included.

Keywords: intellectual disability, inclusive postsecondary education, inclusive higher education, admissions, developmental disability

Introduction

Students with intellectual disability have more opportunities than ever before to attend college, with 359 Inclusive Postsecondary Education (IPSE) college and university programs now in the United States. Thanks in part to the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (HEOA; PL 110-315), as well as other U.S. legislation that includes transition supports and postsecondary access for students with disabilities (IDEIA; PL 108-446; ADA; PL 110-325), Inclusive Postsecondary Education (IPSE) access, funding, technical assistance, and research have grown significantly since its inception (Grigal et al., 2023, 2024). IPSE programs vary significantly based on both the profile of the university or college, such as size, geography, location, course offerings, as well as the characteristics of the program, such as inclusivity, supports, financial options, and residential offerings (Ducett & Myers, 2023; Gill & Myers, 2023; Grigal et al., 2013; Myers & Smith, 2024; Think College, 2022). Most IPSE programs, however, offer an alternative admissions process for students with intellectual disability who are applying to the program.

Previous research has identified several barriers to postsecondary access for students with intellectual disability, including admissions criteria (as will be examined in this paper), pre-program considerations, and programmatic and university issues (e.g., Grigal et al., 2022; Hughson & Uditsky, 2019; Kim & Park, 2023; Lee & Taylor, 2022). Pre-admission barriers to postsecondary access for students with intellectual disability include a lack of collaboration with K-12 school systems and high school transition planning (Lee & Taylor, 2022), lack of awareness of IPSE (Kim & Park, 2023), and limited IPSE program options, particularly in specific regions (such as the Northwestern United States) and international contexts (including most of Europe) (Hughson & Uditsky, 2019; Kim & Park, 2023; Lee & Taylor, 2022; O'Brien et

[1] Syracuse University; [2] SUNY Cortland

al., 2019). Systemic barriers for students with intellectual disability include limited funding (Mock & Love, 2012; Lee & Taylor, 2022; Plotner & Marshall, 2015), access to transportation (Lee & Taylor, 2022), or housing availability (Grigal, et al., 2022; Lee & Taylor, 2022; Yuan et al., 2018). Additionally, families have encountered program barriers such as a lack of individualized or specific supports (Lee & Taylor, 2022) and physical inaccessibility (Rodriguez Herrero et al., 2021). For many, family support has been noted as critical for student access (Rodriguez Herrero et al., 2021).

Research in higher education has illustrated that postsecondary education admissions requirements and processes can be barriers for many students, especially those with marginalized identities (Finger, 2022). A 2012 study by Grigal et al. (2022) found that 25% of responding programs at that time required placement tests for student admission. Other entrance criteria included measurement of students' safety skills, adherence to or agreement with the student code of conduct, and ability to navigate the college campus. Ten years later, Grigal et al. (2022) found additional admission criteria from the 257 programs that self-reported survey data to update a national directory of higher education programs enrolling students with intellectual disability. While almost all programs (over 98%) had a minimum age, 75% also reported a maximum age, a potential barrier for older students who may not have had access to programs like these ten years ago. Twenty-five percent required specific state attendance, 18.7% required specific district or school system attendance, and some programs required vocational rehabilitation or Medicaid eligibility. Some programs reported minimum requirements for reading level or personal independence. Programs also reported requiring employment experience, an unusual requisite for college entrance (Hossler et al., 2019). Adherence to the code of conduct and interest in or motivation to attend college were also noted (Grigal et al., 2022). There is significant variability in admission practices in IPSE across the United States.

This study focuses on only IPSE programs that participated in a model demonstration program called the Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability (TPSIDs). TPSID programs are intended to "create or expand high-quality, inclusive model comprehensive transition and postsecondary programs for students with intellectual disability" (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2025). The TPSID designation means that, for five years, these programs received federal funding through the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Postsecondary Education. Along with this funding was a requirement to gather and report student and program data to a corresponding National Coordinating Center. Although there are many IPSE programs that have not received TPSID funding, we selected TPSID programs for this study because of their relatively standardized data collection requirements.

While annual reports offer some minimal information regarding the admissions requirements used in these programs (Grigal et al., 2021), a more comprehensive multi-year analysis of admissions requirements used by these IPSE programs has not been conducted. To address this gap, we designed this study to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the eligibility requirements for Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability (TPSIDs) in Cohorts 2 and 3 in the United States?
2. What are the admission processes for Cohorts 2 and 3 TPSID programs in the United States?
3. How might eligibility requirements and admissions processes affect the diversity of Cohorts 2 and 3 TPSID programs in the United States?

Theoretical Frameworks

We approached this research utilizing frameworks of Inclusive Postsecondary Education, Disability Studies in Education, and Critical Disability Studies (DisCrit). Inclusive postsecondary education has been in practice in markedly small and marginal spaces beginning as early as the 1970s (Neubert et al., 2001; Westling et al., 1976), but it has only recently begun to be explicitly named as a theoretical framework. Myers and Smith (2024) propose Inclusive Postsecondary Education as a research framework that emphasizes inclusion and the value of cognitive diversity at all levels, with particular focus on higher education for students with intellectual disability. As such, this framework supports research to examine barriers to college for students with intellectual disability, particularly through specialized admissions processes.

We have also considered this research within a Disability Studies in Education (DSE) and DisCrit framework, with the understanding that barriers are constructed by program or university requirements. Disability Studies urges us to examine not only the social construction of disability, but the consequences of these constructions (Linton, 1998). Specific to this study, disability is constructed not as inherent to the individual, but as a product of the meaning assigned by society (e.g., colleges and universities). These institutions take this socially constructed understanding of disability and apply it in shaping admissions cri-

teria, which, through a critical analysis, are revealed to function as barriers that systematically exclude or disadvantage certain individuals. DisCrit pushes this understanding even further to include intersectionality with students' multiple identities, including race, gender, socioeconomics, family status, and more (Annamma et al., 2013, 2018; Crenshaw, 1991). This theoretical framework helps us understand how students with multiple marginalized identities encounter compounded barriers, as their experiences of exclusion are shaped not by a single axis of identity, but by the intersecting effects of race, disability, gender, class, and other forms of systemic oppression. By examining admissions requirements through a DisCrit lens, we can consider specific aspects within IPSE programs that invite some students and exclude others.

Method

Study Design

This study aimed to examine eligibility requirements (RQ1) and admissions processes (RQ2) of IPSE Programs in the United States, and to use that information in concert with student demographics, to understand how eligibility requirements and admission processes may impact access for students from multiply marginalized identities (RQ3). To conduct this research, we utilized website analysis and surveys, which included both quantitative and qualitative aspects. This mixed methods approach, aligned with Creswell and Hirose's (2019) illustration, allowed for the phenomenon of IPSE admissions in the United States to be understood, while also using quantitative data to determine patterns related to IPSE student demographics and admissions at different sites.

Website analysis was used to determine the range of eligibility requirements and admissions processes that students with intellectual disability encounter in their quest for higher education. Surveys were conducted to gather greater insight into the purpose behind those requirements and processes. For example, if an IPSE program used campus tours as part of their admissions process, we wanted to know what the admissions team hoped to learn about the student from that tour. Additionally, with demographic questions in the survey, we aimed to learn who is admitted to programs with campus tours as part of the admissions process. The DSE and DisCrit frameworks informed the decision to utilize the combination of website analysis and surveys because they highlight the importance of contextualizing disability within political and social realms (Linton, 1998), and "considering the legal and historical aspects of dis/ability and race and how both have been used separately and together to deny the rights of some citizens" (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 11). By looking at survey results, which included program site demographics, directly with the website analysis, the students and the administrators creating these requirements are not completely disconnected from the actual requirements potential students have to meet.

Website Analysis

Qualitative content analysis was conducted to determine patterns amongst the eligibility requirements and admissions processes of selected IPSE programs throughout the United States (RQ1&2). As the DSE tenets highlight, research within this framework should promote "meaningful access to all aspects of society" while also being contextualized within "political and social" understandings of disability (Connor et al., 2008, p. 448). Although IPSE programs are part of a move toward more meaningful access for people with intellectual disability into higher education, we were especially curious if and how deficit-based social understandings of disability would be replicated within IPSE admissions. To accomplish this, we used methods similar to summative qualitative content analysis (SQCA), which was employed by Sullivan and Ali (2024) in their content analysis of Canadian university kinesiology curricula and websites. This method was ideal for our study because it goes beyond finding patterns within the website texts to "draw on social and cultural trends that reveal larger systems of discourse and their meaning" (Sullivan & Ali, 2024, p. 6).

The TPSID grants have been dispersed every five years since 2010 in the United States to between 22-27 grantees, with the amount depending on fiscal allotment approved by Congress and distributed via a competitive grant process by the Department of Education. This study focuses on IPSE programs at colleges and universities that received TPSID grants during Cohort 2 (funded between 2015-2020) and Cohort 3 (funded between 2020-2025), which consisted of 40 distinct TPSID grantees across both cohorts. Some TPSID grantees funded program implementation at a single college or university campus, and others supported program implementation at multiple college or university campuses. Six of these grantees received TPSID grants during both cohorts: California State University at Fresno, Millersville University, Minot State University, University of Alabama, University of Hawaii at Manoa, and University of South Alabama. Some grantees disperse their funds to multiple distinct program sites. Across the TPSID grantees in Cohorts 2 and 3, there were 99 program sites funded. Accounting for duplicate sites,

there were 88 distinct program sites funded through TPSID Cohorts 2 and 3. We aimed to analyze websites from at least one site from each TPSID grantee. We did not gather data from Rhode Island College and University of Missouri Kansas City, two of the Cohort 2 grantees, because the programs no longer existed at the point of data collection. In some cases, we gathered from more than one site from the same grantee. For example, we looked at the websites from Millersville, Duquesne, and Temple, which were all within the Millersville grantee network of both TPSID cohorts.

Although there is demographic data published by Think College on students who participate in the TPSID programs, these data are not disaggregated by program or site specifically o (Grigal et al., 2021; Grigal et al., 2025). Therefore, there is no current publicly available information about the demographic breakdown of TPSID programs disaggregated by program/site. Even though our study design only had information from a sample of program sites from Cohorts 2 and 3 TPSIDs, we believe these demographics offer an important context.

Cohort 2: Within Cohort 2, there were 25 TPSID grant awardees who implemented IPSE across 58 program sites. These sites spanned 19 states. We collected data from 27 sites within this TPSID cohort, with at least one site from each grantee. According to the Annual Report of the Cohort 2 TPSID Model Demonstration Projects (Year 5, 2019-2020), Year 5 of Cohort 2 had 956 students enrolled across all program sites; 61% of students in this group identified as White, 24% as Black or African American, 13% as Hispanic, 7% as Asian, and 1% as American Indian or Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. Seventeen percent were dually enrolled through their high school. The National Coordinating Center at Think College, the TPSID grantees federally funded evaluator, reported that 62% of student enrollments were in courses considered inclusive, meaning they were courses available to and attended by students without intellectual disability (Grigal et al., 2021). Approximately 59% of these programs had students who were only enrolled in inclusive courses (Grigal et al., 2021).

Cohort 3: Within Cohort 3, there were 22 TPSID grant awardees implementing IPSE programs at 39 different sites as of the end of Year 5. These sites spanned across 16 states. In total, we collected data from 27 of the program sites within this Cohort, with at least one from each grantee. Of the 557 students in TPSID Cohort 3 in Year 4 (the most recent data available), 13% received college-based transition services through their high school. The racial breakdown of this Cohort is as follows: 60% White, 12% Black or African American, 11% Hispanic or Latino/a/x, 7% Asian, 3% more than one race, 2% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander and American Indian or Alaska Native, and 3% not reported. Over half of these program sites (58%) had students enrolled in inclusive classes only, while the rest had a lower percentage of academic inclusion (Grigal et al., 2025).

Surveys

Through the addition of surveys to this study, we had the opportunity to further engage with not only DSE but also the DisCrit tenet valuing "multidimensional identities" (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 11). The original survey was created to gain a deeper understanding of how demographics of students in a program may be impacted by their admissions (RQ3), and to determine eligibility requirements and admissions processes not visible on the program websites (RQ2&3). The survey questions, as highlighted in Table 1, were greatly informed by the intent to determine preliminary patterns between accepted IPSE student demographics and the eligibility requirements and admissions processes. The survey was designed through mixed methods, with demographic information related to the participant and their IPSE program as the quantitative portion, and qualitative questions related to the eligibility requirements and admissions processes. These qualitative questions were prefaced by Likert-style questions to direct the participant to the correct open-ended question. For example, if a participant responded to the question, "Which of the following are part of your program's admissions process?" with ALWAYS program/campus tour, they were then directed to the question, "What is the purpose of the campus tour and protocol?" Every participant also had an opportunity to respond to the final question, "Describe anything about your admissions process that has not been mentioned in the previous questions."

As Braun et al. (2021) have highlighted in their work on qualitative survey research, there are many benefits to the survey method, including minimized risk and increased accessibility (p. 646), as opposed to other qualitative methods like interviews. The few quantitative aspects of the survey were designed to integrate with the qualitative data through a convergent design (Fetters et al., 2013).

Data Collection

After obtaining IRB approval, we emailed a survey invitation to 32 program directors of the TPSID program Cohort 3 programs. In Cohort 3, there were 39 sites associated with 22 awardees. We gathered emails for the directors from the Think College public

Table 1

IRB Approved Survey Questions

Questions about you:

What postsecondary program do you work with? (Name of Program, State)
What is your title?
What role have you played in the admissions process in this program?

Questions about your program, in general:

How many students do you currently have in your program?
How many students do you typically accept each new school year?
Of your current students, what is the racial and ethnic breakdown? (slide to the correct percentage)
Of your current students, what is the socioeconomic status breakdown? (slide to the correct percentage)
Of your current students, what is the gender breakdown? (slide to the correct percentage)

Questions about admissions:

Does your program have minimum academic skills required for admission?
What are the academic skills requirements and how are they measured?*
What type of diploma is required for admittance to your program?
Does your program require a certain level of verbal communication for admittance?
What is the verbal communication level required and how is it measured?*
What other skills does your program require students to have before being admitted and how do you measure them?
Which of the following are part of your program's admissions process? (Likert from Always to Never): Online Application; Paper Application; In-Person Interview; Virtual Interview; Program/Campus Tour; Student Observation; Test; Other (please specify)
What does the application typically ask for? (or attach the application in next question)
Please attach your program application.
What is the interview protocol? (attach any interview related documents in the next question)*
Please attach interview materials.*
What is the purpose of the campus tour and protocol?*
What is the protocol for student observations?*
Is there a rubric or set of criteria followed for student observations? (please attach if so)*
What type of test is required and how is it given?*
Describe anything about your admissions process that has not been mentioned in the previous questions.

**Questions that were only displayed if an affirmative related answer was given on a previous question.*

directory of IPSE programs (Think College, 2022). Our sampling frame consisted of at least one site from each TPSID awardee, choosing the first listed contact for every awardee. With some of the awardees with multiple sites, the recruitment email was forwarded to other site directors. This action was determined when directors from those programs completed the survey. Surveys were completed by participants during the same timeframe that the program websites were reviewed and analyzed. Therefore, as surveys came in from additional sites, such as the directors within the Pennsylvania consortium, we added those additional sites to our website analysis list.

We offered gift cards to participants for survey completion. After collecting initial responses (10 complete and 3 incomplete surveys), we resent our email to nonrespondents, and added the TPSID program Cohort 2 directors, which added 20 new possible survey participants to the sampling frame. After the second round of survey recruitment, we had 17 completed surveys and 3 partially completed surveys in total.

Concurrently with implementing the surveys, we completed a web search of TPSID program websites from every grantee who was sent the survey recruitment email, to examine eligibility information and admissions procedures through publicly available in-

formation. As mentioned previously, as the surveys came in, we had submissions from multiple sites within the same grantee. We then added the websites of those sites to our analysis. Not all grantees had functional websites, and not all sites included application materials or admission criteria. From Cohort 2, we looked to analyze 30 of the TPSID sites, two of which no longer existed. From Cohort 3, we analyzed 27 websites, 9 of which were also in Cohort 2. Removing duplicates in both cohorts, we analyzed a total of 48 websites. Table 2 shows each TPSID grantee in Cohorts 2 and 3, the number of sites whose websites were analyzed, and the number of surveys received.

Data Analysis

Similarly to Beck and Godley (2023), the two distinct methods of data collection were analyzed recursively to identify patterns of characteristics for IPSE admissions. It was intentional to analyze both the website analysis and survey results together in the same spreadsheet. Each site, 48 in total, was given a reference number in the spreadsheet. These reference numbers were chosen when the first round of surveys came in, using the participant number as the reference number. For example, the site where the first participant to submit the survey works became reference number 1. Two sites had multiple directors submit the survey, but this was not recognized until all codes had been developed, so there were two extra reference numbers initially, which is why there were 50 total reference numbers.

Each row in the spreadsheet contained a different admissions eligibility requirement or process. Researchers inductively coded the data, starting with survey data and then website data. Coding was done by hand with no set codebook. A code was created for every eligibility requirement and admissions process evident in the data, to address RQ1 and RQ2. While analyzing the qualitative survey responses, coding was related to the overall admissions requirement or process being discussed. Sample Analysis A illustrates how we went from the physical data to the codes in the spreadsheet.

Sample Analysis A. Table 3 shows a small subset of the coding spreadsheet, from reference numbers 1 through 4. Site 1 data included both a survey and any information from the site website related to admissions. Both points of data mentioned requiring an IEP as part of the admissions process. Therefore, at the cross-cell between IEP Needed and Site 1, we put the number "1," signifying the reference number. For any site that had multiple data points (i.e., a survey and a website), we coded any requirement or process that was mentioned on either data source. For example, if the website did not mention a verbal speech requirement, but the survey did, we coded that site as requiring speech.

Initial coding revealed 222 codes that were consolidated into 20 thematic headings. For example, the "paperwork" heading was divided into approximately eight different codes, such as guardianship and high school information. Within Table 4, we have highlighted the 20 thematic headings along with a sample of codes within each. Considering all of the codes within each theme, the third column describes which aspect (eligibility requirement or admissions process) that theme is connected to. Many are described as "both" because the code was part of the process that would ultimately be used to determine eligibility. For example, in most programs there is an application portion collecting personal student information. That student information is part of the admissions process but is also being used to determine "fit" into the program.

The sample of codes consists of the two with the highest frequency across sites from that thematic group. We calculated frequency by code and by site using the count function on the spreadsheet. Sample Analysis B explains how we adapted the frequency count with the few duplicate site survey submissions.

Sample Analysis B. In Table 3, reference numbers 2 and 3 were from the same TPSID site. Two different directors from the same program completed the survey, and website analysis was also completed. All three of those data points had the same results: medical history was required to be submitted as part of the application process. These duplicates were ultimately only counted once in any frequency sums. So, if Table 3 were the entire data set, the frequency of an IEP being needed would be two sites, not three.

We placed notations on some requirements as comments when there were caveats or additional information that would be important to note, such as items that are "recommended" but not required. Site-specific demographic data from the 17 surveys received were analyzed descriptively and comparatively. The overall number of students in the program and the demographic breakdown were analyzed for their mean, median, and mode. Although the survey asked for percentages of each demographic, the researchers discovered that some of the participants incorrectly completed the questions. In some of those cases, it was assumed the participant chose a response that corresponded with the number of students, rather than the percentage of students, within that category. Other participants simply did not respond to the demographic questions about their site. This led to less usable demographic data for comparative analysis. Based in the DSE and DisCrit frameworks, with

Table 2

TPSID Grantee Cohorts 2 and 3

Name of TPSID Grantee	Number of Sites Reviewed in Website Analysis	Number of Survey Participants from Grantee
Appalachian State	1	1
Bergen Community College	2	0
California State University Fresno	1	1
Calvin University	1	2
Colorado State University	1	0
East Tennessee State University	1	1
Georgia State University	1	0
Georgian Court University	1	1
Highline College	1	0
Jacksonville State University	1	0
Lipscomb University	1	0
Millersville University	6	2
Minot State University	2	1
Northern Arizona University	1	1
Ohio State University	1	0
Portland State University	1	0
Rhode Island College	N/A	0
Saint Joseph's University	1	1
Spokane Community College	1	0
Syracuse University	1	1
Taft College	1	0
Texas A&M University	1	0
Texas A&M University - San Antonio	1	1
University of Alabama	1	0
University of California (Davis)	1	1
University of Central Florida	1	0
University of Hawaii at Manoa	1	0
University of Illinois Chicago	1	0
University of Kansas	1	0
University of Memphis	1	0
University of Missouri Kansas City	N/A	0
University of Missouri St. Louis	1	0
University of New Hampshire	1	0
University of North Texas	1	0
University of Rochester	2	0
University of South Alabama	1	0
University of South Carolina	1	1
Utah State University	1	0

(Table 2, continued)

Utah Valley University	1	1
Vanderbilt University	1	1
Washington State University	1	0
TOTAL	47	17

Table 3

Sample Coding Spreadsheet

TPSID SITE	1	2	3	4
IEP Needed	1	2	3	
High School Disciplinary Reports Needed		2	3	
5th Grade Reading Level				4

aims of answering RQ3, the demographic data from a TPSID site was looked at in connection with any eligibility requirements and admissions processes at the same site. Additionally, survey responses as to why certain requirements and processes existed were used in triangulation with demographic information.

Findings

Following the methods previously discussed, our findings are displayed with data from the surveys and website analysis combined. These data are broken down by data that pertains to the three separate research questions. First, we provide findings on the overall scope and breadth of admission requirements in IPSE programs implementing TPSID grants for students with intellectual disability to address RQ1. Then, considering the theoretical frameworks of DSE, DisCrit, and IPSE, we focus on synthesizing the data most relevant for three research questions.

Overall Admission Requirements

Through this research and analysis, we found a total of 222 distinct admissions requirements, consisting of both eligibility requirements and admissions processes, across the 48 program sites in this study. These requirements were analyzed and grouped into the following categories: documentation and eligibility requirements, skill-based requirements, dispositional requirements, safety and behavioral requirements, application requirements, and other requirements.

Documentation and eligibility requirements focus on verifying disability status, education history, and basic personal information. The most commonly required element is documentation of intellectual disability, with 41 programs requiring this verification; an additional 19 programs require specific disability documentation. This near-universal requirement reflects the fundamental eligibility criteria for TPSID programs and aligns with federal definitions for Comprehensive Transition Programs. Similarly, IEP documentation is required by 18 programs, connecting the college admission process to students' secondary education history or additional disability documentation. Eight programs also required a medical history. Most programs also specified age ranges, typically 18-26 (nine programs) or variations such as 18-25 (four programs), 18-28 (five programs), or simply over 18 (seven programs). A few programs accepted students as young as 17. Geographic restrictions were less common but included requirements for enrollment in specific school districts (three programs), county support coordination (three programs) or state agency eligibility (two programs). Technology access was also less common but notable: Two programs required students to have a computer, and five programs required students to have a phone.

Skill-Based requirements varied considerably. Some programs required specific independent living skills (hygiene, time management, medication management), while others focused on academic skills (basic reading, writing, and math at various grade levels) or communication abilities. For example, 15 programs required students to be able to administer their own medications, and some had very specific additional independent living skill requirements,

Table 4

Thematic Headings and Codes Within

Heading	Sample of Codes Within	Eligibility Requirement, Admissions Process, or Both
Technology Access	• Computer Access • Phone Access	Eligibility Requirement
Technology Use for Communication	• Text • Send Email	Admissions Process
Technology Use for Academic Purposes	• Make a PowerPoint • Make a Flipgrid	Admissions Process
Guardianship Related	• Are their own guardian. • Guardianship Form	Both
Diagnosis Related	• Has proof of an Intellectual Disability • Received services through IEP, IDEA, or completed assessment portfolio	Both
High School Related	• High School transcript/ report cards/ education history • Completed High School or Learning Resource Program	Both
Standardized Assessment/ Evaluation	• Psychological Assessment Documents • Behavior Assessment	Both
Program Survey/ Assessment	• Skills Inventory/ Survey • Personal Support Inventory	Both
Generic Information	• Personal Student Information Sheet • Parent Information/ Emergency Contact Information	Both
Reference/ Referral/ Recommendation	• Letters of Rec/ Referral Letter • References Collected	Admissions Process
Application Action	• Interview • Tour/ Preview Day	Both
Other Documentation Needed	• Medical History • Release/ Exchange of Info Form/ FERPA	Both
Money	• Application Cost • Not receiving services from public schools	Both
Family Attitude	• Family dynamics taken into account • Family supports students' pursuit of independence	Both
Independent Living Skills	• Administer Meds • Autonomy/ Independence	Eligibility Requirement
Academic Requirements and Skills	• Basic Skills in Math • Basic Skills in Reading/ Literacy	Both
Academic Disposition	• Interested/ Motivated • Potential to Succeed/ Achieve desired goals	Both

(Table 4, continued)

Need to be able to use communication to...	• Effective/ Functional Communication • Ask for help/ Advocate for needs	Both
General environment disposition	• Agrees to follow University policies • Seeking employment/ interest in gaining employment	Both
Student is safe while...	• Navigating independently • Being unsupervised	Both
Age at start	• 18-26 • Over 18	Eligibility Requirement
Location	• Enrolled in county supports coordination/ OVR/ Waiver at start • From specific School district	Eligibility Requirement

Table 5

Guardianship Related Code Frequencies

Guardianship	Required	Recommended
They are their own guardian	3	3
They need to submit a guardianship-related form	2	1
They are not under full guardianship or any social guardianship	1	0
Supported Decision Making agreement can apply - decided on an individual basis	1	0
A parent/ guardian memorandum of understanding is needed	1	0

Table 6

Documentation Related Code Frequencies

Documentation	Required	Recommended
Intellectual Disability Diagnosis	41	0
Individualized Education Program (IEP)	12	5
High School Standard Diploma, GED, Certificate of Completion, or Social Diploma	11	1
High School Transcripts, Report Cards, and/or Education History	10	2
Comprehensive or Psycho-Educational Evaluations	8	6
Release/ FERPA/ Exchange of Information Form	7	0
Medical History	6	2
Proof of Health Insurance	5	0

such as "able to walk 2-4 miles each school day" (one program), use a microwave (two programs), ability to shower (five programs), or prepare simple meals (two programs). Several programs required basic computer literacy (three programs), while others required specific technology skills such as the ability to make a PowerPoint (one program), make a Flipgrid (two programs), or use a calculator (one program). Data showed seven programs that required specific minimum grade-level academic skills, such as reading, writing, or math. One program studied followed typical college academic admission standards, while five specifically stated that students in the IPSE program would not be able to enroll in a "traditional" college, even with accommodations. Only one program required standardized test scores in the form of the SAT or ACT.

Dispositional requirements were also common. The requirement that students demonstrate interest and motivation appeared in 21 programs' admissions requirements, indicating that programs prioritized student buy-in and self-direction in addition to academic skill sets. Beyond motivation, other requirements included emotional stability (six programs), emotional maturity (six programs), willingness to live independently (six programs), and agreement to follow university policies (12 programs). A more nebulous "potential to succeed in the program or achieve desired goals/outcomes" was sought by nine programs. Other programs asked for a willingness to sit in class/seminar/labs, sometimes for a minimum amount of time (seven programs), participate in class (five programs), participate in extracurricular activities for at least 10 hours per week (one program), or participate in program activities for at least 25 hours per week (one program).

Safety and behavioral requirements also appeared frequently, with 17 programs requiring students to be safe while unsupervised and 15 requiring the ability to navigate campus independently. Five programs explicitly required no history of physical harm to self or others. Less frequent but notable requirements were student safety while crossing the street (two programs), no concern of elopement (one program), and no communicable medical conditions by casual contact (three programs). Programs required acceptable social behavior (eight programs), or other requirements such as understanding boundaries (one program), lack of anxiousness (one program), trustworthiness (one program), ability to accept personal responsibility (two programs), and self-respect (three programs).

Admissions process and other requirements included interviews (17 programs), campus tours or preview days (nine programs), essays or personal statements (14 programs, depending on format flexibility), and student observations (four programs). Eleven programs charged an application fee. Other financial requirements were rare, with some programs requiring proof of health insurance (six programs), ability to pay through service funds (one program), or income equivalent to SSI minimums (one program). Family support was also a criterion for admission in some programs. Family dynamics (two programs) and family support of pursuit of independence (five programs) were found to be considerations for admission in these seven programs.

Research Question 1: Eligibility Requirements

The average number of codes found per program was 16, with a minimum of 0 and a maximum of 59. Thirteen programs had fewer than five requirements for eligibility prior to the application process. Although we quantified program requirements for analysis, the study does not intend to evaluate programs based solely on the number of coded eligibility requirements and application processes found. See the discussion section of this manuscript for additional discourse on this topic.

Although 222 total codes were denoted across all programs included in the study, due to manuscript space constraints, we selected three focal eligibility coding categories for in-depth analysis (guardianship, documentation, and dispositions and achievements), and one overall application processes category. Additional coded domains will be explored in subsequent publications. These coded areas were selected for this manuscript because they most closely aligned with the research questions through the theoretical lenses, emphasizing the impact of social constructs of disability and ableist expectations of students on the application and admission process in IPSE. Note that an absence of the requirement in the data does not equate to "Not required"; instead, it means that there was no evidence of the requirement on the program's website or mentioned in survey responses.

Guardianship Requirements

As shown in Table 5, four programs required students to serve as their own legal guardians (three required self-guardianship, and one also prohibited "social guardianship"). When asked in the survey, *What other skills does your program require students to have before being admitted, and how do you measure them*? one program director said, "Students must hold their own guardianship." In the website analysis, another program listed that they were designed to support students who "serve as their own full legal guardian. Individuals with ID who have a supported decision-making agreement are also encouraged to

apply, and decisions will be made on an individual basis." Several programs required students to submit guardianship forms during the application process.

Documentation Requirements

There was wide variation in the number and types of documents required for application to each IPSE program, as seen in Table 6. Most commonly, programs required or recommended proof of intellectual disability diagnosis and/or submission of an individualized education program (IEP) from high school or prior education. Many programs also required a previous evaluation report, such as a comprehensive psychological or educational evaluation. Eight programs required or recommended medical history forms. In addition, some programs required some kind of high school diploma or proof of completion, transcripts, or report cards. When asked about these requirements in the survey, one director responded, "The IEP and most recent evaluations are reviewed to gain information on current academic, social, and functional skills; the admissions teams complete a rubric on how easily the needs of the students can be supported at the University." It must be noted that TPSIDs are required to verify a student's status as having an intellectual disability, potentially shedding light on the underlying rationale for these requirements.

Student Disposition and Achievement Requirements

Table 7 illustrates some student dispositions (often seen as personal, social, or behavioral skills) and achievement requirements across the TPSID programs analyzed in this study. Many of the programs required or recommended minimum reading and math comprehension levels. In response to the survey question, *What are the academic skills requirements and how are they measured?* one director explained, "All students have an intake meeting one-on-one with a staff member where all skills are examined. One straightforward requirement is 3rd grade reading level or above." Another director responded, "We have a skills assessment for students to take that varies from academic to personal care. Primarily, students need to have the ability to focus and stay on task in the classroom without support, navigate campus, and manage their items. Placement testing is waived for folks who enter the program." Two programs reported requiring the same college-level placement tests as all other students. One of those directors said, "Participants have to meet admission standards for the community or 4-year college they are attending, which typically includes secondary level reading and math comprehension skills. Skills are measured based on admission acceptance and number of <100 level classes taken."

Regarding communication requirements, three programs required verbal communication, and one recommended it. The program that indicated verbal communication was recommended in their survey that "Verbal Ability (Vocal or AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication)) to engage in conversational exchanges" is required. Another program did not specify the type of communication needed. Still, it did say, "We don't have a specific level required, but a student needs to show basic communication skills that shows they can be safe on their own and advocate for their basic needs."

Research Question 2: Admissions Processes

Interviews and tours as part of the application process were common. Directors were surveyed about how interviews and tours were used in their decision-making process for admission. Most responses indicated a desire to learn more about student abilities and behaviors through interviews and tour experiences. One director explained the following:

> We gather more information that helps us make our selections during our preview days than we do during the interviews. We are able to gauge much about their physical abilities, their social skills, their levels of interest and independence, their affect, their academic skills and problem-solving and self-advocacy skills. We can also get a good sense of how important going to college is to the candidate.

A few directors explained how their programs used interviews and tours to help the students understand the university and the program. One director added the following:

> Our program focuses on radical inclusivity; participants experience college in the same manner as their non-disabled peers…Non-disabled students are typically invited to tour their prospective campus, and we invite our students to tour the campus as well. We introduce students to key areas on campus, such as financial aid and disability resources, so they know where these resources are located. Immersing the student in the college environment also improves student intrinsic motivation.

In addition to interviews and tours, almost half of the programs required references or letters of recommendation as part of their regular application process, as seen in Table 8. Some programs required an application fee.

Table 7

Student Disposition and Achievement Code Frequencies

Student Disposition and Achievement	Required	Recommended
Interested/ Motivation for College	21	0
Autonomy/ Independence	12	1
Administer own medications	12	2
Seeking employment/ interest in gaining employment	12	0
Readiness Surveys, Support Surveys, or Skill Inventories	11	2
Specific Reading or Math Level (2nd - 5th grade)	11	3
Potential to succeed/ achieve program goals	8	1
Behavior Assessments or Observations	7	3
Verbal Communication	3	1

Table 8

Application Process Code Frequencies

Application Process	Required	Recommended
Letters of Recommendation/ Referral Letters/ References	21	0
Interview	15	2
Tour/ Preview Day	8	1
Application Fee	7	3
Summer Experience Before Acceptance	1	1

Research Question 3: Potential Effects on Program Diversity

Data from the 17 surveys that had most of the demographic information completed is shown in Table 9. We have described the general region of each program site from which demographic information was received. The United States currently has 10 regional alliances, representing states that work together on IPSE coordination (Think College, 2025). We had representation from eight of those regions: Four Corners, Great Lakes Postsecondary Education Alliance (GLIPSEA), Mid-Atlantic Alliance for Inclusive Higher Education (MIDA), Northeast Inclusive Postsecondary Education Alliance (NEPSEA), Red River Higher Education Alliance (RRHEA), Southeast Postsecondary Education Alliance (SEPSEA), Upper Midwest Regional Alliance, and Western States.

In terms of racial breakdown, the majority of students in this subset of programs were White, with eight of them declaring 70% or more as White. One program had 100% enrollment of Hispanic/Latino students. All other programs had other racial categories listed as 50% or less of their student population. A majority of reporting programs (n=10 out of 17) did not complete the socioeconomic status section. Of the programs that did, there were more programs that listed student household incomes above $75,000 than below, indicating above–average family socioeconomic status for program participants. One program did not complete the gender related questions of the survey. A majority of programs (n=11) have more than half of their students identifying as male. There were four programs with a female identifying majority, one program with an equal split male/female, and one program that listed nonbinary as part of their student population.

Table 9

Site Specific Demographics

Site Number	Site Demographic Specifics
2	**Region:** GLIPSEA **Racial Breakdown:** 77% White, 18% Black/African American, 10% Multiracial **Socioeconomic Status Breakdown:** No Response **Gender Breakdown:** 60% Male, 40% Female
4	**Region:** RRHEA **Racial Breakdown:** 100% Hispanic/Latino **Socioeconomic Status Breakdown:** 98% $75-100,000 **Gender Breakdown:** 66% Male, 33% Female
6	**Region:** MIDA **Racial Breakdown:** 43% White, 14% Black/African American, 43% Asian **Socioeconomic Status Breakdown:** No Response **Gender Breakdown:** 80% Male, 20% Female
7	**Region:** SEPSEA **Racial Breakdown:** 70% White, 30% Black/African American, 1% Asian **Socioeconomic Status Breakdown:** No Response **Gender Breakdown:** 50% Male, 50% Female
8	**Region:** MIDA **Racial Breakdown:** 50% White, 50% Hispanic/Latino **Socioeconomic Status Breakdown:** No Response **Gender Breakdown:** 100% Male
9	**Region:** MIDA **Racial Breakdown:** 80% White, 10% Asian, 10% Indian/Alaska Native **Socioeconomic Status Breakdown:** No Response **Gender Breakdown:** 40% Male, 60% Female
10	**Region:** Western States **Racial Breakdown:** 40% White, 5% Black/African American, 20% Hispanic/Latino, 7% Asian, 15% Hawaiian, 3% Indian/Alaska Native, 10% Multiracial **Socioeconomic Status Breakdown:** 5% $25-50,000, 5% $50-75,000, 20% $75-100,000, 40% $100-150,000, 20% 150-200,000, 10% over $200,000 **Gender Breakdown:** 80% Male, 20% Female
11	**Region:** Upper Midwest **Racial Breakdown:** 80% White, 13% Indian/Alaska Native, 6% Multiracial **Socioeconomic Status Breakdown:** 20% $50-75,000, 26% $75-100,000, 26% $100-150,000, 20% 150-200,000, 6% over $200,000 **Gender Breakdown:** 73% Male, 26% Female
13	**Region:** Four Corners **Racial Breakdown:** 61% White, 5% Hispanic/Latino, 11% Indian/Alaska Native, 22% Multiracial **Socioeconomic Status Breakdown:** No Response **Gender Breakdown:** No Response

17	**Region:** Western States **Racial Breakdown:** 20% Black/African American, 10% Hispanic/Latino, 50% Asian, 10% Multiracial, 10% other **Socioeconomic Status Breakdown:** No Response **Gender Breakdown:** 40% Male, 60% Female
25	**Region:** GLIPSEA **Racial Breakdown:** 64% White, 20% Black/African American, 8% Hispanic/Latino, 8% Multiracial **Socioeconomic Status Breakdown:** No Response **Gender Breakdown:** 92% Male, 8% Female
27	**Region:** MIDA **Racial Breakdown:** 62% White, 10% Black/African American, 15% Hispanic/Latino, 3% Asian **Socioeconomic Status Breakdown:** 15% $25-50,000, 30% $75-100,000, 20% $100-150,000, 20% 150-200,000, 15% over $200,000 **Gender Breakdown:** 30% Male, 70% Female
30	**Region:** SEPSEA **Racial Breakdown:** 95% White, 5% Black/African American **Socioeconomic Status Breakdown:** 45% $25-50,000, 50% $50-75,000, 5% $75-100,000 **Gender Breakdown:** 57% Male, 43% Female
32*	**Region:** Four Corners **Racial Breakdown:** 100% White **Socioeconomic Status Breakdown:** No Response **Gender Breakdown:** 66% Male, 33% Female
39	**Region:** NEPSEA **Racial Breakdown:** 77% White, 18% Black/African American, 1% Hispanic/Latino, 3% Asian, 1% Hawaiian, 1% Indian/Alaska Native **Socioeconomic Status Breakdown:** 1% below $25,000, 7% $25-50,000, 7% $50-75,000, 36% $75-100,000, 52% $100-150,000, 10% 150-200,000, 1% over $200,000 G**ender Breakdown:** 60% Male, 39% Female, 1% Nonbinary
42*	**Region:** SEPSEA **Racial Breakdown:** 54% White, 23% Black/African American, 15% Hispanic/Latino, 8% Asian **Socioeconomic Status Breakdown:** 15% below $25,000, 15% $25-50,000, 15% $50-75,000,15% $75-100,000, 8% $100-150,000, 8% 150-200,000, 23% over $200,000 **Gender Breakdown:** 69% Male, 31% Female
48	**Region:** SEPSEA **Racial Breakdown:** 72% White, 17% Black/African American, 3% Hispanic/Latino, 3% Multiracial **Socioeconomic Status Breakdown:** No Response **Gender Breakdown:** 30% Male, 70% Female

Note. *Sites with less than 20 students total at the time of survey completion.

Due to the limited demographic responses, we were not able to discern if there was an expressed connection between demographic diversity at a program site and their eligibility requirements and admissions processes (RQ3). In the discussion, we will comment on this limitation.

Discussion

Programs examined within this data set range in their requirements for admission, including variations in categories such as documentation and eligibility requirements, skill-based requirements, dispositional requirements, safety and behavioral requirements, application process, and other requirements. In this section, we discuss each of these requirement categories, contextualizing with previous research in the field.

Documentation and Eligibility Requirements

Documentation and eligibility requirements represented a significant portion of admission criteria, with identification of intellectual disability being the most common requirement. This finding is logical, given that a key requirement for TPSID funding is that programs serve students with intellectual disability, and verification through an IEP, school evaluation, or medical history helps verify eligibility while providing documentation that may also be needed for access to college or university disability support services. However, Cook et al., (2015) caution against excluding students from postsecondary opportunities based on diagnosis alone, noting that this population has particular strengths and challenges that should be recognized and supported in the transition. From a DSE perspective, reliance on single documents or even structural systems risks reinforcing practices that serve to label, disable and often exclude the students meant to be supported. In practice, we can consider challenges in obtaining updated or accurate psychoeducational evaluations, particularly if students have already exited the k-12 system, or difficulty qualifying for IPSE if intellectual disability is not a primary diagnosis and is, instead, secondary or unlisted.

Eleven of the programs in the study also required proof of high school completion. High school completion is a typical entrance requirement for college, and at first glance, may seem routine. However, given the wide range of school experiences from which students with intellectual disability are transitioning, completion may not be available for all students. Varying by state, school district, or other factors, some students have been placed in segregated settings due only to their disability label, or denied a diploma based on standardized assessments (Irwin et al., 2023). This requirement reflects an assumption that traditional academic benchmarks are necessary indicators of readiness, rather than considering the diverse ways students demonstrate competence and college potential as CTP and HEOA guidelines allow. Individual programs, however, are permitted to have their own additional eligibility criteria.

Four of the programs in the study required that students be their own legal guardians for admission. Smith-Hill et al., (2023) found in their research that while guardianship is typically a legal determination made by the courts based on an individual's decision-making capacity, it is often framed within transition planning for students with intellectual disability as a routine or expected path for support. Guardianship decisions depend highly on family circumstances, attitudinal beliefs about disability, and awareness of options (Jameson et al., 2015; Smith-Hill et al., 2023; Walters & Plotner, 2024). It follows that this requirement might be necessary in some programs, especially for students who plan to live on campus or be expected to have high levels of independence in the university setting. When a student has guardianship of themself, they can make decisions without parental approval, which may streamline decision-making in the college setting in many circumstances.

However, requiring legal independence for program admission not only disadvantages students whose families pursued guardianship, but it also reinforces structures that equate independence with worthiness or readiness for higher education. Moreover, the implications of guardianship extend beyond program admission. Even when students with intellectual disability are admitted to a university, guardianship status may continue to restrict their access to key aspects of the college experience such as living on campus or taking part in study abroad or other programs. These limitations further marginalize students and create a stratified postsecondary experience, where those under guardianship may be excluded from the full benefits of college life. Beyond the programs included in this study, it is likely that guardianship functions as a broader systemic barrier across many institutions, warranting more consideration and reform. Guardianship is a larger conversation beyond the admissions space in the intellectual disability field. (Smith-Hill et al., 2023; Walters & Plotner, 2024)

Seven programs required students to sign Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) waivers, allowing parents direct access to and communication with university staff. This finding follows research that highlights the positive correlation between family involvement and postsecondary success (Graff et al., 2019; Griffin et al., 2010; Rowe et al.,

2015), and waiving FERPA rights, even partially, may lead to increased communication between parents and university supports. From a DisCrit standpoint, this finding raises concerns about how intersecting systems of ableism and adultism operate within higher education. Such policies implicitly question the agency and autonomy of disabled students, particularly those who may already face other forms of marginalization (e.g., race, class, or gender), reinforcing systemic inequities. Although it would seem that the FERPA requirement and admissions processes would highly correlate to the previously discussed guardianship requirement, there was only one program where both codes appeared.

Another requirement was proof of health insurance. Five programs required students to provide this documentation before admission, while others did so before enrollment. This requirement is common for all university students, especially for students living in campus housing. However, due to the non-matriculated status of many IPSE students, they may be excluded from university-sponsored student health plans, despite their CTP status as students. This exclusion reflects a structural oversight that can further exclude students with intellectual disability, particularly those from low-income backgrounds who may not have access to private insurance. This requirement may help institutions manage their risk and protect students who have insurance from higher medical costs. Within a DSE and DisCrit framework, such requirements illustrate how institutional policies, though appearing neutral, can reinforce exclusion and stratification, particularly for students who live at the intersections of multiple marginalizations.

Some programs also required access to technology, like a computer or a phone, for program eligibility. McConnell (2021) noted the importance of technology in today's postsecondary environment, and it is not uncommon for college students to be required to have their own access to computers. While personal phones seem so ubiquitous today, some students with intellectual disability have had limited access to personal devices for either safety and vulnerability concerns, caregiver gatekeeping, financial concerns, or perceived lack of capacity (Chadwick, 2022). Computer or phone ownership as an admission requirement may add financial or logistical hurdles for some students, so programs should be aware and consider potential alternatives, such as computer lab access or a technology lending library, along with support to improve digital literacy skills in real-life instances, as Chadwick's (2022) research suggests.

Skill-Based Requirements

Skill-based requirements varied across programs, encompassing independent living skills such as hygiene, time management, and medication management; academic skills such as basic reading, writing, and math at various grade levels; technology proficiency; and communication abilities. These reflect the unique position of IPSE programs within higher education. Because the HEOA established an alternative admission pathway for students with intellectual disability, programs do not rely on traditional metrics like GPA or standardized test scores (such as the SAT or ACT) to evaluate applicants. Instead, they have developed alternative criteria to assess whether students are prepared for college-level expectations and are a good fit for the program's structure. Prior research further connects skill-based criteria and family expectations. Sheen et al., (2022) identified a list of IPSE preparation items based on the results of their parent study which

> focused more on what we categorized as either IL (independent living) skills (i.e., able to manage medications independently, demonstrates basic hygiene skills, accepts responsibility for their actions, and demonstrates knowledge of personal safety awareness), or social/working with other skills (i.e., able to follow instructions/directions, able to ask for help/clarification across a variety of settings, is kind to self and others). (p. 7)

These items mirror the functional and independent living skills that some programs assess during admissions. However, these alternative criteria can serve as barriers to postsecondary education for students with intellectual disability, particularly when programs specify that students must communicate verbally or demonstrate "functional" or "effective" communication. Such expectations reflect a logic grounded in normative standards of academic and communicative performance. Although IPSE programs are explicitly designed to serve students who do not meet traditional college admission standards, some programs reproduce exclusion by developing new academic thresholds, creating alternative gatekeeping that contradicts the foundational intent of the HEOA and the TPSID model demonstration program (Think College, 2022, 2025). A DisCrit lens highlights how these layered requirements—academic, communicative, and behavioral—may disproportionately and perhaps unintentionally impact marginalized students. Skill based requirements, as part of admissions in IPSE, in many ways align with program goals. However, they could also create additional barriers given that some

students may not have access to opportunities to develop these skills through their high school transition supports, potentially preventing otherwise qualified students from accessing IPSE.

Dispositional Requirements

Dispositional requirements such as motivation, maturity, or emotional stability were also required. A substantial number of programs required demonstrated interest in college, an understanding of self-direction, or other indicators of college or program readiness, echoing what Sheen, et al., (2022) described as these dispositional qualities. Programs often justified these expectations by citing concerns about student success, particularly tied to lack of motivation or readiness for independence (Friesland & King, 2012; Griffin & Papay, 2017). Without traditional academic standards to rely on for admissions, many programs may be looking for ways to ascertain student readiness, cohort fit, and support needs.

Safety and Behavioral Requirements

Safety and behavioral requirements appeared frequently among program admission criteria as well. Programs commonly required students to demonstrate independence and safety or campus navigation; others explicitly required no history of harm to self or others. These findings align with Griffin and Papay's (2017) identification of common admission prerequisites of safety and navigation. The authors provide context for these requirements, noting concerns around student vulnerability potentially increasing the need for both screening of students and skill development once in program. Sheen et al. (2022) similarly found that parents prioritized safety, personal awareness, and emotional regulation. Griffin et al. (2019) also reported that parents identified safety as their main concern, which suggests parent priorities may be in alignment with these admission practices. However, it should be noted that many students seeking enrollment may have had limited chances to independently navigate their communities prior to application; these criteria could screen out students based on lack of experience rather than lack of capacity.

Admission Process and Other Requirements

Some admission processes were similar to typical admission practices, such as requirements for essays, personal statements, or letters of recommendation. Other requirements were partially or substantially different, such as interviews, mandatory campus tours or preview days, and student observations. Matriculated students, for example, are rarely asked about their capacity to manage medications or perform daily living tasks. Such questions may be relevant in IPSE admissions, however, if a program is considering available supports or residential options.

Family support also emerged as an admission criteria, with some programs evaluating family dynamics or family support for the student's "pursuit of independence." Research offers insight into why programs might evaluate family support during admissions. Francis et al. (2019) observed variations in parent engagement in the college transition, with responses ranging from hypervigilance to a more hands-off approach. Parents questioned independence and instead considered ideas of interdependence in a college setting. Friesland and King (2012) noted families valued the peer relationships their students could build, but to establish these, students required more independence from their parents. These studies suggest that programs may be considering admission practices to ensure that parent, student, and program expectations align.

Graff et al. (2019) created an instrument to assess whether parents are prepared to support growing student autonomy. Critically, they cautioned that the tool should identify families who might benefit from additional guidance rather than exclude their students from admission. Following a similar concern, Kelley and Prohn (2019) found that families consistently held more modest postsecondary aspirations than students themselves, with a larger gap for students with higher support needs, often due to inadequate information about available options. Martinez et al. (2012) similarly documented widespread gaps in parent knowledge about transition pathways and found that educators sometimes misread the engagement of culturally and linguistically diverse families. These findings suggest that when programs use family support for admissions, they may unintentionally exclude students whose families encountered systemic barriers to accessing information rather than families who would not support their student's college participation.

Demographic Connections

Although the demographic data we collected by site were minimal, there are some clear gaps in terms of diversity across the 17 sites. There was a high prevalence of majority White students, and a high majority of male students. With more SES data, we hoped to be able to draw connections between site diversity and the admissions codes at the same site. Take, for example, an application fee and required proof of income; while these requirements are not unlike those of other college students, they may lead to decreased socioeconomic diversity if students cannot afford the program or access the same safety nets, such as fee waivers and

merit scholarships. With these limited demographic data, we could not conclude how requirements relate to admission rates of individuals with marginalized racial or socioeconomic status to answer RQ3. Examining eligibility requirements and admission processes with demographic data such as race and family income is recommended for future research.

Limitations and Future Research Recommendations

Although we received at least partial survey responses from 17 IPSE directors for this pilot study, the lack of complete responses from participants was a limitation. Future research could address this by recruiting a sample from all IPSE directors or all TPSID sites, instead of a small subset from each TPSID grantee. Expansion of the study to non-TPSID IPSE programs, to all TPSID cohorts, or to include the available TPSID demographic data would strengthen future studies. Self-report bias is an additional limitation of the study. Survey responses relied on the self-reports of program directors on admission practices and may have been inaccurate or aspirational. The cross-sectional design is also a limitation, as information was taken at one point in time for program admissions. As programs develop or evolve, it is likely that admission policies and practices develop and change as well. This study did not examine outcome data or compare admission practices to application or admission rates. Additionally, geographic and institutional diversity was not studied in relation to admission practices; for example, how a community college in the southwest might differ from a public university in the northeast for admissions.

Missing data are another significant limitation. Survey responses were limited and incomplete, and there were not enough demographic data available to answer RQ3. Using public website information created additional limitations, as data gathered online were sometimes incomplete. For example, in some cases, data were incomplete because the TPSID program removed admissions information outside of the admissions season. In a few instances with Cohort 2, the program site could not be found and may have no longer existed at the time of data collection. With Cohort 3, some programs were not yet fully operational when data were collected, leading to additional missing information. Future research could collect website data during the typical admissions season (winter-early spring) and use a more systematic data collection and analysis tool, like MaxQDA, to ensure coding and analyses are consistent across the research team. Future data collection and analysis could be strengthened by separating web analysis data and survey data. Future studies should also consider utilizing a consistent database of demographic data to analyze in concert with updated admission policies and practices, which could provide a more complete examination of RQ3. It would also be useful to hear from students, families, and program staff about their experiences in the admission process, particularly as students begin to apply to multiple programs with some geographic or resource diversity.

Conclusion

This study provides the first baseline examination of admission practices across TPSID-funded IPSE programs in the United States, which shape access to higher education for students with intellectual disability. The alternative admission pathway established by HEOA has created access to higher education that did not exist before for students with intellectual disability, reflecting a significant shift in educational equity in the postsecondary educational space. However, as this research demonstrates, these alternative criteria can potentially create new barriers. Moving forward, programs should critically and regularly examine their admission practices, considering not only the programmatic implications but the systemic and potentially exclusionary ones as well.

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About the Authors

Beth A. Myers is the Lawrence B. Taishoff Associate Professor of Inclusive Higher Education at Syracuse University, where she teaches in the inclusive teacher education program, serves as the Associate Director for the Center on Disability and Inclusion, and oversees the university's InclusiveU program. Dr. Myers received her doctoral degree from the University of Pennsylvania and focuses her current research and practice on inclusive postsecondary education. She chairs the State of the Art Conference in Inclusive Postsecondary Education and serves as Co-Editor in Chief of the *Journal of Inclusive Postsecondary Education*. Dr Myers can be reached at bemyers@syr.edu.

Katie Ducett received her B.S. and M.S. degrees in Chemistry, Special Education, and Literacy Instruction from Nazareth University and her Ph.D. in Special/Inclusive Education from Syracuse University. She worked as a reading specialist in the Rochester City School District and taught courses at Nazareth University and Syracuse University. She is currently an assistant professor in the Department of Foundations and Social Advocacy at SUNY Cortland. Her research interests include inclusive postsecondary education and inclusive qualitative research. She can be reached by email at: katie.ducett@cortland.edu.

Assessing and Meeting College Support Needs of Students with Disability: A Tiered Approach

Jeremy W. Ford[1]
Julia P. Gorman[1]

Abstract

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) is a widely used model for allocating resources to support students in K-12 settings. However, its tiered structure is also adaptable to higher education settings. In this conceptual practice paper, we outline how core supports (Tier I), supplemental interventions (Tier II), and intensive individualized services (Tier III) align with existing and potential postsecondary resources, characterizing programs that provide access to postsecondary education for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities within the Tier III support framework. Three case studies illustrate how the needs of students with various disabilities can be effectively matched with available resources in a university setting with an Inclusive Postsecondary Education Program. Additionally, a decision-making framework for identifying student needs is presented to illustrate how it can be applied to consider college readiness and provide appropriate support in higher education. Ultimately, we propose intentional integration of MTSS into higher education systems to improve access, retention, and outcomes for students with disabilities, particularly those with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Keywords: inclusive postsecondary education, disability resource center, multi-tiered systems of support, decision-making

The Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (HEOA, 2008) initiated federal support for expanding access to postsecondary education for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). This act promoted grant-funded projects, such as the National Coordinating Center and the Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability (TPSID) model demonstration projects, to evolve, expand, and refine inclusive postsecondary education for students with IDD through research and practice (Think College, n.d.). These federal initiatives embody the belief that when creating disability law or policy, the focus should be on an individual's long-term goals and those of their families (Lee et al., 2018). College is a frequently sought-after milestone for many young people and their families. The HEOA (2008) and its associated investments in the TPSID programs and the National Coordinating Center have helped increase opportunities for students with IDD to participate in postsecondary education over the last two decades across much of the United States.

There are many ways for one to build a rich, fulfilling life, and enrolling in college is a normative pathway sought by many after high school for this purpose (Uditsky & Hughson, 2012). While college is not the "right fit" for everyone, college access should be available to all who demonstrate a willingness to engage in the work and express a genuine interest in postsecondary education. Further, the option to pursue meaningful postsecondary education should be available for individuals without disabilities as well as individuals with a wide range of disabilities, including IDD (Inclusive Postsecondary Education Association, 2025).

Notably, K-12 students with disabilities benefit from educational systems that offer flexible, tiered supports tailored to their diverse needs, such as the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) model (Jimerson et al., 2016). A tiered model of support, such as the MTSS, is particularly well-suited to support postsecondary students with disabilities as it provides varying levels of intervention intensity to

[1] *Boise State University*

ensure that all students receive the necessary resources for their success. Importantly, decisions about a student's transition from high school to adult life should be grounded in a meaningful, comprehensive assessment process (Neubert & Leconte, 2013).

Likewise, data-based decision making is a cornerstone of MTSS (Deno, 2016) for identifying students' strengths, areas for support, and progress toward goals. Although different from the traditional data collected in K-12, institutions of higher education still collect data, such as academic progress, referrals for student outreach, and a student's self-report. It is essential to examine the available information and use it to make informed decisions about referring and supporting students to achieve their goals.

In the following section, we provide a brief overview of the MTSS model and the services and supports available, given the resources typically available in K-12 settings. We follow this overview with a description of how the MTSS model can be applied to higher education. We then describe a decision-making framework for determining whether pursuing postsecondary education is a "good fit" for a student with IDD, and if so, what resources are likely needed for their success in higher education. This framework is inspired by both related research and our experiences as the director of an inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) program and associate director of a disability resource center (DRC). Roles of the director include communicating with interested students and families, coordinating with various units on campus (e.g., admissions, financial aid, registrar, DRC), supervising student employees, communicating with parents/guardians as needed, and advising students in the program. Roles of the associate director include managing the day-to-day operations of the center, supervising professional staff, determining accommodations, supporting faculty/staff with accessibility and accommodations, providing campus/community training, and serving on the student intervention team. We have repeatedly found ourselves referring students with disabilities, their families, and teachers to each other when learning more about students' needs during initial conversations about postsecondary education options.

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

A MTSS model is proactive and preventative. MTSS uses both data and instruction to support student learning regarding their social, emotional, and behavioral needs (Jimerson et al., 2016) and includes three tiers of intervention to support the academic and non-academic skills of students (see Figure 1). The MTSS model is widely used in K-12 education, often to support the identification of students with disabilities who may need specially designed instruction (i.e., special education services). This framework can also be applied to the higher education environment. Before discussing MTSS in a postsecondary context, we will first provide a foundational understanding of MTSS and the resources associated with each tier.

Tier I

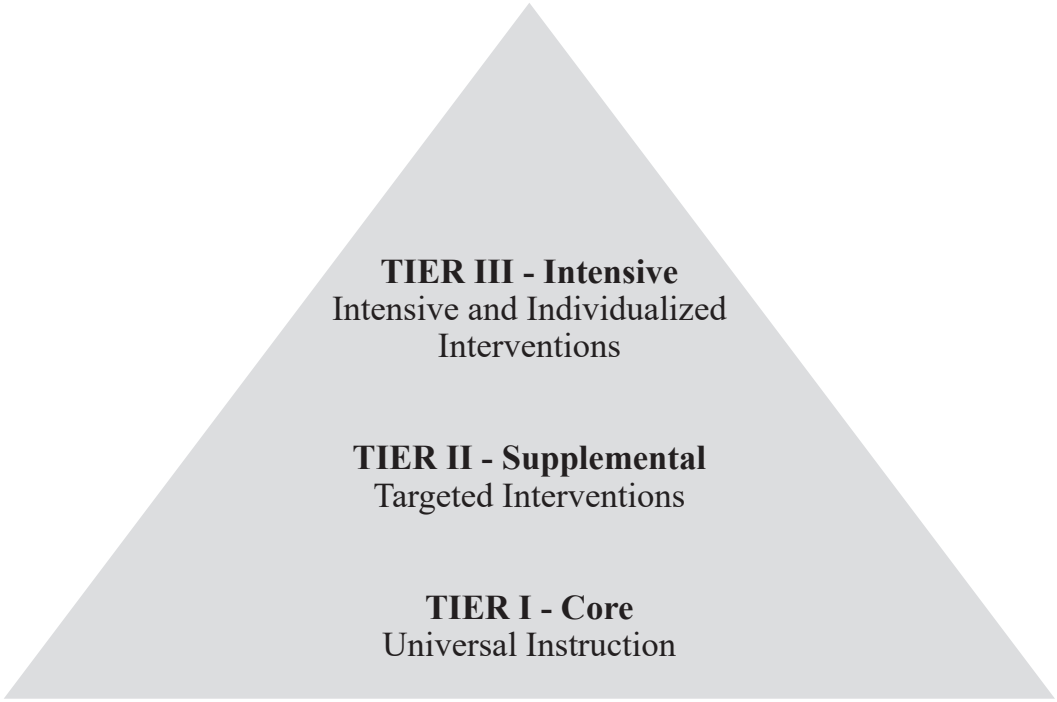
Core instruction, also known as Tier I, represents the resources available to every student simply because they attend their school. The instruction and support students receive are comprehensive, evidence-based, and ensure students have the opportunity to learn essential content and skills (Stoiber & Gettinger, 2016). Instruction and support are often scaffolded and adapted to meet the needs of all learners. This work is typically done through a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, which closely aligns with Tier I elements of support (Rao et al., 2017). The UDL framework, developed by the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST), addresses the diverse needs of learners by planning instruction based on a variety of engagement, representation, and action and expression principles (CAST, n.d.; Davies et al., 2013). The goal of UDL is to reach the greatest number of learners, regardless of disability or learning preference, and for them to access the learning and meaningfully participate (CAST, n.d.; Hartsoe & Barclay, 2017). Within Tier I, student data are collected to monitor learning and progress (Thomas et al., 2023). If students are not making adequate progress with the resources provided within Tier I, additional, more intensive resources are considered for Tier II (Riley-Tillman et al., 2020). Importantly, in K-12 schools, the tiers are implemented sequentially based on success or progress. In the proposed application to postsecondary education, tiers would likely be chosen prior to implementation. This notion is further clarified below. In the context of MTSS, more intensive resources can include increased duration or frequency of instruction, smaller group size to increase opportunities for corrective feedback, and additional staff (e.g., a paraprofessional responsible for providing instruction).

Tier II

The purpose of Tier II interventions and supports is to give students additional opportunities to develop and practice their skills (Stoiber & Gettinger, 2016). Tier II, or supplemental instruction, does not replace Tier I; instead, Tier II instruction complements what the student is already receiving in Tier I (Hosp et al., 2016). Examples of Tier II instruction include Title I

Figure 1

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support in K-12 Schools



Reading, differentiated instruction practices, simple token economy systems to reinforce meeting behavioral expectations, and other supplementary approaches. Within Tier II, student progress is monitored more closely than in Tier I. This allows the school to adapt the support as needed (e.g., increasing the frequency or duration of instruction). If the instructional support provided in Tier II is insufficient for the student to make adequate progress, resources available within Tier III will be considered to support the student's learning (Riley-Tillman et al., 2020).

Tier III

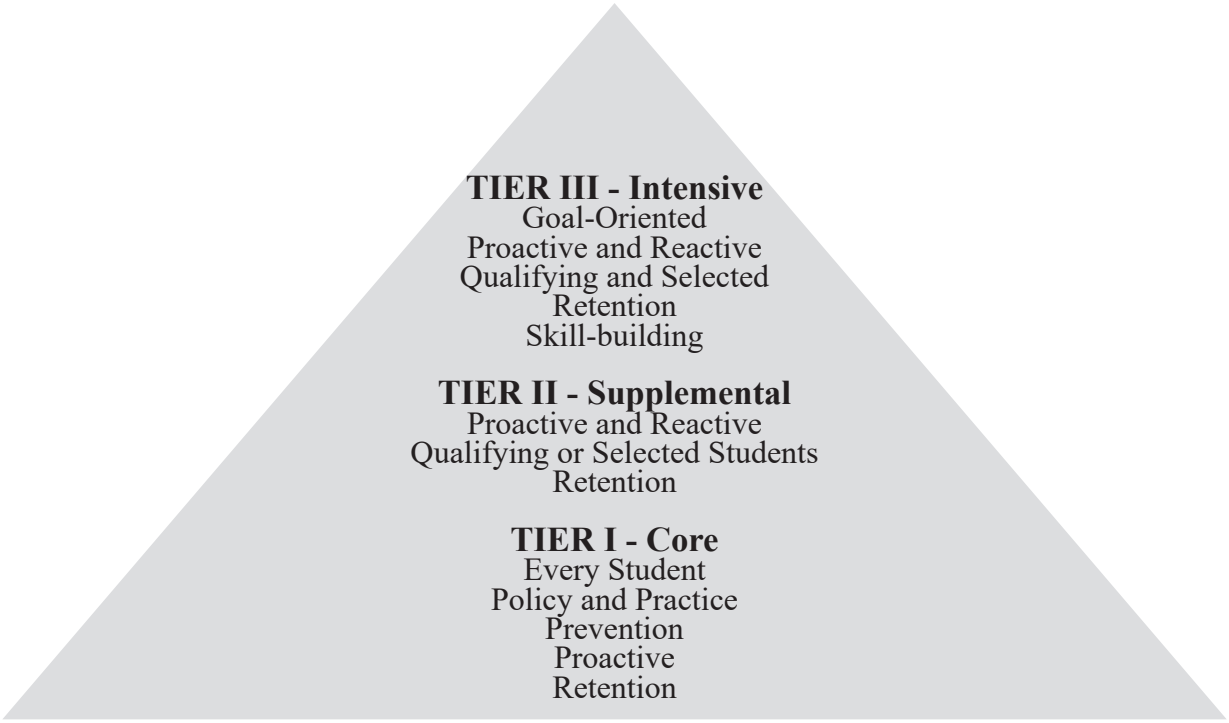
Tier III, or intensive instruction, is more rigorous than that of Tiers I and II. Instruction is adapted to the student's individual needs due to the inadequate progress made with core (Tier I) and supplemental (Tier II) instruction (Stoiber & Gettinger, 2016). This level of support typically requires more time and resources, as well as specialized staff (e.g., an interventionist), and involves frequent progress monitoring (Riley-Tillman et al., 2020; Stoiber & Gettinger, 2016). Tier III may be, but is not necessarily, synonymous with special education (Hosp et al., 2016). In addition to special education, Tier III can include small-group instruction, often one-on-one; complex plans to reinforce students who meet behavioral expectations; and frequent collaboration between professionals (e.g., a general education teacher and a behavior specialist). In addition, Tier III instruction does not replace the support students are receiving in Tiers I and II.

Student Supports in Postsecondary Education

Although the MTSS framework is used regularly in K-12 education, it can also be feasibly applied to the postsecondary education context. Higher education institutions offer a range of academic, social, and behavioral support services to meet the diverse needs of their students. Many of these services can be organized using the MTSS model (Figure 2). By providing a foundational level of support and increasing that support through tiers of increasing intensity matched to students' needs, instructors are better able to focus on teaching students and trust other professionals across campus to provide additional intervention, as necessary. One may even relate the idea of data-based, early-warning student support systems used in higher education to implement robust retention strategies (Hanover Research, 2024). The relation between proactive and preventive intervention within the framework would support student retention, as they would receive early support for their identified needs. Overall, a tiered model of support in postsecondary education focuses on both proactive

Figure 2

Envisioned Postsecondary Education Resources Mapped Out in a Multi-Tiered Systems of Support Model



and reactive support to promote student retention and ensure students meet satisfactory academic progress.

Core (Tier I)

Institutional support available to all students in postsecondary education would be considered Tier I support. These services are embedded through policies, practices, and programming. Examples of student support services in Tier I may include an academic support center, advising, a career center, the office of the dean of students, new student orientation, a student involvement center (e.g., clubs), or tutoring centers (e.g., math, writing). The purpose of these supports is to proactively serve all students with the goals of retention and satisfactory academic progress. For students with disabilities, there has been a significant increase in the rate at which they attend college. However, their graduation rate is lower than that of their non-disabled peers (Francis et. al., 2019). This gap could be indicative that additional, or more intentional, services beyond the basic support available are needed for students to meet their goals.

Supplemental (Tier II)

Tier II services in postsecondary education are both proactive and reactive. To receive this support, students must meet the qualification requirements. For example, a student would need to have a disability to receive disability accommodations. Again, the goal of these supplemental services is to retain students and facilitate satisfactory academic progress. Examples of Tier II services may include academic recovery programs, academic integrity interventions, English language support programs, and DRCs.

DRCs are the primary service available to students with disabilities in postsecondary education. The purpose of DRCs is to determine appropriate and reasonable accommodations for qualifying students with disabilities. According to Newman and Madaus (2015), only 35% of students who received special education services in high school chose to disclose their disability when enrolled in postsecondary education. In some cases, this disclosure is proactive (e.g., when students obtain accommodations from the start of their academic journey). In others, it can be reactive (e.g., a student realizes they need accommodations after classes begin). Of course, students with disabilities who access the Tier II services of the DRC still receive and can access the Tier I services available. For example, Anastopoulos and King (2015) found that multimodal treatment (e.g., counseling, tutoring, and accommodations) can have promising impacts on the mental health and graduation rates of neurodivergent students. Some students, however,

may need more than the core services and accommodations available.

Intensive (Tier III)

Similar to Tier II, Tier III services in postsecondary education can be either proactive or reactive, with a focus on student retention. Students receiving this support typically have to qualify and be selected for it. These services are goal-oriented and focused on skill-building. For example, a student with IDD could both qualify for a program that provides access to participate in college meaningfully and have to apply and be selected for the program. Examples of Tier III services in postsecondary education may include individualized counseling, TRiO programs, and dedicated programs for students with IDD.

Dedicated programs for students with IDD may include IPSE programs. IPSE programs are designed for students with IDD who want to develop their academic, employment, and community involvement skills. According to a national directory, there are currently 361 colleges and universities in the United States with dedicated programs for students with IDD (Think College, 2025). Students enrolled in IPSE programs participate in coursework offered by the institution (traditional and/or program-specific courses), engage in employment practicums, and have opportunities to participate in the campus community. Requirements vary for on-campus or residential living. Some IPSE programs may require on-campus or residential living, others may have it as an option, and other programs do not have the option. IPSE programs may be appropriate for students with IDD who want to pursue higher education but may need additional resources to support their success. Often, these resources provide dynamic services that can enhance student success (Corby et al., 2018; Hendrickson et al., 2013; Petroff et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2023). Table 2 includes a comparison of resources across tiers in K-12 education and postsecondary education.

Given the variety of resources available to support students with disabilities and the varying skills of these students, it can be challenging to determine the type of support most likely to help a student succeed in meeting their postsecondary educational goals. This challenge is especially true for students with IDD, for whom pursuing postsecondary education may not have been considered until graduation approaches and the option becomes known. Thus, a framework that provides prompts for students with IDD, their families, and their teachers and other professionals who support them can help with the challenging tasks associated with making decisions about postsecondary education.

In the next section, three case studies are presented. We begin by describing three students with various disabilities who are interested in attending college. Next, we introduce an access coordinator working in the college's DRC. Using the data available, the appropriate postsecondary resources for each student are then identified.

Case Studies

The students described below each have multiple strengths and skills, but they also face barriers to accessing college. While reviewing these fictional case studies, consider the supports appropriate for each student and the accommodations they may need in the postsecondary environment.

Tier I Case Study: Kelsey

Kelsey is a high school senior who is unsure about attending the local community college or university in her hometown in the fall. She will be completing high school having met traditional graduation requirements and attaining a 3.2 GPA. Kelsey plans to enroll in a radiologic sciences program, with aspirations to become a radiologic technologist. Kelsey is diagnosed with anxiety and depression. She demonstrates strong academic abilities, particularly in language arts and science. Kelsey tends to struggle more in her math courses and is concerned about the math requirements she will need to fulfill as part of her course of study. Kelsey has had a 504 plan throughout high school, which gives her access to a quiet space and a trusted adult she can speak with when feeling overwhelmed. As Kelsey's high school experience has progressed, the need for a quiet space and a trusted adult has decreased but remains on her 504 plan as a precaution.

Tier II Case Study: Maria

Maria is a graduating high school student with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), and she's diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Maria will be completing high school having met traditional graduation requirements and attaining a 3.4 GPA. Overall, she possesses strong skills across core academic areas but tends to second-guess her abilities. Maria has a goal of obtaining her bachelor's degree, but is undecided on her specific major. She hopes to have a career related to theater, writing, or visual arts.

Maria has identified barriers related to her academic management skills (e.g., time management), group projects, self-regulation, processing information, and multitasking. She performs well with con-

sistency but can experience dysregulation in response to unexpected changes. Maria's auditory senses are strong (e.g., hearing the air conditioning unit turn on and off), which can sometimes cause her difficulty in remaining focused on the current task. During class, Maria may experience barriers related to processing information at the same pace as her teachers are teaching. Maria's teachers often go back to reteach her the information.

On Maria's current IEP, she receives specially designed instruction in academic management and organization, as well as social-emotional skills. Maria's accommodations include teacher checks for understanding, extra time on tests and quizzes, permission to listen to music in class, a copy of the teacher's notes, additional time on assignments, early release for the passing period (to limit increased sensory stimuli), and encouragement to use self-regulation tools and skills.

Tier III Case Study: Alex

Alex is graduating soon from his 18-21 transition program, where he has an IEP and receives support for his part-time job at a construction company. Alex was diagnosed with an intellectual disability at a young age and has received specially designed instruction throughout his schooling. He had individual paraprofessional support through elementary school, middle school, and the beginning of high school. This support decreased when he expressed aspirations of attending college. By the end of high school, Alex was mostly attending classes independently and attempting the majority of all assignments in classes (e.g., U.S. History, Biology) with high school peers with and without disabilities. While Alex attempted all assignments, modifications included the following: reduction of pages or word counts for final papers, presentation time limits capped at 6-7 minutes, and assignments graded on a modified scale of (exceeds expectations, meets expectations, does not meet expectations). In addition to his goal of attending college, Alex has goals to maintain meaningful employment and live with friends one day. Alex is social and hopes to get involved at his future school.

Alex is highly organized and appreciates routine. Alex is engaged at school and work, often being the first to greet potential clients in the office. Alex does have difficulty with reading fluency and comprehension, so he uses assistive technology to access written materials. Alex also uses dictation to assist with writing tasks. It can also be difficult for Alex to process multiple pieces of information at once, so an outline of his tasks, notes from meetings, and check-ins are helpful support he receives at his job. Alex enjoys his place of work but wants to acquire more skills so he can earn a competitive salary and live independently in the future.

Alex's current IEP includes specially designed instruction in transition services, independent living, reading, and writing. Alex's accommodations include teacher checks for understanding, extra time on tests and quizzes, a copy of the teacher's notes, access to a daily schedule, chunked assignments and tasks, text-to-speech and speech-to-text capabilities, a calculator, preferential seating, and a teacher-provided graphic organizer for writing.

Case Study Summary

Table 1 outlines the accommodations and resources available to each student. Postsecondary education is an option and an appropriate goal for each of the three students. How they attain their postsecondary education goals might look different, and each student will likely access resources across tiers. The student's self-report and documentation provide us with the necessary information to determine reasonable and appropriate accommodations for postsecondary education. This interactive process exemplifies the application of data-driven decision-making within the postsecondary education context. Not all accommodations will remain suitable; some may look different, and new ones might even be considered. We will discuss this below. Each student's experience as a learner with a disability and the previous services they received allow us to make those meaningful referrals. Below, we consider how an Access Coordinator could make these connections with students.

Reaching out to the DRC

Marcy is an access coordinator at the local university's DRC. Along with working with enrolled students with disabilities, Marcy has informational meetings with interested students or answers questions when they call. Informational meetings include reviewing the accommodation process, learning about the student's educational experiences and services (e.g., IEP), answering their questions, and referring them to explore other resources (e.g., IPSE). Marcy also explains the interactive process, which officially begins when the student self-identifies as a student with a disability needing accommodations and is admitted to the university.

In the interactive process, Marcy will (a) get the student's self-report about their experience of disability, barriers within the learning environment, and history of accommodations, (b) review the student's external documentation (e.g., medical documents, IEP), and (c) develop her own impressions and conclusions as a professional (AHEAD, n.d.). There are

Table 1

Summary of Case Studies

Student	Primary Tier for Services	DRC/IPSE	Appropriate Accommodations for Postsecondary Education	Resources
Kelsey	I (Core)	N/A	Based on the information provided, accommodations are unlikely to be necessary.	Wellness resources Math tutoring center
Maria	II (Supplemental)	DRC	1.5x extra time on tests/ quizzes Noise-cancelling headphones Copy of PowerPoint slides Permission to record the class Access to course materials in advance	Academic support center Wellness resources Mental health resources
Alex	III (Intensive)	DRC and IPSE	2x extra time on tests/quizzes Preferential seating Copy of PowerPoint slides Note-taking services Text-to-speech Speech-to-text	Student involvement/clubs Writing support center Job coach provided by IPSE Academic coaching from IPSE Social opportunities through IPSE Independent living support from IPSE

Note. DRC = Disability Resource Center; IPSE = Inclusive Postsecondary Education Program

Table 2

Components of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support Comparison

MTSS Tier	K-12	Postsecondary Education
Tier I (Core)	Curriculum standards School-wide behavior supports Universal screening/assessments Extracurricular activities School counselors	General education requirements Student conduct codes Admissions data, retention data Student involvement/clubs Academic advisors
Tier II (Supplemental)	Supplemental instruction Progress monitoring Teacher referrals for support Accommodations	Remedial courses Academic recovery programs Faculty/staff referrals Accommodation plans
Tier III (Intensive)	Individualized instruction Multidisciplinary approach Therapeutic services Academic and non-academic support	Individual academic coaching Student intervention teams Individualized counseling Inclusive-postsecondary education programs

Note. MTSS = Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

many questions professionals can ask to obtain an accurate self -report, including the following: "What is your experience with (subject/skill)?" "What accommodations have been helpful or not helpful in the past?" and "What type of support did you have previously in school?" (AHEAD, n.d.).

Marcy's university has recently established a college program for students with IDD that has gained significant popularity among students and families. This is an IPSE program, as students take classes with typically enrolled peers, program-specific classes, engage in competitive integrated employment, and are involved in campus community activities with support from the program. Marcy has noticed in her calls that she often reflects on what the student or prospective family is telling her and whether the IPSE program would be an appropriate referral.

Kelsey Calls Marcy

Early in her day, Marcy receives a phone call from Kelsey. Kelsey shares with Marcy that although she is leaning toward enrolling in community college, she wants to explore her options at the university too. Marcy asks Kelsey about what she is looking for concerning resources and accommodations. Kelsey explains the current support she gets on her 504 plan due to her anxiety and depression. However, she has been working with a counselor for the last few years and feels like she has her mental health well-managed. Kelsey shares that she did not know why she still had her 504 plan, as she did not use it, but her parents continued to advocate for it. Kelsey shares that she may consider mental health resources at her future college, but is more interested in the academic support. She is concerned about the required math courses and knows that if she has access to tutoring, she could likely do well.

Marcy affirms Kelsey's efforts to manage her anxiety and depression. She also uses reflective listening to share with Kelsey that it sounds like accommodations may no longer be needed for her. Reflective listening is a technique Marcy uses to ensure she is accurately understanding the student's self-report (Braillon & Taiebi, 2020). Marcy provides Kelsey with information about her rights to receive or decline accommodations and shares the general process for requesting them if needed. Marcy also reflects that she heard Kelsey is interested in mental health and math tutoring. Marcy provides information about how counseling and tutoring are not accommodations, but could be resources available on college campuses. Marcy provides information about the well-being resources and math tutoring center at her university. She gives Kelsey ideas about questions she could ask the community college about the availability of similar services.

Maria Drops into Marcy's Office

Maria, a soon-to-be high school graduate, drops by the DRC. Marcy greets Maria and learns that Maria has committed to the university and will be starting in the fall. Maria shares with Marcy that she is nervous to make the transition from high school to college. She has been successful with the support she has received, but is concerned about the availability of accommodations and academic support in college. Maria shares some of her current accommodations and concerns about becoming dysregulated in class, managing her time, and overall feeling burned out.

Marcy assures Maria that accommodations are still available in college but that they may look different sometimes. Marcy shares general information about testing and note-taking accommodations, but notes that there is an official process to receive them. Marcy walks Maria through the process for formally requesting accommodations. Marcy also normalizes many of Maria's concerns and shares that many students worry about the stress of managing their academics, and that it is great she's being proactive and reaching out now. In addition to the accommodation information, Marcy shares information about the university's academic support center, wellness resources to help prevent burnout, and mental health resources in case more individualized support is needed.

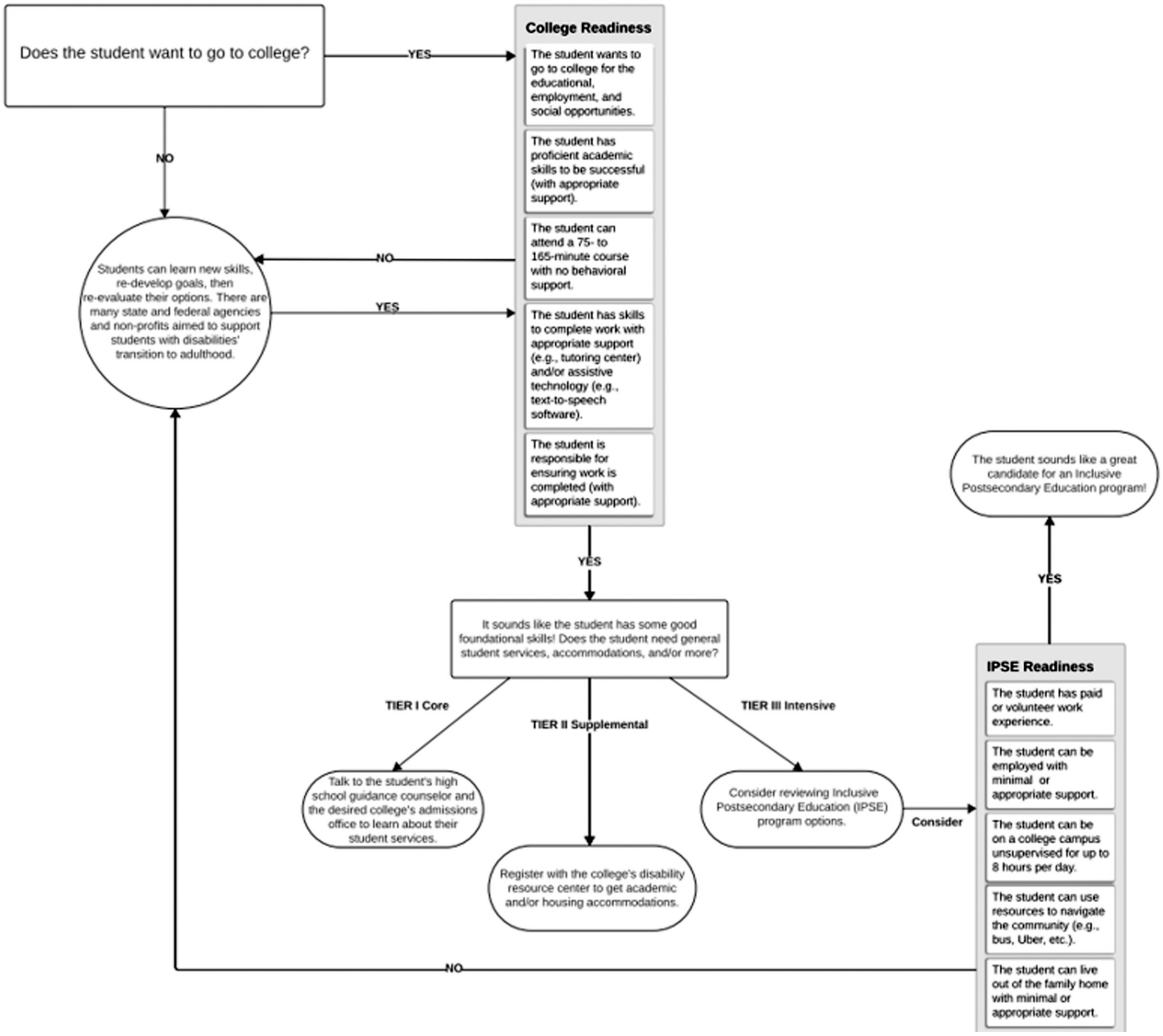
Alex and His Parents Meet Marcy

It is Marcy's last meeting of the day, and she gets to meet with a prospective student, Alex, and his parents. Alex and his parents had been emailing back and forth with Marcy since his graduation will be soon. In their communication, Marcy has learned that Alex has an intellectual disability, holds a part-time job, is graduating from his transition program, and has a goal to attend college. Alex is concerned about the courses and thinks he may start with one class at a time. Marcy has begun to wonder, based on these early observations, if Alex would be a good candidate for her university's IPSE program.

Marcy finally gets to meet Alex, and his parents join for the meeting. Marcy learns more about Alex's goals for himself. Alex appears to be a motivated student who wants to engage in both the academic and social opportunities the university has to offer. He also emphasizes the importance of meaningful, competitive employment for him. Alex tells Marcy about the services he has been receiving in his transition program, including building his skills in assistive technology. Marcy shares that there are many

Figure 3

Decision-Making Framework to Identify Needed Postsecondary Supports for Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities



resources and opportunities for college support. She gives Alex and his parents an overview of the differences in services between his IEP and the accommodations he could receive in college. Marcy can tell Alex is feeling overwhelmed, and he expresses that he does not think that would be enough, at least for his first couple of years.

Marcy uses reflective listening to share some of what appeared important to Alex: building academic skills, starting at a manageable pace, and attaining meaningful employment. Marcy asks if he or his parents have heard of IPSE programs, and they had, but were uncertain what they were. Marcy explains how IPSE programs are meant to intentionally support students in developing their academic and employment skills while increasing their independence and community involvement. Marcy explains that at her university's IPSE program, students take program-specific classes and elective classes with typically enrolled peers. She also shares how students can work with both academic and job coaches to develop their skills further.

Alex starts getting excited, and his parents share that it sounds like something that would be a good transition from what he is currently receiving. Alex also appreciated hearing that he would graduate with a certificate from the program, which he could include on his resume to enhance his employability. Marcy affirmed Alex's excitement and shares that even if he chooses to apply and was accepted, he would still be able to get accommodations through the DRC and access all other campus resources available to students. Marcy provides Alex and his parents with information on how to contact IPSE program staff if they have further questions. In a follow-up email, Marcy provides the IPSE program website, directions for registering with the DRC, and other campus resources.

Using Knowledge of Available Tiered Supports to Assist in College Planning

Figure 3 provides a decision-making framework for considering the types of support a student with a disability may require in college. This framework is designed for use by students, teachers, and other professionals who support them and is informed by the College and Career Readiness Framework proposed by Morningstar et al. (2023). In the fictional case studies above, Marcy engages in an interactive process to gather information and uses the decision-making framework to identify appropriate resources aligned with students' needs, recognizing the increasing levels of support provided in each tier. Parents are especially encouraged to be involved in the decision-making process for students with IDD, as they play a crucial role in setting expectations for college enrollment (Martinez et al., 2012). The most important factor in helping a student decide whether to attend college is ensuring that the student genuinely wants to attend. The pursuit of postsecondary education cannot be the goal of a parent or teacher; it must be the student's goal.

Establishing that the student is interested in postsecondary education is key to determining Ownership of Learning (Morningstar et al., 2023). It is certainly acceptable for a student not to be interested in attending college. If this is the case, the student can learn new skills, redevelop goals, and reevaluate their options at any time. Each state includes government and non-profit agencies to support individuals with disabilities. If the student decides in the future that they wish to attend college, that opportunity may still exist in the future, and the specific support the student needs can be explored. Importantly, while some IPSE programs do not have age limits, other programs do. Interested students and their families should verify whether the program(s) they are interested in have an age limit. In addition, college-based transition programs (i.e., programs where students are enrolled in both their school district and IPSE) will be restrained by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) or the state age limit for providing special education services.

If a student is interested in attending college, their readiness for college must be assessed. When doing so, the student's interest in college should be confirmed. That is, students should be interested in college not only for the social opportunities, but also for the educational, employment, and social (college is fun!) opportunities. Once a holistic interest in college has been established, other important considerations include determining the student to (a) have proficient academic skills for the coursework they plan to take (with appropriate support), (b) be able to attend a college class lasting a traditional amount of time (e.g., 75 to 165 minutes), (c) advocate for themselves by accessing resources (e.g., writing center) with appropriate support and assistive technology, and (d) be expected to be responsible for completing assignments (i.e., turn in their work on time) with appropriate support.

The areas considered in College Readiness (Figure 3) are mostly subjective. However, attending class can be viewed as an indicator of academic engagement, while skills related to academic tasks, work completion, and time management can be viewed as process-oriented skills (Morningstar et al., 2023). The most qualified people to answer the prompts in Figure 3 are the student themself, their parent(s) or guard-

ian(s), and the teachers or related professionals they have worked with. It is also expected that any individual preparing to transition to life after high school, in particular students with IDD, is still developing the skills related to these prompts. Identifying what is proficient and what is appropriate support is not always easy to determine. Suppose it is determined that the student has gaps regarding College Readiness skills. In that case, the decision-making framework guides teams back to the idea that students can learn new skills, redevelop goals, and reevaluate their options. Revisiting the possibility of attending college can occur in the future, and might include working with a state vocational rehabilitation agency, parent and information training center, or local nonprofit agency. For students who are near completing high school, it may be appropriate to consider extending special education services.

When it is decided that a student is holistically interested in attending college and possesses the necessary College Readiness skills to succeed, discussion of what types of support the student needs can be considered. This can also be thought of as identifying the resources that are most likely to facilitate the student in meeting their postsecondary education goals. For students without a disability, Tier I resources, such as the university library or tutoring center, are available. Some students with milder disabilities may only need these and similar resources to meet their postsecondary education goals as well. For students with mild or more moderate disabilities, registering with a disability resource center is recommended. Tier II resources, such as accommodations for taking classes (e.g., extra time on tests and note-taking services) and housing, may be necessary to meet postsecondary education goals.

We believe that IPSE programs are best conceptualized as representing Tier III resources of a postsecondary institution. Students with IDD can be successful with the more intensive person-centered supports provided by IPSE programs. However, in the spirit of college not being for everyone, several IPSE Readiness skills must be evaluated to determine if a student is a good fit for college. Responses to the prompts about these skills indicate the current level of independence in the community and workplace of students with IDD who are interested in college. Again, it is essential to note that the student, their parent(s)/guardian(s), and the teachers and related professionals they work with are in the best position to evaluate these skills.

In addition, a student's IEP in high school or transition program can be explicitly aligned with goals for postsecondary education success. This alignment makes it essential for school districts and IPSE programs to collaborate, preferably early, to consider if postsecondary education is an attainable goal. Skills related to college readiness (e.g., self-determination, career awareness) can start as early as elementary school when integrated into the classroom (Papay et al., 2015). For students who express an interest in college relatively late in high school, a decision by IEP teams to extend special education services past high school to work on college readiness goals may need to be considered.

Furthermore, it is once again necessary to acknowledge that phrases such as "minimum or appropriate support" are vague, and students are likely to be developing skills like navigating the community and living independently. If it is determined that a student "checks all the boxes" for IPSE Readiness, they might be a good fit for college. Importantly, if all boxes are not checked, the student can learn new skills, redevelop goals, and reevaluate their options.

Future Directions

As the field of IPSE continues to evolve, it is crucial to expand and deepen efforts that promote equitable access to postsecondary education for students with IDD. Such an expansion must continue in both K-12 and higher education. Workshops teaching the decision-making framework presented in this paper and examining its effects on students, parents, teachers, and other professionals in understanding the available postsecondary education resources should be pursued. Institutions of higher education (IHEs) can also take an active role in embedding tiered systems designed to support student retention and satisfactory academic progress. However, while the application of MTSS in K-12 settings is well established, its integration into postsecondary education remains conceptual, highlighting the need for empirical research. Such a call for research aligns with previous ones for increasing knowledge on supporting students with disabilities in higher education (Newman et al., 2021).

One particular barrier to implementing a tiered system of supports in higher education stems from the difference in focus of K-12 schools and IHEs for supporting students with disabilities. That is, the focus of K-12 schools is most often to provide the support that students with disabilities need to meet the same expectations as their same-grade peers without disabilities. The focus of DRCs is to provide students with disabilities access to the school's curriculum, while an essential focus of IHEs overall is to create a sense of belonging (Gopalan & Bradly, 2019) for students that facilitates retention and degree completion. While more attention is likely devoted in K-12 schools to considering data related to the success of

students with disabilities than is found in postsecondary settings, IHEs often have data indicating when the allocation of resources in Tier I (e.g., satisfactory academic progress, retention indicators, student outreach referrals), Tier II (e.g., progress in remedial courses, DRC information), and Tier III (e.g., school student intervention teams, IPSE program information) is insufficient to support a student. When the allocation of resources associated with a Tier is unsuccessful, meaningful referrals are necessary. It is important to note that individual units may not have access to all the data, but use the information they do have to make meaningful referrals. Additionally, multi-disciplinary teams within the IHE (e.g., student intervention teams) may be able to share enough appropriate information to make further decisions and support students.

A continuum of services (Deno, 1970; Murdock-Perriera et al., 2019) is necessary to support students with disabilities in K-12 settings and IHEs effectively. These resources are present in postsecondary education settings, and framing their use within a tiered model, such as MTSS, can provide a systematic and intentional approach to supporting student learning. Notably, IHEs likely do not require different or additional data collection or personnel to collect such data. Instead, by examining the resources the school offers and what "success" looks like for students accessing the resources available at specific tiers, it can be determined which resources are helping and where additional supports (i.e., different resources associated with a tier or the resources associated with a different tier) are needed. Unlike K-12 schools, where multiple metrics are available for making decisions about whether students are receiving the support they need, IHEs lack research that identifies the specific indicators from the data they collect to inform these decisions, which makes it an essential area of research to focus on moving forward.

Further, while research examining the experience of students with disabilities in college has increased considerably (Kimberly et al., 2019) and continues to do so, particularly for students with IDD (Carter & McCabe, 2021; Grigal & Papay, 2018; Grigal et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2021), research examining the experience of students with disabilities enrolled in an IHE explicitly integrating an MTSS model should be an area of interest given the benefits associated with the model in K-12 settings (Kearney et al., 2020; Hines et al., 2023; Morningstar et al., 2018; Raley et al., 2021). Such research could help normalize disability within the college experience, reduce stigma, and cultivate environments that anticipate and plan for diverse learning needs, as called for by Lombardi and Lalor (2023). Moreover, calls for training faculty in UDL (Hromalik et al., 2019; Reardon et al., 2019) are consistent with the need for improvements in universal instruction in higher education. By advancing research, training, and advocacy, the field can move toward more inclusive, data-informed, and person-centered postsecondary education systems.

Conclusion

The decision-making framework outlined above emphasizes student-centered planning, promotes self-determination, and helps IHEs align their services to foster academic success, independence, and access to postsecondary education for students with disabilities. As the conversation around equitable access to postsecondary education continues to evolve, particularly for students with IDD, future efforts can benefit from the intentional integration of a tiered structure of support aligned with the MTSS model in IHEs. The conceptual framework outlined in this practice paper represents a reimagining of how colleges and universities can better support all learners; however, further research is necessary to validate and refine this model. Specifically, there is a growing need to examine how students, families, educators, and institutional leaders understand and utilize decision-making frameworks aligned with MTSS. This includes exploring the types and levels of support that different stakeholders find most effective, feasible, and meaningful.

As research on the postsecondary experiences of students with disabilities continues to grow, particularly among students with IDD, there is an opportunity to build on this momentum by conducting empirical studies that assess the effectiveness and feasibility of MTSS-based supports in higher education. These investigations should also consider the perspectives of students with disabilities, as well as those of faculty and staff. Ultimately, creating a system wherein all students have access to the proper supports at the right time will require a shift in institutional culture and policy, one grounded in data, inclusivity, and the belief that every student deserves the opportunity to pursue postsecondary education.

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About the Authors

Dr. Jeremy W. Ford, NCSP, received his B.S. degree in psychology from Northland College (WI), his MS.Ed. and Ed.S. degrees in school psychology from the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, and his Ph.D. in Teaching and Learning (Special Education) from The University of Iowa. His experience includes working as a school psychologist for the now named Central Rivers Area Education Agency and serving as a Co-Chair for the NorthWest Inclusive Postsecondary Education Alliance. He is currently an associate professor of special education in the Department of Teaching, Learning, and Community Engagement at Boise State University. His research interests include curriculum-based measurement, explicit instruction, postsecondary transition and education for students with disabilities, Response to Intervention / Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, and instructional decision-making. He can be reached by email at: jwford@boisestate.edu.

Julia P. Gorman received her B.A. degree in elementary and special education and M.Ed. in early and special education from Boise State University. Her experience includes working as a graduate assistant in special education and inclusive postsecondary education research, and working as a special education teacher and department head in Idaho. She is currently the Associate Director of the Educational Access Center and a doctoral candidate at Boise State University. Her research interests include multi-tiered systems of support, inclusive postsecondary education, and disability and higher education. She can be reached by email at: juliagorman@boisestate.edu.

Inclusive Postsecondary Education: A Scoping Review of the Research and Recommendations for the Future

Beth Myers[1]
Sara Jo Soldovieri[1,3]
Katie Ducett[2]
Nikkia Borowski[1]
Teukie Martin[1]
Rebekah Wallis[1]
Ethan W. Jackson[1]
Cam Powell[1]
Camille Valdez [1]

Abstract

The field of inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) has grown significantly since its early inception, alongside a developing body of empirical and conceptual research. This scoping review was designed to catalog and analyze the entirety of peer-reviewed research in the field of inclusive postsecondary education available in English to explore themes, subtopics, methodologies, and trends over time. Guided by the PRISMA-ScR framework, we analyzed 498 peer-reviewed studies published between 1976 and 2024. A thematic review of the research was also conducted and is partially presented here. Overall findings indicate a substantial increase in IPSE research over time, as well as changes in focus from program development to more outcome- or support-focused research. Gaps in the research are identified, and recommendations for the field are provided.

Keywords: intellectual disability, inclusive postsecondary education, inclusive higher education, literature review

Introduction

Rationale

Inclusive Postsecondary Education (IPSE) is a rapidly growing field with a burgeoning research base (Whirley et al., 2020). However, there are recognized research gaps, and more research is needed, particularly to support strong practices in program design and full university inclusion (Madaus et al., 2024). While some have called the field of inclusive postsecondary education an emerging area of research (e.g., Smith-Hill et al., 2024; Hall et al., 2021), a case can be made that this field is no longer emerging and is now established. IPSE has a dedicated journal (*Journal of Inclusive Postsecondary Education*), an independent accreditation body (The Inclusive Higher Education Accreditation Council [IHEAC], 2024), a national professional conference since 2010 (The State of the Art Conference), a national coordinating center for 15 years (https://thinkcollege.net/projects/ncc), and international collaboration (JoinIn). A searchable list posted on the Think College website indicates over 139 peer-reviewed articles as resources, in addition to books or book chapters, legislation, presentations, guides, webinars, and other materials (Think College, n.d.). Many of these resources have contributed greatly to the development of inclusive higher education across the United States and beyond.

[1] Syracuse University; [2] SUNY Cortland; [3] The IDEAL School of Manhattan

IPSE refers to programs that support access to higher education for students with intellectual disability, often through alternative enrollment pathways. While programs can vary regarding course access, degrees and certificates, housing, and more, IPSE is college access with peers for students with intellectual disability (Stinnett et al., 2023). These programs have expanded in the past decades, reflecting increasing enrollment of students with intellectual disability in colleges and universities. However, the IPSE field is complex and evolving, with ongoing challenges around program design, equity, and outcomes. While several previous literature reviews have been done, none have explored the entire scope of IPSE research. Existing reviews instead address a specific span of years (such as Papay and Grigal's 2019 study examining research from 2010-2016, or Whirley et al.'s 2020 examination of papers from 2008-2018), or a specific subset of the literature, such as research on self-determination (Burke et al., 2024) or faculty attitudes (Alanazi & Gadelmawla, 2021). There is a need for a comprehensive synthesis of the literature to identify what is known and to highlight gaps, especially regarding the inclusion of diverse student populations and theoretical foundations for the work. The purpose of this scoping review is to provide an overview of existing IPSE research, summarizing key themes, methodologies, trends over time, and gaps in knowledge.

Objectives

This review addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the key research themes and subtopics in the field of IPSE?
2. What research designs and methodologies have been commonly used in IPSE research?
3. Are there any emerging trends or changes in the focus of IPSE research over time?
4. What are the identified gaps in the literature, and what areas require further research?

Methods

Protocol and Registration

We conducted a scoping review guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) guidelines to enhance methodological rigor and transparency (Page et al., 2021). A detailed protocol outlining the search strategy, inclusion criteria, and methods for data extraction and synthesis was developed a priori by the first and second authors.

Eligibility Criteria

For this review, we included peer-reviewed studies that focused specifically on postsecondary or higher education for students with intellectual disability. No date restrictions were imposed to comprehensively capture the historical and contemporary developments in the field.

Publications were excluded if they did not focus explicitly on college or university settings or on preparing students with intellectual disability for postsecondary education (e.g., programs exclusively covering K-12 or vocational training) or on the transition out of college after IPSE program completion. Studies focusing on disabilities other than intellectual disability were excluded to maintain specificity and relevance to the target population. Non-research publications such as journal introductions, speeches, or announcements were excluded to ensure methodological rigor. Non-empirical research, such as program descriptions and theoretical papers that met the peer-reviewed criteria, were included because they provide valuable insights into the breadth of the field, contributing to an understanding of inclusive higher education for individuals with intellectual disability. Articles not available in English were excluded due to practical constraints in translation resources. Dissertations, while not specifically excluded, did not pass through the peer-reviewed criteria during the database search.

Information Sources and Search

A comprehensive search was conducted across multiple databases, including Education Source, ERIC, PsycINFO, Web of Science, and Scopus, with coverage dates extending from database inception to the date of the final search. The search strategy was collaboratively developed with a librarian and included keywords related to intellectual disability, postsecondary or higher education, and inclusion. Database searches were performed independently by the first through fourth authors between January 11, 2024 and August 27, 2024, with an additional search executed on October 9, 2024. To ensure comprehensiveness, manual searches of reference lists and specialized resources, including the Think College resource library, were also performed. Additionally, on October 10, 2024, the second author manually reviewed and included relevant articles from volumes one through six of the *Journal of Inclusive Postsecondary Education* (JIPE). See Appendix A for the full electronic search strategy used, including all search terms and parameters to ensure transparency and reproducibility.

Selection of Sources of Evidence

All identified records were imported into the online Covidence software (Covidence, 2025) for deduplication and screening. Duplicates were first removed automatically by Covidence, followed by an additional manual check by the first and second authors to ensure completeness. The first and second authors independently conducted initial screening of titles and abstracts to assess each source's relevance to inclusive higher education involving students with intellectual disability. Articles focusing explicitly on inclusive higher education for students with intellectual disability were included for full-text review. Disagreements or discrepancies encountered during both screening phases (title/abstract and full-text review) were resolved through discussion and consensus meetings between the same two authors. A PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1) provides a summary of the selection process, including the number of sources assessed at each stage and reasons for exclusion. Although we did not calculate formal interrater reliability statistics, we used ongoing consistency checks throughout both screening phases, including independent dual review and structured consensus meetings to resolve discrepancies, aligning with recommended scoping review practices.

Data Charting Process and Data Items

A standardized data extraction form was developed to systematically chart key information from each included source of evidence. The form captured the following data fields: title of the study, stated research question(s) (or "not found" if not explicitly stated), country or location of the study, year of publication, and type of publication, including whether it was classified as research. For non-research publications, the form recorded the nature of the source (e.g., speech, introduction, letter). Methodological details were documented, including whether the approach was qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods, or other, along with specific methods used (e.g., interview, focus group, narrative, ethnography, survey, Delphi).

The use of a theoretical or conceptual framework was also recorded or marked as "not found" if not identified. The form included detailed study focus categories such as academics, program design or development and IPSE overview, policy, transition into or out of IPSE, employment, support (including peer support), social or student engagement and campus involvement, residential, campus, or independent living and life skills, and literature reviews. Additionally, population focus was documented, including students with intellectual disability, students without intellectual disability (peers), faculty, instructors, or staff, family members, parents, caregivers, and others as applicable.

Each source was also reviewed for any mention of race. A low threshold was used for this category; any mention of race or racial identity, including in participant demographic descriptions, was coded as "Yes." Inclusion in this category did not require that race be analyzed or discussed in the findings or interpretation. We adopted a low-threshold approach to race coding to ensure that the review captured even minimal attention to racial or ethnic identity, allowing us to document foundational patterns in whether race was acknowledged at all. However, we recognize that this approach may overlook deeper analyses of racialized experiences, intersectionality, or equity-oriented interpretations within studies. All authors contributed to piloting and refining the data extraction form to ensure clarity and consistency. Data charting was conducted in duplicate, with two authors independently extracting data from each article. Following this, the second author reviewed all entries for accuracy and consensus. Discrepancies were resolved through team discussion. This rigorous process ensured transparency and reliability in the extraction and synthesis of data. The full data extraction framework is presented in Appendix B.

Synthesis of Results

After reaching consensus on all extracted data, we applied both descriptive and thematic analysis techniques to synthesize the charted information. Descriptive analysis was used to summarize key study characteristics in aggregate form, including frequency of methodologies, publication years, and geographic distribution (see Results). We then conducted thematic analysis to identify and categorize studies based on primary focus or research questions. Within these categories, we identified overarching themes and subtopics and recorded frequency. This process allowed us to map the distribution and prominence of specific topics over time or geography. After discussion and modeling with the research team, each author analyzed one of the thematic groups for key insights, recurring patterns, areas of concentration or gaps, shifts in focus over time, or differences in topic emphasis by country. The first and second authors then cross-checked findings to ensure themes were analyzed consistently. This dual approach of quantifying descriptive features while qualitatively interpreting thematic content supported a more comprehensive understanding of the field. We identified themes through an iterative, team-based coding process in which all 498 studies were grouped by their primary focus, and these themes were selected because they represent the most con-

sistently recurring and foundational areas of IPSE research. This process ensured the themes reflected both the historical trajectory of the field and the issues most essential to understanding current practices, gaps, and future directions.

Results

A total of 14,736 records were identified through database searches. After the removal of 6,589 duplicates by Covidence and an additional 15 identified manually (total 6,604), 8,132 unique records remained for title and abstract screening. A substantial number of studies (n = 7,573) were excluded during this phase for not meeting the inclusion criteria. This was partly due to the initial inclusion of the search term "learning disability," used in the United Kingdom to label intellectual disability. However, in the United States context, "learning disability" refers to a different category of disability (e.g., dyslexia, dysgraphia). While the use of this term ensured relevant studies from the United Kingdom were captured, it also resulted in the inclusion of many unrelated articles which needed to be screened. The remaining 559 studies were retrieved in full-text form for further assessment. None were excluded due to retrieval issues. During full-text review, 61 studies were excluded for the following reasons: not focused on intellectual disability (n = 25), not classified as research (n = 21), not related to college or university settings (n = 4), not published in English (n = 1), or not specifically addressing college students with intellectual disability (n = 10). It should be noted that while 21 of these articles were included in peer-reviewed publications, they did not meet our criteria as research, even as early descriptive research and were subsequently excluded from this study. These manuscripts included items such as journal introductions, award announcements, and opinion pieces that did not include a research study. In total, 498 studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the final scoping review. A PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1) provides a visual summary of the study selection process, including reasons for exclusion at each stage.

Methodological Characteristics of Included Studies

A range of methodological approaches was found in the literature. Of the 498 articles included in this scoping review, 418 of 489 (85%) were identified as empirical studies while the remaining publications comprised conceptual analyses, program descriptions, or briefs. Among the empirical studies, qualitative methods were the most frequently used, appearing in 198 studies (47%). Common qualitative designs included case studies, individual and focus group interviews, observations, and ethnographic or narrative analyses. Many of these studies focused on collecting qualitative data from students with intellectual disability, peer mentors, or faculty members to explore personal experiences and perspectives within inclusive college settings.

Quantitative methodologies were used in 148 studies (35%) and utilized surveys, standardized assessments, or statistical analyses to examine patterns, outcomes, or group differences. Surveys were especially common, with data collected from students, program staff, or families to measure outcomes and perceptions. Some studies used correlational or regression analyses to examine predictors of success or to analyze large secondary datasets, such as national longitudinal studies. A smaller subset of studies used experimental or quasi-experimental design, such as single-subject experimental design to evaluate specific interventions, and pre/post-test or quasi-experimental group designs to assess program effectiveness. Few randomized controlled trials were found and can be considered rare in IPSE research.

Mixed methods approaches were utilized in 72 studies (17%), combining quantitative and qualitative methods. These studies often merged survey or performance data with interview or focus group findings. This approach was especially common in program evaluation research, where studies included quantitative indicators such as graduation rates or employment outcomes alongside qualitative information from participants about their experience.

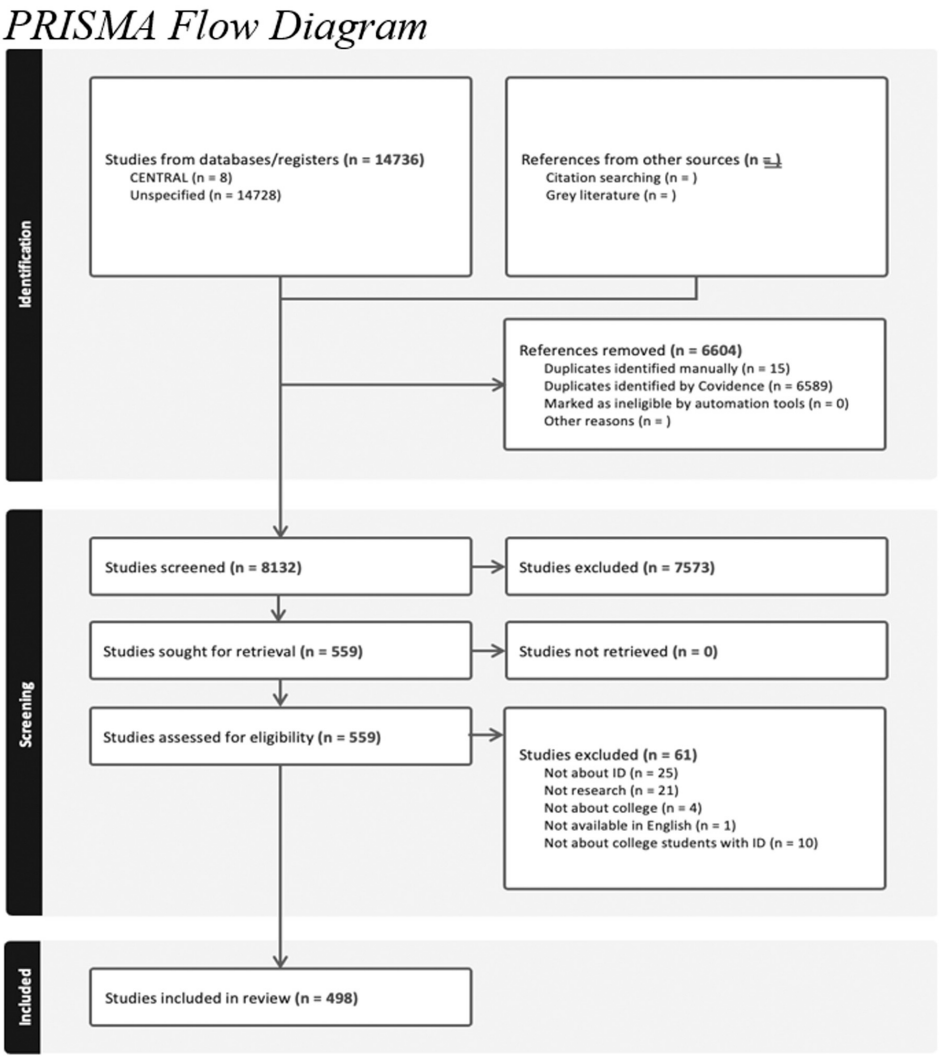
Finally, 80 studies (16%) were categorized as "other" or "not specified." These included publications where the methodology was either unclear or not reported, as well as non-empirical manuscripts such as program descriptions, theoretical commentaries, practice briefs, and conceptual papers.

IPSE Research Over Time

The volume of published research on IPSE has increased significantly over the past several decades. The earliest identified publication included in this review dates to 1976 and was the only article from that decade. Only two articles were identified from the 1980s, published in 1981 and 1988. While publication activity increased over time, there was sparse scholarly activity in the IPSE field through the 1990s and 2000s, with only 42 published studies in these two decades. Between 2010 and 2019, 208 articles were published, representing a sharp and sustained increase in literature production within the field. Publication numbers fluctuated slightly but remained

Figure 1

Results and Characteristics of Individual Sources of Evidence



consistently high, with approximately 42 to 57 studies published annually between 2020 and 2024. One outlier in the data was a study pre-published in 2024 with an actual publication date of 2025. See Table 2 for the number of research publications by year.

In addition to the increase in research volume, the thematic focus of IPSE scholarship has broadened and evolved as the field has matured. Publications prior to 2009 were focused predominantly on program design and development. The most frequently addressed topics included program overviews, structural components, and the transition of students with intellectual disability into postsecondary education. Early IPSE literature documented program establishment and feasibility, often making the case that college was even possible for students with intellectual disability. This early focus reflects the field's developmental stage, in which researchers and practitioners were engaged in documenting pilot initiatives and conceptualizing potential IPSE models.

Entering the 2010s, the scope of IPSE research began to expand beyond program development and proof of concept. During this time, there was an increase in studies examining academic access and transition planning. Research also emerged on support systems and social inclusion, including investigations into peer mentoring and the social experiences of students with intellectual disability. The focus began to shift from program engagement and success to student engagement and success.

Between 2016 and 2020, the scope of IPSE research expanded considerably, reflecting the field's growth and evolution. Program design was no longer primary, as research examining academic engage-

ment, social inclusion, support services, independent living, and post-graduation outcomes increased. Notably, research addressing academic components of IPSE nearly doubled compared to the earlier period, and investigations into peer support and social experiences within college settings also grew significantly. Career readiness was also a major focus, with research examining employment outcomes.

The years between 2021 and 2024 have continued the trend toward greater diversification in IPSE research. During this period, studies focusing on support strategies, including technological aids, mental health services, and social engagement have become as prevalent as those examining program design. In the most recent years' publications, there has been an emerging critical perspective, for example, questioning how inclusive current programs truly are, analyzing representation issues (who is being served by IPSE), and calling for more student-centered and equitable approaches. This shift indicates a broadening of focus from simply "establishing" IPSE programs to critically evaluating their quality and inclusiveness. Moreover, issues of equity and diversity have begun to receive increased scholarly attention. Recent studies have explored topics such as racial diversity within IPSE programs and the implementation of culturally responsive practices, areas that were largely overlooked in earlier decades.

The data reveal a notable increase in the number of studies referencing race or including racial demographics after 2018. Prior to 2004, none of the included studies acknowledged the racial or cultural backgrounds of participants, and such considerations remained infrequent throughout the early 2000s. However, between 2021 and 2024, approximately half of the studies published each year included some mention of race or ethnicity. It is important to clarify that the criteria for identifying a study as addressing race were broad: studies were counted if they referenced racial or ethnic identity in any form, including mentions limited to participant demographic information. In many cases, these variables were not integrated into the study's analysis, interpretation, or discussion. See Table 1, which shows the increase in research including race over time.

Thematic Findings

From the content analysis of 498 publications, articles were categorized by major thematic groups often overlapping with one another. Table 3 summarizes the primary themes and their frequency of occurrence in the literature; it should be noted that many studies addressed multiple themes and categorization reflects as such.

Program Design and Development

The research team coded 161 articles focused on program design, program development, and overviews of IPSE, beginning in 1981 (Little, 1981). Of these, 119 articles were focused on programs in the United States, 11 in Ireland, three articles in unknown countries, and the remaining 28 articles were focused on programs in 16 other countries. Of the 161 total articles, the two most prevalent methodological approaches were qualitative (66) and non-systematic or descriptive research (52), with the remaining 43 articles employing a quantitative research design.

The literature also highlighted how purposeful inclusive program design with an integrated support system can support academic access, development, community involvement, professional training, and interpersonal connections (Hafner et al., 2011; Little, 1981). Additionally, inclusive programming was associated with a positive impact on social connectivity, student learning, decision-making, emotional recognition, and self-determination (Becht et al., 2020; Hafner et al., 2011; Little, 1981).

Academics

The research team coded 116 articles focusing on academics. Of those, 71% were focused on the United States, 8.8% on Ireland, and 2.6% on places not named. The other 17.6% of articles were focused on 13 other countries. The methods of these articles consisted of the following: 54 qualitative, 40 quantitative, 12 mixed methods, and 10 that were not systematic research. Research articles about the topic of academics have increased over time, from one article in 2001 to 11 articles in 2024. The majority of the articles about academics (n = 91, 78%) had no explicit theoretical framework, highlighting a gap across the field. Theories were mentioned in a few articles, such as grounded theory, Universal Design for Learning, and self-determination theory (e.g., Kamperman, 2020; Kubiak, 2024; Paiewonsky, 2011; Potts et al., 2024; Smith & Myers, 2024). Forty-four of 116 articles focused on academics specifically mentioned race.

The three main categories of research related to academics were (a) how to increase content area knowledge of students with intellectual disability (e.g., Carpenter, 2015; Madden et al., 2021), (b) studies discussing faculty pedagogy and classroom accommodations (e.g., Brendli et al., 2021), and (c) studies analyzing the attitudes of various stakeholders towards the inclusion of people with intellectual disability in college (e.g., Kubiak, 2015a, 2015b).

Table 1

IPSE Studies by Method

Method	Frequency Used	Percent of Studies
Qualitative	198	~ 40%
Quantitative	148	~30%
Mixed Method	72	~14%
Other[1]	80	~16%

Note. [1] Non-empirical but peer-reviewed work and publications with unspecified methods

Table 2

Year Published and Inclusion of Race

Year	Number of Studies Published	Articles Mentioning Race	Year	Number of Studies Published	Articles Mentioning Race
1976	1	0	2010	4	3
1981	1	0	2011	9	5
1988	1	0	2012	22	5
1991	1	0	2013	18	5
1992	2	0	2014	14	8
1993	1	0	2015	23	8
1994	3	0	2016	16	6
1996	1	0	2017	29	11
2001	3	0	2018	34	19
2002	1	0	2019	39	15
2003	1	0	2020	46	16
2004	9	2	2021	57	26
2006	4	0	2022	42	19
2007	2	0	2023	43	22
2008	6	4	2024	54	31
2009	8	0	2025	1	1

Table 3

Research Themes and Frequencies

Research Theme	Frequency of Studies
Program design & development (models, implementation, overviews)	161
Academics (course access, curriculum modifications, performance)	116
Support (peer mentoring, coaching, accommodations)	102
Social or student engagement & campus involvement	88
Residential/campus living/independent living	75
Employment (career development during & after IPSE)	73
Transition into IPSE (college preparation, K–12 transition planning)	72
Transition out of IPSE (post-program outcomes, life after college)	54
Literature review	24
Policy	14

Notes. $n = 498$ studies included in the scoping review. Studies could be categorized under more than one theme.

Support

The research team identified 102 studies focused on supports for students with intellectual disability. Studies on this topic date back to 1991 (Strully & Strully, 1991). Of the 102 articles reviewed, 88 were from the United States. Other countries included Spain ($n = 3$), Canada ($n = 2$), Ireland ($n = 2$), Australia ($n = 3$), Sweden ($n = 1$), Turkey ($n = 1$), and Saudi Arabia ($n = 1$). The majority of studies focused on students with intellectual disability ($n = 66$); however, far fewer studies centered on the lived experiences of IPSE participants ($n = 26$). Remaining articles focused on peers without intellectual disability ($n = 35$), staff and faculty ($n = 29$), and family, guardians, and caregivers ($n = 11$). The methods consisted of 50 qualitative, 28 quantitative, and 13 mixed-methods studies. The other eight articles were narrative or non-empirical works. Fifty of 102 articles focused on support specifically mentioned race.

Of the reviewed articles, peer mentoring was the most extensively researched support strategy ($n = 46$; e.g., Fisher et al., 2020; McLendon et al., 2024). Peer mentors were mentioned individually and in combination with every other support studied; identified outcomes of peer mentoring included increased confidence, motivation, and feelings of belonging for both IPSE students and peer mentors (Fisher et al., 2020) as well as improved academic skills such as note-taking and vocabulary comprehension (Giust & Valle-Riestra, 2017). Other supports present in this category were family support systems ($n = 17$; e.g., Plotner & May, 2019; Rodríguez Herrero et al., 2021), teaching supports ($n = 15$; e.g., Shikarpurya et al., 2024), communication supports ($n = 14$; e.g., Fisher et al., 2020; Watts et al., 2023), assistive technology/online alternatives ($n = 13$; e.g., Lansey et al., 2022; Wright et al., 2022), and hands-on experiences or workshops ($n = 11$). Less named supports included wrap-around or UDL services, sexual health and intimacy supports, and faith-related support (e.g., Stinnett et al., 2023). Few articles focused on embedded supports on the college campus, including counseling and the disability resources office, which was identified as a gap in the research.

Social Engagement and Campus Involvement

The research team coded 88 articles focusing on topics related to socialization, student engagement, and campus involvement. Seventy-one were focused on the United States, five on Spain, one had no country named, and the other 11 were focused on seven other countries. The methods of these articles consisted of 51 qualitative, 23 quantitative, 13 mixed methods, and one that was not systematic research. The earliest articles in this category were published in 2003 (Hamill, 2003) and then in 2009 (Carroll et al., 2009), with one article in both years. This long early gap in this area of research indicates the field had not yet matured; many articles at the time were still focused on program development (see discussion below). Most of the articles ($n = 58$) about social/student engagement and campus involvement did not

have a theoretical framework. Those that did were framed with theories such as self-determination theory (e.g., Francis et al., 2018), social model of disability (Oakes et al., 2020), grounded theory (e.g., Smith Hill et al., 2025), contact theory (e.g., Shikarpurya et al., 2024), Disability Studies in Education (e.g., Ducett & Myers, 2023), and Tierney's Individual Institutional Culture Framework (Oakes et al., 2020). Notably, 50 articles (57%) within this topic mentioned race.

Within this topic area, articles fell within three major categories: intervention, program design/historical context, and attitudes. Interventions, found in a quarter of articles in this overall topic area, focused on outcomes for students with intellectual disability explicitly related to social skills and social networks (e.g., Eisenman et al., 2013; Kearney & Torres, 2022; Spencer et al., 2021). The largest group of articles within this overall category (n = 49) highlighted the perspectives of stakeholders towards the inclusion of people with intellectual disability in college. The attitudes of people with intellectual disability towards IPSE programs were examined in 17 of these articles (e.g., Ducett & Myers, 2023), with over half of the articles discussing the attitudes of other stakeholders towards inclusion in college, most commonly faculty and peers (e.g., Griffin et al., 2012).

Residential, Campus, and Independent Living

The research team reviewed 75 articles focused on residential, campus, and community living, as well as work explicitly labeled as addressing "life skills" or daily living. The earliest publication in this category examined success after graduation for students with intellectual disability was in 1994 (Levine & Edgar, 1994). Most studies were conducted within the United States (n = 69), with other notable settings including Ireland (n = 1), Australia (n = 1), Mexico (n = 1), and the United Kingdom (n = 1). Two articles did not list a location. Sixty-eight articles focused on students with intellectual disability; however, fewer studies (n = 29) sought feedback and collaboration from individuals with intellectual disability. Interestingly, studies that centered on the effectiveness of a particular method on students with intellectual disability (n = 27) were nearly as common as those that centered on the lived experiences of IPSE students (e.g., Baker et al., 2019). Faculty (n = 11), peers (n = 9), and family, guardians, and caregivers (n = 4) were also primary areas of focus. The most common methods were quantitative (n = 38), qualitative (n = 22), and mixed methods (n = 9). Six additional articles were not academic in nature. Thirty-three of 75 articles focused on living specifically mentioned race.

The majority of studies (n = 47) focused on students with intellectual disability acquiring skills to help them become more self-reliant, including executive function, emotional regulation, and task completion. Studies emphasizing choice and self-determination were also common (n = 25). Community integration (n = 21), exercise, health and recreation (n = 15), and building confidence (n = 11) were also popular themes. Lesser named trends revolved around engaging in adult behavior (e.g., alcohol and sexual activity) (n = 8) and emergency preparedness (n = 4). Less frequently discussed was the location of residence for IPSE students: campus living (n = 15) was the most named, followed by community living (n = 6), and living with family (n = 5).

Across this theme, constructs such as executive functioning, emotional regulation, and community integration were operationalized through both quantitative measures (e.g., standardized assessments, surveys, or task-based performance indicators) and qualitative reports describing students' lived experiences and skill development.

Employment

Seventy-three articles focused on employment. Most of this research (90%, n = 65) took place in the United States. Forty of the articles used quantitative research methods, seventeen used qualitative approaches, eight were mixed methods studies, while the remaining eight were conceptual works. Other types of articles included program review papers (e.g., Wilson et al., 2017) and conceptual articles (e.g., Harmon et al., 2021). Within this employment dataset, articles discussed topics such as program design (n = 12), support (n = 8), social engagement (n = 7), and academics (n = 5) (e.g., Devine et al., 2022; Fisher et al., 2020). Forty-nine of the articles focused primarily on students with intellectual disability (e.g., Roberts-Dahm & Dukes, 2024), two focused on faculty and staff (e.g., Chezan et al., 2018), and one centered on the perspectives of parents (Yuan et al., 2018). The remaining studies examined programming (Harmon et al., 2021); students and faculty (e.g., Scheef et al., 2018); students, faculty, and families (e.g., Kelley & Prohn, 2019), students without intellectual disability (e.g., Carter et al., 2019); and other combinations of students and stakeholders. Thirty-three of 73 articles focused on employment specifically mentioned race.

Common trends among the articles in this thematic dataset include identification and development of employment skills, employment outcomes, and predictors of employment. Employment skills addressed in the literature include interviewing skills, decision-making skills, self-advocacy skills, and workplace communication skills. Studies on employment

outcomes found participation in an IPSE program was correlated with higher rates of paid employment (e.g., Grigal et al., 2019; Spencer et al., 2021).

Transition Into IPSE

The research team identified 72 studies focused on transitioning into IPSE, with the first article published in 1988 (Westwood & Mitchell, 1988). Of these articles, the majority took place in the United States (n = 60). Other countries included Canada (n = 4), United Kingdom (n = 3), Spain (n = 1), Saudi Arabia (n = 1), Ireland (n = 1), New Zealand (n = 1), and Taiwan (n = 1). Two of the included studies did not specify a location. Many of the studies in this theme (n = 59) had the students with intellectual disability as the population focus, although far fewer included these individuals as participants or co-researchers (note exceptions such as Scanlon & Doyle, 2021). Other common subjects included families and caregivers (n = 23) and faculty or teachers (n = 20). The most common method used was quantitative (n = 25), closely followed by qualitative (n = 20), mixed methods (n = 13), while the remaining articles constituted conceptual papers (n = 14). Only eight of the identified articles (11%) made use of a theoretical framework in analysis, with the rest (n = 64) not engaging with theory in their research. This limited engagement with theory constitutes a striking gap and a notable limitation within the field, underscoring the need for more conceptually grounded research in IPSE. Thirty of the 72 articles focused on the transition into IPSE specifically mentioned race.

Among the identified studies, transition planning and postsecondary goal setting was the most common focus (e.g., Baer et al., 2011), with studies reporting on predictive factors of postsecondary education access (e.g., Andresen, 2024), followed by best practices and examinations of collaboration between families, students, and professionals (e.g., Pearman et al., 2004). Studies examining family perspectives, preparation, and experiences (e.g., Graff et al., 2019) were also common in this category.

Transition out of IPSE and Post-IPSE

A total of 54 articles were coded with a focus on transitioning out of IPSE or post-IPSE. Among these articles (n = 41) (76%) were conducted in the United States. Other countries include the United Kingdom (n = 3), Australia (n = 2), Iceland (n = 1), Ireland (n = 1), New Zealand (n = 1), Saudi Arabia (n = 1), Spain (n = 1), Taiwan (n = 1). The remaining two articles did not report a study location. The year of publication began in 1988. Twenty-five of these studies employed quantitative methods, seventeen utilized qualitative methods, and seven used mixed methods. Additional types of articles within this theme included conceptual papers (e.g., Cook, 2017) and policy overviews (Talapatra & Snider, 2022). Of the 54 articles on transition out of IPSE, 27 mentioned race (50%).

The variety of topics discussed in the articles about transition post-IPSE included employment (e.g., Rillotta et al., 2024), independent living skills (Ross et al., 2013), transitioning into IPSE programs (e.g., Kelley & Prohn, 2019), IPSE program development (e.g., Caniglia & Michall, 2018), post-IPSE outcomes (Grigal et al., 2019), and social engagement (Spencer et al., 2021). Thirty-one of these studies concentrated on students with intellectual disability (e.g., Lansey et al., 2024), four focused on parents and caregivers of students with intellectual disability (e.g., Yuan et al., 2018), and 19 investigated students with intellectual disability alongside other populations of faculty or peers (e.g., Butler et al., 2016). Employment outcomes were best documented in this area, while quality of life, community participation, and community living remained under-researched.

Literature Reviews

A total of 24 literature reviews were identified by the research team, ranging in publication dates from 2001 (Neubert et al., 2001) to 2024 (Taconet et al., 2024). While not every literature review was restricted to a specific country, the United States was the most specified country (n = 17), with the remaining articles (n = 7) being unspecified. These articles were overwhelmingly qualitative (n = 23), encompassing both scoping and systematic reviews, with one quantitative exception (Woods-Groves et al., 2023). The majority of the studies (n = 17) identified students with intellectual disability as the population focus, with other foci including family and caregivers (n = 3), faculty (n = 4), and students without intellectual disability (n = 3). Only seven of the identified studies engaged with race.

The two most common topics among the literature reviews included reviews of interventions (n = 6) and IPSE overviews and state of the field (n = 6). Most of the reviews of interventions were related to academics, such as literacy, assistive technology, augmented reality, communication, and independent living (e.g., Jdaitawi & Kan'an, 2022; Shelton et al., 2019; Taconet et al., 2024). The literature reviews focused on IPSE broadly discussed access to IPSE, academic progress, or funding (e.g., Becht et al., 2020). Other literature reviews centered on stakeholder attitudes toward IPSE, but overwhelmingly did not include student perspectives (e.g., Carter & McCabe, 2021).

Policy

A total of 14 articles were classified by the research team as policy-related, with publication dates beginning in 2012 (e.g., Mock & Love, 2012). The majority of these articles originated from the United States (n = 11), with the remaining articles coming from Australia (n = 1), Brazil (n = 1), and New Zealand (n = 1). Of these 14 articles, nine were empirical studies, with five employing qualitative methodologies, three using quantitative methodologies, and one adopting mixed methods. The remaining five articles consisted of policy briefs and conceptual discussions grounded in policy frameworks. The predominant topic among these articles focused on policy implementation (n = 10), while a smaller subset explored interactions of policy across systems and agencies (n = 3), and one article presented a literature review. Notably, none of the identified articles explicitly addressed race, a critical gap in informing equity-based policy in the field. Additionally, there was an evident absence of student voices and perspectives in these articles, highlighting a disconnect between policy-making processes and the experiences of the student community being served.

Discussion and Recommendations

This scoping review reflects a near 50-year history of university supports for students with intellectual disability, with a total of 498 research articles found in the field of inclusive postsecondary education dating back to 1976. Eleven early articles were published prior to 2000, with the majority of research published after 2010. Both the total number of publications and the year span of research is notable for a field that is generally considered "first generation." It is not surprising, however, that the surge in publications corresponds with the growing recognition and support for IPSE programs, particularly following the passage of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) of 2008 and the first Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) awardees in 2010.

The research also follows a predictable trajectory of the field: While early research focused primarily on program design and development, research topics became more refined over time. This research is aligned with previous literature reviews, reflecting similar findings such as Papay and Grigal (2019), Whirley et al., (2020), Lee and Taylor (2022), and Thoma et al., (2011). Some of the reviews focused on a particular set of dates, such as 2010-2016 (Papay & Grigal, 2019), or 2001-2010 (Thoma et al., 2011). Key themes, such as academics and employment, have been explored with more specialized research in recent years, and an understanding of student supports and services is reflected in the recent literature, mirroring the broader research of higher education (Blankstein & Wolff-Eisenberg, 2020; Braxton, 2009). Some of the literature reviews found also examined a particular specialization within the IPSE field, such as assistive technology (Woods-Groves et al., 2023), faculty attitudes (Alanazi & Gadelmawla, 2021; Li, 2020), academic access (Becht et al., 2020), self-determination (Burke et al., 2024), literacy interventions (Hua et al., 2019), or health disparities (Oakes et al., 2020).

The acceleration of IPSE scholarship after 2010 reflects not only increased program activity, but also a shift in the structural conditions that made such research possible. The passage of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (2008) and the establishment of TPSID model funding did more than expand program numbers, they reshaped the research agenda by defining the outcomes that counted, incentivizing demonstration of effectiveness, and channeling institutional attention toward particular models of inclusion. The funding from the TPSID program not only impacted program development, but also much of the research that was developed after 2010 in the field (Papay & Grigal, 2019; Grigal et al., 2021). As a result, the post-2010 literature is not simply more refined, it is shaped by policy priorities that privileged program evaluation, measurable outcomes, and proof-of-concept narratives (Papay & Grigal, 2019). Recognizing this influence clarifies why certain topics, such as program development, employment outcomes, and academic access, became dominant (Papay & Grigal, 2019; Whirley et al., 2020), while others, including equity, remained underexamined. Situating the growth of the field in this policy context moves the discussion beyond description and toward a critical account of how IPSE research has been produced, constrained, and directed over time.

Theoretical Foundations

The limited use of explicit theoretical frameworks was also noted. In the coded dataset, only 20.5% of studies (n = 102) employed a guiding theory, while approximately 80% were coded as having "no theory found," indicating the authors did not identify a theoretical foundation for their research. This absence suggests much of the IPSE literature remains exploratory or descriptive in nature, lacking a cohesive conceptual lens. While such a finding is expected early in a field's development, the continued dearth of theoretical framing may raise concerns about the cumulative ability to build a generalizable and connected knowledge base. Although only 20.5% of

studies employed an explicit theoretical framework, the significance of this gap extends far beyond the number itself. The limited use of theory reflects a broader pattern in which IPSE research often prioritizes documenting practices over building coherent conceptual foundations. Without shared or clearly articulated frameworks, findings accumulate in isolation, making it difficult to compare studies, interrogate assumptions, or develop cumulative knowledge about what drives meaningful inclusion. This absence of theory also constrains the field's ability to engage critically with power, identity, and structures that shape postsecondary experiences.

In short, the scarcity of theoretical grounding does not simply describe the literature, it limits its coherence, its interpretive depth, and its potential to guide transformative practice. While 20% of studies provided a theoretical framework, few studies offer some explicit guidance for theoretical framing for the field. One example, Rooney-Kron et al., (2022), is specific to considerations of student risk in IPSE. Other common frameworks include grounded theory (Prohn, et al., 2019), Disability Studies in Education (Myers & Smith, 2025; Soldovieri & Myers, 2025), self-determination theory (Torres, et al., 2023), and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Scott, et al., 2017).

Intersectionality and Access

The consideration of diversity and access within the IPSE research remains limited. Notable recent publications on this topic include Andresen's (2024) study of minoritized representation in IPSE (e.g., gender, race, socioeconomics, ethnicity, foster care status, and housing status), and Harmon et al., (2021) in their paper examining social justice and systems approaches to inclusive higher education. Although recent years have shown some improvement—with approximately half of studies published between 2021 and 2024 referencing race in some capacity—this area continues to require attention. Importantly, only 7 of the 24 literature reviews we identified (29%) included any engagement with race, even at the level of basic demographic reporting. This limited attention to racial equity represents a significant gap in the existing synthesis work and warrants explicit acknowledgment as a limitation of the field. Additionally, because "literature review" encompasses a wide spectrum of rigor, we specified in the Results section which reviews were systematic, scoping, or narrative to provide greater clarity for readers.

The omission of race extends to other intersectional student identities as well. While we specifically coded for mentions of race, such mentions were typically an entry to other demographics, such as ethnicity or socioeconomic background. Studies rarely addressed students who are English language learners, for example, or students who do not use spoken language as their primary mode of communication. Those with additional intersecting disabilities (e.g., intellectual disability and autistic or Deaf), or other intersectional identities (e.g., gender and disability) were rarely specified in the literature. These topics are seldom addressed in depth in the IPSE research currently, underscoring the need for more substantive engagement with issues of equity and intersectionality in future studies. Despite this recognized need, current federal funding models may further restrict research in this area.

While our dataset shows that race and other equity-related identities are rarely addressed in depth, the issue extends beyond the absence of demographic reporting. The uneven engagement with equity reflects deeper structural patterns in the field—whose experiences are centered, whose perspectives are systematically overlooked, and which questions researchers position as worthy of study. Rather than listing underrepresented groups, it is more accurate, and more productive, to acknowledge that IPSE research has seldom interrogated how race, gender, language, socioeconomic status, disability intersections, or other dimensions of identity shape access to, participation in, or outcomes of inclusive postsecondary education. These omissions are not merely descriptive gaps; they reflect broader systemic inequities within higher education, and then also in IPSE, that are reproduced in the research itself. Recognizing these patterns is essential if the field is to move toward a more equity-oriented research agenda.

Geographic and Cultural Contexts

The overwhelming majority of IPSE research included in this study were conducted in the United States. According to this study, about 80% of the publications are U.S.-based. Only a portion of studies came from other countries (e.g., Canada, Ireland, Australia, Spain) each representing a small number of publications. While some of this gap is likely due to the English-availability constraint, this large percentage also indicates a gap in knowledge about how inclusive postsecondary education operates in different cultural or national contexts. With Ireland as a notable exception, few countries outside of the United States have had policy support for IPSE like HEOA 2008, or national funding models like the TPSID initiative. This is, perhaps, why the United States can cite over 300 PSE programs and most countries in Europe have zero or one (JoinIn, 2020). Even less is known in the U.S. research context about IPSE in Asia, Africa, or South America.

Although approximately 80% of the identified studies were conducted in the United States, the implications of this imbalance extend far beyond uneven representation. A U.S.-centric evidence base means that the field may be disproportionately shaped by American policy structures, funding mechanisms, disability classifications, and higher education norms. As a result, the research risks reinforcing assumptions that are context-specific, such as reliance on TPSID funding models, IDEA-aligned transition practices, or U.S. definitions of intellectual disability, while obscuring alternative models emerging in other countries. This concentration of scholarship narrows the conceptual horizons of the field by limiting opportunities to compare policy environments, understand cultural variation in inclusion, or examine how IPSE may function within different social welfare systems. The geographic skew, therefore, introduces a structural bias into the literature, constraining the field's ability to build a genuinely international, context-responsive understanding of inclusive postsecondary education.

There may be unique challenges, policy frameworks, or program models internationally that are under-documented in the literature, or that we have not yet found due to language constraints. Countries with alternative policy frameworks may offer valuable perspectives that may be models for future development. For example, most countries outside of the United States have signed the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and approach disability from a human rights perspective. While this perspective may look different in practice than in policy or theory, it provides a baseline for inclusion in educational systems and community spaces. Similarly, many countries outside of the United States provide university access at low or no cost to all. Costs can have both positive and negative implications for potential IPSE programming. On the one hand, low-cost access is ideal, especially for a population that has been historically impoverished like the disabled. On the other hand, initial access to off-limit spaces is often easiest when it can be granted to those who are willing to pay and is either cost-neutral or income-generating for the institution. This relationship between cost and access is perhaps one of the reasons why the few programs that do exist in Europe are small in student numbers.

Centering Student Voice

Although 78% of the articles were about students with intellectual disability, only 15% of the articles gathered the experiences of students with intellectual disability or students' own voices. Instead, most of these student-focused articles looked at data about students with intellectual disability or intervention outcomes, with a few notable exceptions (e.g., Kubiak, 2015a, 2015b). This absence is not merely numerical; it reflects a structural pattern in which research about students is routinely privileged over research *with* students. The result, as Smith-Hill et al., (2025) point to in their research, is an evidence base shaped largely by proxy perspectives, limiting the field's ability to understand self-advocacy, agency, and lived experience from the vantage point of those most directly impacted. This gap was apparent in the literature.

This finding suggests that much of what we know about the college experiences of students with intellectual disability is from the perspectives of others, and not the students themselves. Notable examples of this come from the research on peer partnership and peer mentoring; the vast majority of studies are on the experiences of the peer partners (e.g. Travers & Carter, 2022), as though a driving factor of program research was to prove to university communities that matriculated peers were not harmed, and could actually potentially benefit, from IPSE programs. This tendency to omit the perspectives of students with intellectual disability from research is, perhaps, exacerbated by research requirements such as IRB participation, guardianship limitations in research, and other systemic issues, despite recent projects to support change (see RE4All). Recognition and funding for this type of research may also be limited.

Implications for Disability Support Professionals

Traditional university disability services are primarily based on an accommodations model to help students access the regular academic curriculum. While students with intellectual disability should have access to these accommodation supports, they often need direct and sustained support that may exceed what universities are accustomed to offering (Harrison & Holmes, 2014). This scoping review identified program design in 161 studies, the most common topic throughout IPSE literature, reflecting the field's recognition that students with intellectual disability need intentional consideration in the disability support space. These factors include alternative pathways to admissions and course access, curriculum modifications in addition to accommodations, and support in social, residential, and career preparation spheres of college life (Plotner & Marshall, 2014; Papay et al., 2017). Data from TPSID programs affirm the importance of connecting students with existing campus resources, including disability supports (Papay et al., 2017), and more recent data from Grigal et al., (2025) continue to track how programs provide support beyond traditional accommodations. This review identified 102 studies

on support, including 42 studies on peer mentorship. Disability support professionals should consider not only the development of peer mentorship opportunities on college campuses but also opening these opportunities to students with intellectual disability in an empowering approach, considering the wealth of experiences that students with intellectual disability bring to the university community.

Recommendations for the Field

Although research on employment and post-IPSE trajectories has expanded, the evidence base remains largely short-term, limiting what can be inferred about the durability or broader impact of IPSE participation. The near absence of longitudinal studies means that the field lacks the ability to trace whether early employment gains translate into sustained labor-market participation, career advancement, wage growth, or stable independent living. Without multiyear follow-up, current findings may overestimate program effectiveness or overlook later challenges that only emerge once students leave structured campus environments. This gap also restricts the field's capacity to evaluate how broader systems, such as public benefits, workplace discrimination, or regional labor markets, shape the long-term lives of IPSE graduates. In this sense, the limitation is not simply an evidentiary gap but a constraint on the field's theoretical and practical understanding of what inclusion means beyond the college years.

As reflected in this review, research on post-program outcomes such as employment, independent living, and long-term quality of life for IPSE graduates has increased but remains relatively limited in scope. Sheppard-Jones et al. (2018) argue for more longitudinal data to follow students across multiple years and multiple measures, considering a broad range of factors. The research demonstrates a need for more longitudinal studies that track students beyond their time in college. While employment is a frequently studied outcome, much of the current research is cross-sectional or short-term, focusing on employment status at the time of graduation or shortly thereafter. Longitudinal studies could offer critical insights such as stability of employment outcomes five or ten years post-graduation, IPSE alumni experiences with career advancement, or increased earnings over time. Similarly, long-term data on independent living such as housing stability, community participation, quality of life, and self-determination are lacking. Importantly, future research should also account for the broader systems and structures that influence these outcomes, an area largely underexplored in the existing literature. For example, limitations associated with Social Security Income (SSI) and other public benefits and their effects on graduates' ability to obtain, sustain, and advance in employment will be critical issues to address for the field. Current funding for national data collection, such as that through the TPSID program, is the only long-term IPSE data collection mechanism in the United States, and cohorts change every five years. There is no current federal funding for long-term longitudinal data collection in IPSE, nor the existence of IPSE programs beyond TPSIDs. National database funding, similar to that of the Education Longitudinal Study (ELS) or others housed through the National Center for Education Statistics, is important for researchers in the field.

Despite notable advancements, research on social inclusion and student support services within IPSE programs remains inconsistent, especially within specific campus sub-environments (e.g., participation in student organizations, Greek life, or study abroad programs). While the existence of support practices is documented, more research is needed to determine best practices in providing support, as well as the balance between support and autonomy. Sexuality and relationship education represent another critical yet underexplored dimension of adult life within the IPSE research literature. Future research should expand to include additional topics related to sexuality, relationships, and personal agency.

Research on social inclusion and sexuality highlights important domains of student life, but the existing evidence base remains uneven (Hill et al., 2023). Studies consistently document that opportunities for social connection, campus engagement, and relationship education are central to students' experiences in IPSE programs. However, empirical work in these areas is still limited in scope and depth, making it difficult to draw firm conclusions about how specific supports shape these outcomes. Where gaps appear, such as the lack of research on counseling services, campus-based supports, or sexuality and relationship education, our analysis reflects the absence of data rather than an endorsement of particular program models. Distinguishing between what is empirically established and what remains underexamined clarifies the contours of the literature and avoids conflating evidence with aspirational practice. This more precise delineation underscores the need for continued inquiry into how social belonging and relationship autonomy are cultivated within inclusive postsecondary settings. For sustainable growth, establishing a research agenda to guide policy and practice is essential (Brady, 2021).

Additionally, despite recognition that early planning is crucial, there is little research following stu-

dents longitudinally from elementary, middle, or high school into college to identify predictors of success in IPSE. The absence of research that traces students from K-12 through their postsecondary transitions reflects a deeper structural omission within the field. Without longitudinal designs that connect early educational experiences, transition practices, and college participation, the field lacks the analytic foundation needed to understand how opportunity is shaped or constrained long before students arrive on campus. This gap also obscures the systemic barriers that determine who is positioned to access IPSE programs in the first place. Evidence from related areas of disability and education research suggests that inequities in school resources, referral processes, family advocacy burdens, and local policy landscapes shape postsecondary pathways in patterned ways. Yet, these dynamics remain largely unexamined in IPSE scholarship. Addressing this omission is not simply a matter of adding another research topic; it is essential for developing a field-wide account of how inclusion is produced or foreclosed across students' educational trajectories.

Limitations

This scoping review has several limitations. The review did not seek to evaluate the quality of every research study included, nor was this review a full meta-analysis of data in the field. The validity of the evidence included cannot be guaranteed, even though the search was limited to peer-reviewed studies. Another notable limitation is that the search was narrowed to studies available in English, which likely excluded valuable work that was not available in English, and is particularly important to consider given the U.S.-centric skew of the results. Additionally, the requirement that included studies be published in peer-reviewed journals means that we did not consider other potentially valuable works or published in community practice spaces or other sources. These studies might have been particularly useful, especially in the early years of the field. Some relevant literature may have been missed because of limited search terms or selected databases, despite efforts of the research team to find all relevant articles. Additionally, no information about research funding was sought or reported. Given the aim of this study was to find and synthesize the entire scope of the field, any missed research would affect, and potentially limit, the presented results.

Conclusion

Research in the field of inclusive postsecondary education has grown significantly since it first appeared in the literature in 1976. This study definitively shows that what was considered a fledgling field is now well established, with a near 50-year research trajectory comprised of over 498 peer-reviewed research articles published in English. We recognize the significance of documenting not only the exponential increase in the amount of research in the field, but the breadth and depth of topics addressed in the studies.

While the research on IPSE has become more refined over time, this study also points to the need for more attention to issues of identity, access, and outcomes. Issues of access, including who accesses IPSE programs and how, are rare. Closer examination is needed, considering student identity markers as well as university and program metrics, such as geographic availability, as well as long-term success, on both the student level (examining, for instance, not only employment but also community inclusion and quality of life) and program level (such as sustainability). By targeting these gaps, future research can promote a more inclusive postsecondary landscape.

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About the Authors

Beth A. Myers is the Lawrence B. Taishoff Associate Professor of Inclusive Higher Education at Syracuse University, where she teaches in the inclusive teacher education program, serves as the Associate Director for the Center on Disability and Inclusion, and oversees the university's InclusiveU program. Dr. Myers received her doctoral degree from the University of Pennsylvania and focuses her current research and practice on inclusive postsecondary education. She chairs the State of the Art Conference in Inclusive Postsecondary Education and serves as Co-Editor in Chief of the *Journal of Inclusive Postsecondary Education*. Dr Myers can be reached at bemyers@syr.edu.

Sara Jo Soldovieri (she/her) received her B.A. in Inclusive Elementary and Special Education, her Master's degree in Inclusive Secondary Special Education, and her Ph.D. in Inclusive Special Education from Syracuse University. Her experience includes working with students with complex support needs in inclusive settings from pre-K through higher education, serving as an inclusive educator, administrator, advocate, and consultant internationally. She is currently an adjunct professor at Syracuse University's School of Education and the Director of the Dylan Program at the IDEAL School of Manhattan. Her research interests include parent advocacy in and around special education and educational systems, students with complex support needs in inclusive settings from pre-K through higher education, and educational systems and policy. She can be reached by email at sjsoldov@syr.edu.

Katie Ducett received her B.S. and M.S. degrees in Chemistry, Special Education, and Literacy Instruction from Nazareth University and her Ph.D. in Special/Inclusive Education from Syracuse University. She worked as a reading specialist in the Rochester City School District and taught courses at Nazareth University and Syracuse University. She is currently an assistant professor in the Department of Foundations and Social Advocacy at SUNY Cortland. Her research interests include inclusive postsecondary education and inclusive qualitative research. She can be reached by email at: katie.ducett@cortland.edu.

Nikkia D Borowski received her B.A. and M.A. degrees in linguistics and Inclusive Special Education from Syracuse University and is a Ph.D. Candidate at Syracuse University. Her research interests include inclusive education access and communication opportunities for students with complex support needs. She can be reached by email at ndborows@syr.edu.

Teukie Martin received their B.A. degree in Comparative American Studies from Oberlin College and their masters degree from Syracuse University. They are currently a doctoral candidate in Inclusive Education and working as instructor of record and graduate assistant in the department of Women's and Gender Studies. Their research interests include bringing together mad, queer, and abolitionist frameworks to education. They can be reached by email at: jmart111@syr.edu.

Rebekah Wallis received her B.A.E. in special education and M.Ed. in special education and disability services from the University of North Florida. Her experience includes working as a special education teacher and district administrator in Duval County Public Schools. She is currently a Ph.D. student in inclusive special education at Syracuse University. Her research focuses on inclusion, equity and social justice in education, teacher preparation, and disability studies. She can be reached by email at: rwallis@syr.edu.

Ethan W. Jackson received his B.A. degree in Deaf education/special education from Ball State University and M.A. in cross-cultural and international education from Bowling Green State University. Ethan worked as a special education teacher in Indiana, Ohio, and Vermont. He is currently a Ph.D. student at Syracuse University studying inclusive special education. His research interest includes Critical Access Studies, disability in the global south, and epistemic injustice. He can be reached by email at ejacks25@syr.edu.

Cam Powell received his B.A. degree in psychology and master's in education from Springfield College. His experience includes working as an elementary special education teacher for Springfield Public Schools. He is currently a doctoral student in the Inclusive Special Education department at Syracuse University. His research interests include disability in athletics, play-based learning, and peer mentoring. He can be reached by email at: cpowel14@syr.edu.

Camille Valdez is a fourth-year undergraduate student pursuing her B.A. in Anthropology from Syracuse University. Her experience includes working as a research assistant for Syracuse University School of Education and interning in the archives of local museums and government agencies. Her research interests include the intersections of culture, information, and education, and their accessibility to the public. She can be reached by email at: camillevaldez1005@gmail.com.

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Appendix A
Education Source Database Terms

Concept 1: Search Terms for intellectual disability
"intellectual disability" OR
"neurodevelopmental disorders" OR
"learning disabilities" OR
"developmental disabilities"

Keywords:
"intellectual disabilit*" OR
"learning disabilit*" OR
"learning disorder*" OR
"down syndrome" OR
"developmental disabilit*" OR
"people with intellectual disabilit*" OR
"people with developmental disabilit*" OR

Concept 2: Search terms for College
Subject heading (only 1 maps to a descriptor)
College OR
University OR
"Higher education" OR
"postsecondary education" OR
"Dual enrollment" OR
IPSE

Keywords:
"College" OR
"Universit*" OR
"Higher educat*"
"postsecondary educat*" OR
"Dual enrollment" OR
"IPSE"

English only

Search 1
- concept 1 subject headings AND concept 2 subject headings

Search 2
- concept 1 key words (Title) AND concept 2 keywords (title)

Search 3
- concept 1 key words (ab) AND concept 2 keywords (title)

Search 4
- concept 1 key words (Title) AND concept 2 keywords (ab)

Search 5
- concept 1 key words (ab) AND concept 2 keywords (ab)

Appendix B
Data Extraction Framework

Study Identification
- Title of Study:
- Research Question(s): (If not available, write "not found")
- Location of Study (Country):
- Year Published:

Research Information
- Is this research?
  - Yes
  - No (specify type, e.g., speech, introduction, letter)
  - Other (please specify)
- Methodology:
  - Qualitative (specify type e.g., interviews, focus groups, ethnography)
  - Quantitative (specify type e.g., statistical analysis)
  - Mixed Method (specify components)
  - Other (please specify)
- Theory Used: (If not available, write "not found")

Study Focus (Select all that apply)
- Academics
- Program design/development/IPSE overview
- Policy
- Transition into IPSE/Preparing for IPSE
- Transition out of IPSE/Post IPSE
- Employment
- Support (including peer support)
- Social/Student engagement/Campus involvement
- Residential/Campus living/Independent living/Life Skills
- Literature Reviews
- Other (please specify)

Population Focus (Select all that apply)
- Students with Intellectual Disabilities (ID)
- Students without ID (peers)

Faculty/Instructors/Staff
- Family/Parents/Caregivers
- Other (please specify)

Additional Information
- Any mention of race?
  - Yes
  - No

Mental Health Strategies for College Students with Intellectual Disability: A Scoping Review

Rebecca B. Smith Hill[1]
Chelsea VanHorn Stinnett[2]

Abstract

Accessing mental health support in college presents distinct challenges for students with intellectual disability enrolled in postsecondary education (PSE) programs. Common barriers include inconsistent access to campus counseling services, dependence on PSE program staff for help during stressful situations, and insufficient staff training to effectively address students' mental health concerns. Even when university or community counseling is available, emerging adults with intellectual disability often struggle to find providers who are knowledgeable and equipped to meet their specific and often nuanced needs (Ee et al., 2022; Whittle et al., 2018). Researchers conducted a scoping literature review to identify effective strategies to meet the mental health needs of adults with intellectual disability published within the past decade, to provide information that can be used to prepare both PSE program staff and college-based mental health counselors to meet the needs of this growing student population.

Keywords: intellectual disability, mental health, inclusive higher education, counseling

Mental health concerns for emerging adults have increased significantly in the past decade. The *National Survey on Drug Use and Health* (*N*= 611,880), a nationally representative sample of adolescents and adults, identified a drastic rise in mental health disorders for young adults aged 18-25, with no parallel increase in adults over 26 years old (Twenge et al., 2019). Emerging adulthood is categorized as a distinct period of human development between adolescence and young adulthood encompassing the late teens to the 20s when identity exploration is typically prioritized (Arnett, 2000). Emerging adulthood often includes the pursuit of postsecondary education.

As more young adults pursue higher education, attention has increasingly turned to the experiences of students with disabilities, particularly those with intellectual disability. In the past two decades, there has been a significant increase in the number of postsecondary education (PSE) programs for emerging adults with intellectual disability at college and university campuses in the United States (Grigal et al., 2024). While the number of students with intellectual disability on college campuses continues to grow, so does the concern around effectively addressing the number of college students struggling with mental health disorders, including those with unique needs related to their disability. Researchers in the field have long understood the prevalence of comorbid mental health concerns for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (Mazza et al., 2020; White et al., 2005; Whitney et al., 2019). These mental health diagnoses often include anxiety, depression, and other behavioral disorders (Whitney et al., 2019). Reichard and colleagues (2019) estimate the rates of co-occurring mental health conditions in adults with intellectual disability may be as high as 59%.

Given these statistics, the intersection of emerging adulthood, higher education, and disability highlights a critical need for tailored strategies. The growing prevalence of mental health needs among emerging adults coupled with what is known about the ubiquity of mental health issues for emerging adults with intellectual disability indicate a need for strategies validated to support mental health for this population.

[1] *University of South Carolina;* [2] *University of Massachusetts- Boston*

However, current research shows that adults with intellectual disability may not be receiving adequate mental health care (Lineberry et al., 2023). Ee and colleagues (2022) found in their systematic review of 14 relevant studies, that mental health professionals often felt concerned about their level of training and preparedness to work with people with intellectual disability and recognized the exigency for specialized training, resources, and support to effectively meet the needs of this group.

A lack of preparation among professionals is compounded by systemic and historical barriers faced by people with intellectual disability. In addition to many mental health professionals being inadequately trained to support individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (Feather & Carlson, 2019), efforts to develop targeted services and strategies for this population have been limited, largely due to a lack of recognition of their mental health needs in primary care settings (McCarthy & Boyd, 2002). Due to inherent ableism in society and the resulting history of exclusion from everyday life, individuals with intellectual disability have often been over-protected and infantilized, and opportunities to participate in typical experiences in non-segregated environments are often withheld. Kramer and colleagues (2019) found that young adults with intellectual disability and co-occurring mental health conditions reported that their interactions with doctors and other professionals often worsened their mental health. This was due to a lack of respect—such as being talked about rather than spoken to—and inadequate communication skills on the part of the professionals.

These concerns extend into higher education, where students with disabilities frequently experience disproportionate mental health challenges. Solís García and colleagues (2024) examined trends and challenges in mental health of university students with disabilities in their recent systematic review of the literature. One particular study in the review, (McLeod et al. 2019), examined a large sample of college students with autism compared to peers without autism and found that those with autism had significantly higher rates of mental health issues (67% compared to 45% for students without disabilities). The college students with autism had a significantly higher prevalence of depression, anxiety, and a threefold likelihood of suicide attempts. They were also more likely to use mental health services compared to peers without autism (McLeod, 2019). Their findings highlight the importance of implementing specific and nuanced strategies that address the unique needs of college students with developmental disabilities.

Transitioning to college can be an overwhelming experience for any student, let alone students with intellectual disability who historically come from highly segregated high school settings (Wehmeyer et al., 2021). Francis and colleagues (2022) richly describe the college transition experiences of 12 students with disabilities and co-occurring mental health disorders and found that they routinely do not receive appropriate support in college and often felt low self-esteem, shame, self-doubt, and isolation. While PSE program options have expanded access to inclusive higher education environments, the mental health needs of college students with intellectual disability are likely not met by PSE program staff, disability services, or college-based mental health counselors (CBMHCs; Fields et al., 2024; McKnight-Lizotte et al., 2021).

At the same time, evidence from national surveys underscores the growing strain on campus counseling services. According to the American College Health Association's national survey of over 33,000 undergraduate students, 20% were experiencing serious psychological distress (2024). While the majority of four-year colleges and universities in the United States offer some form of mental health or counseling services for enrolled students (Aluri et al., 2025), it is unclear how many of those have formally accredited counseling and psychological services (CAPS) programs (Danzman, 2019). Of the 381 respondents to the 2023-2024 Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors survey, 65% reported receiving psychiatric services in the counseling center, elsewhere on campus, or both (Bruns et al., 2025). Yet, national data from 2009 to 2015 indicate that the demand for mental health services on college campuses has increased five times faster than student enrollment, leaving counseling centers struggling to meet the growing need (EAB, 2019).

Moreover, existing campus counseling services may not fully address the needs of students with disabilities. Findings from a study of 197,000 mental health support-seeking college students with and without disability suggest that campus-based counseling may be less effective at addressing and ameliorating academic and psychological stress in students with disabilities in comparison to their peers (O'Shea et al., 2021). Additionally, while most college counseling centers employ at least some licensed professional counselors, often counseling services are provided by graduate students pursuing degrees in counseling. The gap between counseling services provided and student need for services is often wide and therapy offered is often short-term (AUCCCD, 2025).

Taken together, these gaps in research, practice, and service delivery point to the need for a focused

review, which was inspired by the growing need to effectively meet the mental health needs of college students with intellectual disability. The purpose of the scoping review described herein is to better understand the landscape of research related to mental health strategies to support emerging adults with intellectual disability in college. Specifically, we aim to answer the following research question: *What have research findings from the past decade revealed about effective mental health strategies for supporting emerging adults with intellectual disability?*

Method

The purpose of this review is to identify and describe articles related to mental health strategies or practices to support emerging adults with intellectual disability in college within the literature base. A scoping review methodology was chosen as the most appropriate to meet the exploratory objectives of this study. As described by Munn et al. (2018), a scoping review does not engage in critical appraisal of study rigor and is a broader overview of a research topic. Scoping reviews often consist of broad inclusion criteria, systematic search procedures, a transparent coding framework, and clear reporting (Munn et al., 2018).

The research team for this scoping review has a combined 40 years working in varied settings with youth and young adults with intellectual disability, primarily secondary and PSE settings. We used the guidelines for Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR; Trico et al., 2018) to compile this description of the literature on mental health strategies for emerging adults with intellectual disability in college. The search and coding strategy used by our team are described in the following sections.

Search Strategy and Criteria

To identify potentially eligible articles, we searched four databases: Academic Search Complete, APA PsychINFO, ERIC, and Medline. The search terms used were "intellectual disab*" AND "mental health" AND "counseling" AND "practice." The Boolean operator "AND" was utilized between each of the four search terms. We set the time parameters to include articles published between January 1, 2014, and April 30, 2025, ensuring a full ten years of review and including the most recent research available at the time of the database search (May 2025). We restricted the search to peer-reviewed articles (i.e., no dissertations or book reviews) and articles written in English.

The results of our search are depicted visually in Figure 1. The database search resulted in a total of 139 retrieved articles once duplicates were automatically removed by the database search tool. The research team conducted a check of the initial 139 database-identified articles to ensure there were no duplicates and that the titles and abstracts of the remaining retrieved papers included the keywords "intellectual disability" AND "mental health" AND "counseling" AND "practice" and met other criteria, described above (i.e., peer-reviewed, written in English). At this phase of screening, we reviewed the articles independently to ensure each met our initial search parameters, which resulted in the exclusion of an additional 19 articles. Additional articles excluded included all types of literature reviews (systematic, scoping, and meta-analyses), one book review, one non-English article, and one additional duplicate, bringing the total number of articles screened for inclusion and exclusion to 120.

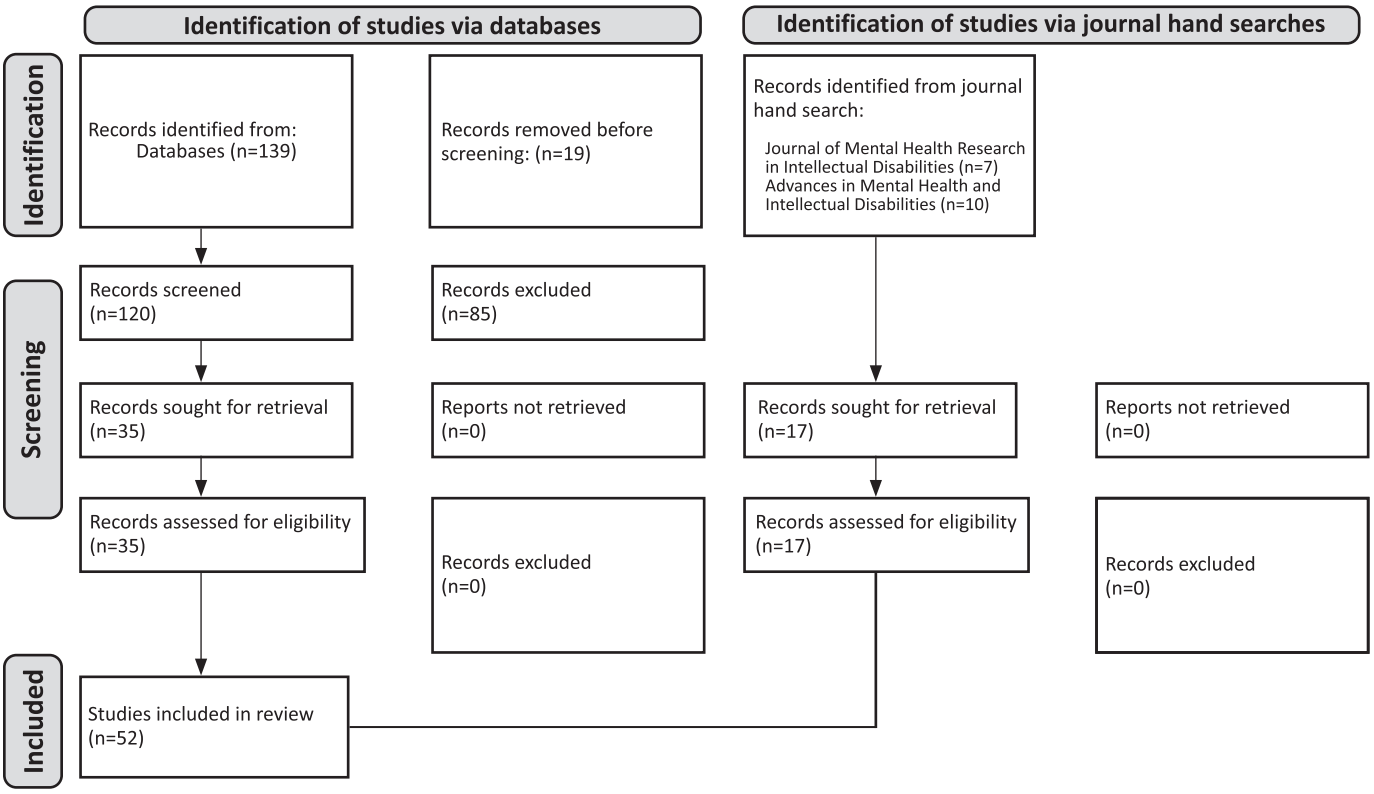
In addition to the database search, we conducted a systematic hand search of two journals, *Advances in Mental Health Care and Intellectual Disabilities* (AMHC) and *Journal of Mental Health Research in Intellectual Disabilities* (JMHRID) for the same time period to ensure all relevant articles were included. This search yielded an additional ten articles in *AMHC* and an additional seven articles in *JMHRID* meeting search criteria. These additional 17 articles were carried forward to phase two of screening.

For the next phase of screening, the research team screened the articles to determine if they (a) included adults in the population of interest, (b) presented a primary focus on intellectual disability (ID) and/or developmental disability (DD; IDD; only abbreviated in accompanying tables), and (c) were empirical. Intellectual and developmental disabilities are disorders that are usually present at birth and that negatively affect the trajectory of the individual's physical, intellectual, and/or emotional development. The term developmental disabilities is a broader category of often lifelong disability that can be intellectual, physical, or both. "IDD" is the term often used to describe situations in which intellectual disability and other disabilities are present (Institute on Community Integration, 2025).

We excluded articles whose primary focus was not adults (i.e. children or adolescents only), whose primary focus was disabilities other than intellectual disability, developmental disabilities, or both, and that were conceptual, theoretical, a review of any type (systematic, scoping, or literature), or otherwise not empirical articles. This round of review was completed by having each author screen half of the remaining articles to determine these factors. Each author then checked the articles that were screened by the other author to obtain an inter-coder agreement of 92%.

Figure 1

PRISMA Flow Diagram for the Scoping Review Process



Any disagreements between the two authors were resolved through closer examination of the article and author discussion. As a result of this screening process, 85 additional articles were deemed not eligible for further review, leaving a total of 52 articles retained for full review, based on the second phase inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Coding Process

The 52 included peer-reviewed articles each examined mental health counseling practices for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities in the extant literature. After the initial inclusion/exclusion process was complete, the authors independently coded the retained articles across four domains of interest: (a) demographic focus, including disability focus (intellectual disability, developmental disability, or both) and whether the article is specific to college students or not; (b) details a described strategy or practice, including whether the strategy or practice is required to be administered by a licensed professional (e.g., counselor, psychologist) or is a strictly medical intervention (e.g., pharmaceutical-based), or, if no specific therapeutic strategy is described, is a (c) process-related consideration (e.g., policy or systems-level examination); or (d) assessment-related (i.e., diagnostic).

These categories were developed by the team to give a detailed picture of the landscape of the current literature related to mental health strategies to support adults with intellectual disability in college. The focus on the disability category allowed us to understand whether the study was specific to a certain group of individuals—those with intellectual disability, those with developmental disability, or both. Identifying whether the article details a specific intervention or strategy and whether it has to be administered or overseen by a licensed professional allowed us to identify practical solutions that can be implemented by non-licensed/certified health providers, like PSE program staff. The distinction between process and assessment related allowed us to understand what can be used to address systemic issues to accessing mental health services and which tools can be used to assess needs—two important tools for advancing effective practices in meeting the mental health needs of college students with intellectual disability. A re-

liability check of this stage of coding by comparing each authors' codes of 100% of the articles resulted in 90% agreement across researchers. Discrepancies were discussed until 100% agreement was reached.

Findings

Demographic Focus

A primary coding characteristic included whether the article focused on adults with intellectual disability, developmental disabilities, or both. Among the 52 retained articles, 27 focused solely on intellectual disability, six solely on developmental disabilities, and 18 on both. An example of an article that focused on both intellectual and developmental disabilities is Lunsky and colleagues' (2022) "The Development and Pilot Evaluation of ECHO Mental Health for Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities." In this study, researchers piloted and evaluated a 12-week intervention to support the mental health of 62 participants with intellectual and developmental disabilities and co-occurring psychiatric disorders.

Another aspect of interest in coding was whether the article was specifically focused on college students or not. Of the 52 included articles, only 6% (n = 3) were focused on students in college. These articles are: Digman's (2021) "Lost Voices Part 1: A Narrative Case Study of Two Young Men with Learning Disabilities Disclosing Experiences of Sexual, Emotional and Physical Abuse," Fields et al.'s (2024) "Access and Barriers to Mental Health Resources for College Students in an Inclusive Postsecondary Education (IPSE) Program: A Qualitative Inquiry," and Harrison and Holmes' (2014) "Mild Intellectual Disability at the Postsecondary Level: Results of a Survey of Disability Service Offices."

Digman (2021) details the experiences of two men with intellectual disability who were college students (referred to as learning disability in the United Kingdom), who were sexually, emotionally, and mentally abused by the individuals charged with supporting them. Implications for support professionals, police, legal services, and educators on how to support sexual assault survivors in college are discussed. Fields et al. (2024) reveals the experiences of college students with intellectual disability in navigating mental health resources. They found that participants used resources and services from their PSE program and their institute of higher education (IHE) with varying degrees of satisfaction. They used family and friends as resources when navigating mental health needs and acknowledged the importance of identifying and meeting their emotional needs yet frequently navigate barriers to mental health resources. Harrison and Holmes (2014) report findings from a survey of Canadian IHE disability service office (DSO) staff who were investigating enrolled students with the label of mild intellectual disability. Findings from 34 institutions found that less than 25% of students seeking DSO services were able to succeed at a postsecondary level as well as indications that there was little consistency across institutions regarding criteria used to determine a mild intellectual disability label.

Specific Strategies or Practices

A primary focus of coding for the articles included in this scoping review was related to the specific counseling or mental health strategies or practices discussed or described. As such, we coded articles based on their inclusion of a description of a specific strategy or practice. Of the 52 articles, 44% (n = 23) included at least a description of a specific strategy or practice intended to address the mental health needs of adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. An example of an article describing a specific mental health strategy is McMahon and colleagues' (2021) "Supporting Mindfulness with Technology in Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities," which described an intervention utilizing a wearable device designed to provide neurofeedback to help promote mindfulness in high school and college-enrolled young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

There is a noticeable shift toward technology-mediated and remote delivery (telehealth, online mood programs, virtual reality, wearable devices, and phone therapy) among the described strategies that offer promise for scalability and reach, particularly where local professionals are scarce. Table 1 shows multiple examples (e.g., virtual mental health education, online mood management, virtual reality for anxiety reduction, wearable-supported mindfulness). Yet this trend coexists with a reliance on licensed/medical professionals for many interventions, which constrains scalability and access in low-resource settings or on campuses lacking providers.

Table 1 lists all specific mental health-related strategies or practices identified within the articles coded for this review. Interventions are highly heterogeneous, ranging from brief self-help and peer-mentor approaches to specialized therapies (CBT, ACT, EMDR, art therapy) and medical/pharmacological interventions. This diversity is a strength (multiple pathways to support), but it complicates synthesis as few interventions have standardized protocols or large, controlled trials, and outcome measures vary widely. Several studies emphasized the need for standardized protocols and professional capacity building to ensure fidelity (Helverschou et al. 2021; Witwer et al., 2024).

Table 1

Strategies to Support College Students with Mental Health Needs

Article	Population	License/ Medical Intervention?	Brief Description
Kim et al. (2025)	ID	No	Garden-based healing and learning program for young adults with ID.
Acton et al. (2024)	ID	No	Virtual reality to reduce anxiety and build capacity to access mental healthcare for adults with ID.
Busfield et al. (2024)	ID	Yes	Compassion-focused therapy groups for adults with ID.
Witwer et al. (2024)	ID	Yes	Cognitive behavioral therapy, dialectical behavior therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, eye movement desensitization and reprocessing, play therapy, and mindfulness-based stress reduction for adults with ID.
Goerlich (2023)	ID	Yes	Kink-affirming therapy for an adult with ID who self-identifies as an Adult Baby/Diaper Lover.
Lunsky et al. (2023)	Both	No	Virtual mental health education program for professionals with information and practices to support the mental health of adults with IDD.
Verhagen et al. (2023)	ID	Yes	Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy for adults with ID.
Helverschou et al. (2021)	Both	Yes	Standardized protocols as a strategy for improving professional competence and effective mental health services for adults with autism and ID.
Kildahl (2021)	Both	Yes	Diagnosing anxiety disorder and self-injurious behavior in an adult with autism and ID as an effective strategy for developing a treatment plan.
McMahon et al. (2021)	Both	No	Use of a wearable device to promote mindfulness amongst young adults with IDD.
Rawlings et al. (2021)	ID	Yes	Phone therapy for adults with ID.
Vereenooghe et al. (2021)	ID	No	Online mood management program for adults with ID.
Schwartz et al. (2020)	Both	No	Peer mentor intervention to identify and use leisure activities as coping strategies amongst young adults with IDD.
Siegeal et al. (2020)	ID	Yes	Assessment as a critical step in informing treatment plans for adults with ID.
Oliver et al. (2019)	ID	Yes	Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for adults with ID.
Beasley et al. (2018)	ID	No	Crisis prevention model for individuals with ID and their support networks.
Caveney et al. (2018)	Both	Yes	Art psychotherapy to identify barriers to therapeutic progress for an adult with autism and ID.
Chaplin et al. (2017)	ID	No	Self-help intervention for adults with ID with mild depression.
Manohar (2016)	ID	Yes	Structured evaluation as a method for diagnosis; aimed at minimizing risk of diagnostic masking/overshadowing.
McInnis (2016)	ID	Yes	Psychotherapy for an adult with ID.

Article	Population	License/ Medical Intervention?	Brief Description
Barrowcliff & Evans (2015)	ID	Yes	Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy for an individual with multiple disabilities, including ID.
Sigan et al. (2015)	ID	Yes	Group Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) for adults with ID.
Drury & Alim (2014)	ID	Yes	Integrative treatment intervention, using different psychological models and psychodynamic ideas.

Only one of the coded articles focused primarily on a medical or pharmacological intervention, rather than relying solely on behavioral or psychosocial approaches to mental health support. "Trends in the Use of Psychotropic Drugs in People with Intellectual Disability in Taiwan: A Nationwide Outpatient Service Study, 1997-2007" found that the overall prevalence of psychotropic drug use increased during this time period. The largest increases in prescriptions to address mental health concerns were observed for antipsychotics, sedatives, and antidepressants (Hsu et al., 2014).

Of the articles that did not describe a specific counseling or mental health-related strategy or practice, many were process-related, meaning they employed a survey or qualitative examination of participant experiences, such as Northrup and colleagues' (2024) "'It Starts with a Knock on the Door': Caregiver and Provider Perspectives on Healthcare Communication for Youth with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities." In this article, authors reported findings from interviews with family caregivers on the challenges and facilitators to effective healthcare communication for youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities. A total of 23 articles (44%) were coded as process-related (not describing a specific counseling or mental health strategy or practice)., which suggests the field is still mapping needs and experiences more than producing robust evidence for efficacious interventions.

An additional five articles (10%) neither described a specific mental health-related practice or strategy nor a process-related finding but instead reported on an assessment or diagnostic tool or findings from a comparison study. For example, the aim of Wieland and colleagues' (2015), "The Prevalence of Personality Disorders in Psychiatric Outpatients with Borderline Intellectual Functioning: Comparison with Outpatients from Regular Mental Health Care and Outpatients with Mild Intellectual Disabilities" was to examine the rates of comorbid personality disorders among individuals with varying degrees of intellectual disability. Park and colleagues' (2019) article, "Disability, Functioning, and Quality of Life Among Treatment-Seeking Young Autistic Adults and Its Relation to Depression, Anxiety, and Stress" compared mental and general health and functioning in a sample of treatment-seeking young autistic adults whose primary diagnosis was ASD with a sample of young autistic adults with a primary mental health diagnosis. The intent of Battaglia and colleagues' (2016), "Multidisciplinary Treatment for Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Co-Occurring Mental Health Disorders: Adapting Clinical Research Tools to Everyday Clinical Practice" was to evaluate the *Schedule for the Assessment of Psychiatric Problems Associated with Autism*, a research instrument designed specifically for the psychiatric evaluation of patients with autism, for use in a clinical setting. And in "The Effects and Associations of Trauma and Intellectual Disability in Severely Mentally Ill Outpatients," Nieuwenhuis et al. (2019) used questionnaires to establish the prevalence of trauma and its association with intellectual function in severely mentally ill adults in the Netherlands.

Reliance on Professionals and Common Barriers

Twelve of the 24 articles that tested or examined a specific strategy or intervention indicated that the mental health-related strategy or intervention must be implemented or administered by a trained and licensed professional. The named professionals included licensed therapists, social workers, or professional counselors. One such article is Oliver et al.'s (2019) "Two Cases of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy Leading to Rapid Psychological Improvement in People with Intellectual Disabilities," which describes two case studies of psychiatrists utilizing Acceptance

and Commitment Therapy (ACT) with adults with intellectual disability in clinical practice. Another example is Witwer and colleagues' (2024), "Working with Adults with Intellectual Disability and Clinicians to Advance Mental Health Treatment: Informing Practice Guidelines and Treatment." This article reported findings from focus groups conducted with mental health clinicians and their clients. As defined by the study, mental health clinicians include "licensed psychologists, psychiatrists, counselors, and social workers" (p. 5). Across studies, recurring barriers included: (a) limited overall systemic capacity and clinician availability (driving need for telehealth or technology-based solutions, but also limiting those that require licensed staff), (b) inconsistent identification/labeling practices across institutions (affecting eligibility and service access), (c) accessibility and acceptability of interventions for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (e.g., need for adaptations, plain-language materials, sensory/communication accommodations), and (d) reliance on familial or informal supports when formal campus or community services are inadequate (noted in the college-student studies).

Discussion

To explore the literature on mental health strategies and interventions for emerging adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, we conducted a review of peer-reviewed research published over the past decade. Although this review was initially intended to focus on interventions designed for students with intellectual disability in postsecondary education or college settings, we broadened our scope after recognizing the limited amount of existing literature specific to this context and demographic. Using a systematic keyword search of four databases and a hand search of two journals with a primary focus on mental health and adult individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities resulted in identifying 52 articles for full review and coding. Slightly less than half (44%) of the articles described a strategy or intervention aimed at addressing the mental health needs of adults with IDD. Of those, 50% specified that implementation required a trained and licensed professional.

Lack of College-Specific Strategies

While the primary impetus for the current scoping review was to identify available strategies to support the mental health of college students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, only three articles were found that specifically addressed this population. According to Think College data, over 8,000 students with intellectual disability attended college in the United States in 2024 through a record-high 363 PSE programs (Think College National Coordinating Center, 2024). Additionally, the 2024 American College Health Association's (2024) annual survey found that nearly 5% of the more than 33,000 typically matriculating students surveyed reported having autism. These substantial numbers, combined with the well-documented high rates of co-occurring mental health concerns among individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, highlight a pressing need for targeted, evidence-based mental health supports in higher education settings. Given this, it was disappointing, though not altogether surprising, that only 6% of the total 52 articles focused on this population. Researchers in the IPSE field (Fields et al., 2024; Francis et al., 2022; Lizotte et al., 2021) and those researching supports for typically-matriculating students with developmental disabilities like autism, have recognized this paucity and called for further research in this area (Solís García et al., 2024).

The small body of mental health-focused research within IPSE settings underscores a significant need for practical strategies that can be implemented by program staff, who may not be trained mental health professionals, or by peers. Lizotte and colleagues (2021) surveyed staff from 33 PSE programs and found that while the vast majority of programs reported that their students were experiencing mental health concerns including anxiety and depression, as well as suicidal ideation, only 61% of programs were making referrals to the typical campus mental health resources to meet their students' needs. Further, Fields and colleagues (2024) found in their qualitative examination of college students with intellectual disability's experiences with mental health supports that a primary source of support and information was staff employed by the PSE program. Participants described their experiences within their PSE programs, identifying both programmatic coursework and staff as key contributors to maintaining their mental health. Study participants also highlighted how staff provided affirming support by teaching emotional self-regulation skills and connecting them with available mental health resources on campus (Fields et al., 2024).

With no specific strategies identified, PSE program staff are likely employing strategies for support that are not supported in the literature base and, therefore, may be ineffective. With little to no helpful information that is evidence-based, PSE professionals may be reliant upon the use of trial and error, with strategies that they have little-to-no formal training in providing. Further, they may be dependent upon college-based mental health professionals with lit-

tle-to-no training in working effectively with college students with intellectual disability and dwindling availability to meet student demands for services, let alone in an individualized capacity. Recent research shows that college students with disabilities have greater needs for mental health services compared to their non-disabled peers (Solís García et al., 2024). At the same time, university counseling centers and mental health professionals have been increasingly overwhelmed by the growing demand for campus counseling services (Lipson et al., 2019).

While specific strategies were not identified during this scoping review, there are existing frameworks that may help all higher education professionals in supporting students with disabilities at large with their mental health needs in college. *Be Ready, Be Well* (BRBW; Francis et al., 2020) provides a framework from which PSE professionals could conceptualize support for college students with intellectual disability. The BRBW framework consists of three interrelated cogs: well-being practices, students with disabilities, and family, which "reflects the interdependence and bidirectional nature of well-being among families and students with disabilities, consistent with literature on the importance of family support and interdependence," (Francis et al., 2020, p. 133). This framework also includes "barrier wedges," (Francis et al., 2020, p. 133), which reflect barriers that disrupt the entire system from operating seamlessly. Some examples provided include depression, familial stress, and difficulty making and sustaining relationships. A framework like BRBW, while not specific to intellectual disability, provides initial considerations for assessing and supporting students' mental health needs.

Professional Implementation of Supports

The fact that half of the strategies or interventions to support the mental health of adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities must be implemented by trained and licensed professionals, such as counselors or social workers, is significant. There is currently a dearth of licensed mental health professionals adequately trained and willing to work with adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities in the United States (Lake et al., 2021; Lineberry et al., 2023; Whittle et al., 2018). More significantly, college campuses have become increasingly overwhelmed by student need for counseling and mental health services in the past decade (Oswalt et al., 2020), and a recent survey of college counseling center professionals found they do not feel equipped to adequately support students with developmental disabilities like autism (Chandrasekhar & Hu, 2024). Moreover, Feather and Carlson (2019) found that counselor preparation programs often fall short of adequately preparing counselors to work with disabled individuals, particularly those with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

Our first of two sweeping recommendations based on the review findings is for PSE program professionals to build their own capacity to address their students' mental health needs without formal or intensive certification programs. Tier 1 interventions, or those aimed at prevention and early recognition of mental health distress, such as Mental Health First Aid or suicide prevention (also known as gatekeeper trainings) for staff like Suicide Alertness for Everyone (safeTALK) or Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST), can be a cost-effective and accessible way to do this work (Fields et al., 2024). Emerging evidence suggests that college-age peers (anyone over the age of 16) can be trained using ASIST to act as gatekeepers and provide meaningful support to students at risk for suicide, thereby enhancing early detection and connection to mental health resources and aiding in the address of the lack of trained professional service providers. Tools like the *Mental Health College Guide* from the National Alliance on Mental Illness can also support professionals in fostering mental health awareness and building supportive campus environments.

As many PSE program staff likely do not have certification or expertise to effectively meet the mental health needs of college students with intellectual disability, it is imperative that PSE programs and college-based mental health centers (CBMHCs) engage in proactive partnerships. Mutual professional development, triage, and shared data could build each partners' respective capacity to meet the needs of students. Further, partnerships with academic programs housed at the university charged with preparing counselors, social workers, and other mental health professionals are effective in both meeting a need amongst college students with intellectual disability and providing those pre-service professionals with training and experience to work with adults with intellectual disability in the future (Smith Hill et al., 2024). It is likely that disability service offices (DSO) are already tackling the need to address the growing mental health needs of students with disabilities on campus (Aguilar & Lipson, 2021) if they are already supporting campus partners in implementing inclusive design to meet the needs of people with disabilities within daily service provision and accessible programming.

A robust partnership aimed at educating CBMHCs on the needs of college students with intellectual disability and conversely, educating college students on

the resources that are available to them at the college/university, allows for both parties to build awareness and capacity. For CBMHCs, this awareness could facilitate supplemental or revised resources using inclusive design principles. For counselors, this work could look like creating resources and employing strategies that can be consumed by students with a variety of needs by using clear language, graphics, and other accessible ways of conveying information to a wide array of consumers on campus. For students, this awareness could facilitate the likelihood of their use of accessible resources on campus when needed. Inclusive postsecondary education program staff can create an inventory of services, resources, policies, and events to support mental health that students can use, and staff can work with CBMHCs to confirm accessibility.

Separate programming and services for students with intellectual disability is counterintuitive to the typicality that PSE programs often aim to provide. When analyzing resources, policies, or events, professionals should be mindful to not create a different set of expectations or programming specific to students with intellectual disability, such as policies for expulsion and suspension. With typicality in mind, however, Fields and colleagues (2024) found that emerging adults enrolled in an PSE program had distinct support needs related to understanding emotions and conceptualizing emotional wellness, which has distinct implications for mental health. Similarly, Lizotte et al. (2021) emphasize that college students with intellectual disability may require developmentally appropriate and differentiated strategies to effectively support their emotional well-being.

The practices outlined in Table 1 provide a foundation for both researchers and practitioners in identifying effective strategies to support the mental health needs of this population. Many of these are well-established counseling best practices that have been adapted to address the unique needs of adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, including Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (Barrowcliff & Evans, 2015; Verhagen et al., 2023) and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (Sigan et al., 2015; Witwer et al., 2024). The list of strategies also includes novel and creative interventions for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, such as garden-based healing (Kim et al., 2025) and virtual reality to reduce anxiety (Acton et al., 2024), indicating a growing interest in innovative, multisensory approaches that may offer accessible and engaging alternatives to traditional mental health supports.

An aligning research recommendation is to expand and rigorously evaluate scalable, low-cost delivery models that do not always require licensed clinicians (e.g., structured peer-mentor programs, standardized self-help tools, supervised lay-facilitator models), while ensuring safety and fidelity. As well, researchers should prioritize college-specific implementation research. A specific focus on conducting pilot studies within DSOs or PSE programs would ensure effective integration with campus services and enhanced outcomes for students with intellectual disability in particular. As participatory researchers, we recommend that studies center lived experience and the voices of individuals with intellectual disability in design to improve accessibility and relevance of interventions developed and tested.

Limitations

Although we employed a comprehensive search strategy across multiple databases, and to promote rigor we hand-searched two particularly relevant journals, it is still possible that some relevant studies were not captured. Additionally, given that many mental health supports for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities are implemented in practice-based settings, they may not be formally evaluated or published in peer-reviewed journals. Consistent with scoping review methodology, we did not assess the quality or rigor of the included studies, limiting our ability to comment on the strength of the evidence or the feasibility or social validity of the practices described. Because this quality appraisal was not included, it could also affect the strength of our practice recommendations. Finally, the field of mental health support for adults with intellectual disability is relatively nascent and rapidly evolving, and some recent or innovative practices may not yet be reflected in the published literature.

Conclusion

This scoping review highlights a critical gap in the literature regarding mental health strategies for emerging adults with intellectual disability enrolled in PSE programs. While the intent was to identify targeted interventions, few studies directly addressed this population's unique needs within the higher education context. The strategies that were identified tended to be adapted from general counseling best practices or broader disability support approaches, underscoring the need for further research that prioritizes inclusive, developmentally appropriate, and accessible mental health interventions.

There were several lessons learned with immediate implications for PSE program staff. Given the increasing enrollment of students with intellectual disability in higher education, PSE programs and universities

must take proactive steps to build capacity among both program staff and CBMHCs. This work includes investing in Tier 1 interventions such as *Mental Health First Aid* and gatekeeper trainings, developing key partnerships on campus (e.g., DSO, social work, counseling), integrating inclusive design principles into emotional wellness programming, and ensuring that counseling centers are equipped with professionals trained to support students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. PSE programs would also benefit from utilizing frameworks like *Be Ready, Be Well* to assess and identify gaps in effective support for college students with intellectual disability and comorbid mental health needs. Addressing these gaps is essential to creating equitable access to mental health care and fostering environments where all students can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

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About the Authors

Rebecca B. Smith Hill received her B.A. degree in Psychology and Education from Washington & Lee University and her M.S.W. and Ph.D. in special education from University of South Carolina (USC). Her experience includes over 25 years working with youth and young adults with intellectual and developmental disability as a camp counselor, middle school and high school teacher, social worker, and inclusive postsecondary education staff. She is currently Associate Director of the Center for Transition Research and Leadership at USC and an adjunct professor in the department of Educational and Developmental Sciences. Her research interests include self-determination, sense of belonging, dignity of risk, identity development, and overall wellness for transition-age young adults. She can be reached by email at: smithrb@email.sc.edu.

Chelsea VanHorn Stinnett received her B.A. in English Language Arts and M.Ed. in Special Education from Wright State University, and Ph.D. in Special Education from the University of South Carolina. Her experience includes working as a high school special education teacher in Ohio and South Carolina and Research Assistant Professor/Executive Director of CarolinaLIFE at the University of South Carolina, where she worked with students with intellectual disability working towards competitive, meaningful employment in inclusive postsecondary education. She is currently the Technical Assistance and Research Manager for Think College at the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Her research interests include IPSE program development and the lived experiences and wellness of college students with intellectual disability, including their development of sexual agency. She can be reached by email at chelsea.stinnett@umb.edu.

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Manuscripts demonstrate scholarly excellence using one of the types of articles described in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (7th edition, American Psychological Association [APA], 2020) sections 1.1-1.8 These include quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, replication, meta-analyses, literature review, theoretical, and methodological articles. ***Inclusive of all manuscript elements (including title page, references, tables, and appendices) research articles cannot exceed 35 pages and typically are between 25-30 pages.***

Practice Briefs

Manuscripts describe innovative programs, services, or contemporary best practices that support disabled college students or disability services, and are organized using the following first-heading levels (APA 2.27):

- **Summary of Relevant Literature:** provide a succinct summary of the most relevant and contemporary literature that provides context for what is already known about the practice/program.
- **Setting and/or Participants Demographics:** provide enough information about the implementation context for the practice described for the reader to make an informed assessment regarding similarity to their own practice environment-- using a pseudonym or compositing as needed to provide anonymity for participants / institutions involved;
- **Depiction of the Problem:** provide a statement of the problem being addressed.
- **Description of Practice:** briefly describe the intended outcome for the innovative practice/program and how it has been implemented to date. Tables and figures may enhance specific details.
- **Evaluation of Observed Outcomes:** summarize formative and/or summative data used to evaluate the efficacy of your practice/program; support claims with evaluation data.
- **Implications and Transferability:** discuss what has been learned and how this practice/program could be enhanced. Be realistic about any challenges encountered and how others seeking to replicate the practice elsewhere might experience them. Offer suggestions about what could be done differently in the future to achieve better outcomes. Provide a clear description of how and why other disability service educators should consider adapting your practice/program.

Inclusive of all manuscript elements (including title page, references, tables, and appendices) practice briefs cannot exceed 15 pages and typically are between 8-12 pages.

Media Reviews

Prior to preparing a media review, please contact the JPED's Managing Editor (jped@ahead.org) to discuss the resource (e.g., book, film, online resource) you are considering reviewing. Media reviews provide:

- An overview of the resource, identifying the stated purpose, the author/creator and their viewpoint, and a general summary of the content.
- An evaluation of the resource's strengths, elaborating on the author/creator's objectives and how well those objectives were achieved.
- Recommendations about the audiences that might find the resource useful, why, and how you would suggest the resource be used. Please be sure to address its potential contribution to the field. For any gaps in the resource's content, rather than framing as weaknesses, consider offering suggestions about other works or perspectives that could be used in tandem with this resource. In other words, of what conversations in our field could this resource be an important part?

Inclusive of the text of the review itself, media reviews should typically be between 750-1250 words. Media review submissions should also be accompanied by a complete APA reference for the resource reviewed as well as references for any additional citations in the text of the review.

Manuscript Preparation

All manuscripts must be prepared according to the standards of the APA publication manual (7th edition). Authors submitting manuscripts to the JPED will be well-served to thoroughly understand Section 12 of the APA manual where the publication process is described as preparing for publication, understanding the editorial publication process, manuscript preparation, copyright and permission guidelines, and during and after publication.

When submitting a manuscript to the JPED, follow these specific guidelines:

- Submit *one* complete Word document (.doc or .docx) that contains all manuscript components (i.e., title page, abstract, body, references, tables/figures).
- Provide a separate cover letter (APA 12.11) asking that the manuscript be considered for publication and providing any other information that would be useful to the editors.
- Manuscripts should have one-inch margins in 12-point Times New Roman font. Double space the abstract, body, and references; single space the title page and tables/figures.
- The title (APA 2.4) should not exceed 12 words.
- Place the abstract (maximum 250 words, APA 2.9) on page two (following the title page). Include three to five keywords (APA 2.10) below the abstract (does not apply to book reviews).
- Use APA Section 1, Scholarly Writing and Publishing Principles, related to types of articles and papers; ethical, legal, and professional standards in publishing; ensuring the accuracy of scientific findings; protecting the rights and welfare of research participants and subjects; and protecting intellectual property rights.
- Manuscripts must comply with ethical standards governing the conduct of research. This includes prior review and approval by an appropriate institutional review board (IRB) or research ethics committee (REC) when applicable and especially when human subjects are involved. Authors are expected to include a clear statement in the manuscript regarding this approval. If ethics approval was not required, a brief explanation should be provided (e.g., "This study involved publicly available anonymized data and did not involve human subjects."). The journal reserves the right to request documentation of ethics approval, participant consent forms, or correspondence with regulatory bodies as part of the review or publication process
- Use APA Section 2, Paper Elements and Format, to align paper elements, format, and organization. Indent paragraphs (APA 2.24), and adhere to heading levels (APA 2.27) to organize the manuscript.
- Content and method are important. Use APA Section 3, Journal Article Reporting Standards, related to overview of reporting standards; common reporting standards across research designs; and reporting standards for quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods research. Please refer to Madaus et al. (2020) for research guidelines for higher education and disability where instructions are provided for describing samples and study locations, and appropriately selecting and describing the methodologies employed.
- Writing is important, carefully edit and proofread the manuscript. Use APA Section 4, Writing Style and Grammar, related to continuity and flow, conciseness and clarity, verbs, pronouns, and sentence construction. Use APA Section 6, Mechanics of Style, related to punctuation, spelling, capitalization, italics, abbreviations, numbers, statistical and mathematical copy, presentation of equations, and lists. Refer to APA 6.32-6.39 to properly report numbers expressed as numerals or in words.
- APA Section 5, Bias-Free Language and Guidelines provides guidance for writing about people, identity, and other topics wherein bias in writing is

common. Although generally useful, this section's discussion of disability is reductive. Authors should follow their best judgment in this regard. Additional guidance is provided below.

- Regarding language related to disability, authors must determine the type of wording that is best for their given study - typically person-first or identity-first language. (See the "AHEAD Statement on Language" for details about these options and for additional resources on the topic.) We encourage authors to be explicit about their choices in the manuscript, informing readers about the rationale for their choice of language. When research or program participants are disabled and it is possible to determine their preferences, the preferred language of those individuals should be prioritized ahead of researcher or practitioner decisions. Additionally, aligned with the AHEAD statement in terms of outdated language use, we discourage "the use of outmoded euphemisms such as 'special needs,' 'physically or mentally challenged,' differently- or alternatively-abled, etc." unless there is an explicit reason, such as referring to past practices or terminology to learn something valuable from it for current practice.
- Use APA Section 8, Works Credited in Text, related to general guidelines for citation, works requiring special approaches to citation, in-text citations, and paraphrases and quotations. All citations must be referenced, and all references must be cited; avoid undercitation and overcitation (APA 8.1). Double-space and block quotations of 40 words or more (APA 8.27).
- Provide a complete reference list (APA 2.12) rather than a bibliography following the manuscript. References should be formatted consistently, following APA examples in sections 9-11. Please be sure to carefully edit references as manuscripts will not be sent out for review until they conform to APA guidelines and references represent the most common challenge point for submitted manuscripts.
- Mask any information that could reasonably reveal the identity of the authors to the reviewers. For example, citations that would identify an author should be replaced with "citation omitted" and the corresponding reference removed from the reference list (APA 8.3). This does not mean that all author citations must be removed, only those that are likely to reveal an author identity by being self-referential. Those which are "in press" or "under review" should also be removed as they are typically from an author. Mask institutional identities in manuscripts if they are likely to reveal the institution of an author. Please do not use a title that can be searched in order to find a previous iteration of the work (e.g., a conference presentation, a dissertation). We will ask you to unmask these elements of your manuscript subsequent to acceptance. These examples are not exhaustive, but it is the author's job to minimize any information that can reveal author identity.
- Tables and/or figures, following references, are in black and white only, and must conform to APA standards in APA Section 7. Follow examples related to table lines. Align numbers in tables to the single digit or the decimal. If tables and/or figures are submitted in image format (JPEG, PDF, etc.), an editable format must also be submitted along with a text description of the information depicted in the table/figure. This will be provided as an alternate format in the electronic version of the JPED, making tables/figures accessible for screen readers.
- In submitted manuscripts, all tables and figures should be placed at the end of the manuscript with a corresponding indication in the text, "< Place Table/Figure X approximately here>". During layout editing, tables and/or figures should will be embedded in the text either as noted in the manuscript or after its first mention in text (APA 7.6)
- Do not include footnotes, instead, incorporate footnote narratives into the manuscript.
- Because of the importance of articles including practical implications for disability services educators in colleges and universities, authors will be well-served to include in the discussion a multiple paragraph subsection where practical implications for disability services educators are discussed.
- Before submission, ensure that the manuscript is ready by using strategies, examples, and checklists provided by APA:
    - Sample papers (end of Section 2, pp. 50-67).
    - Strategies to improve your writing (APA 4.25-4.30).
    - Tables checklist (APA 7.20).
    - Figure checklist (APA 7.35).
    - In-text citation styles (Table 8.1).
    - Examples of direct quotations in the text (Table 8.2).
    - Reference examples (section 10 and 11).
    - Manuscript preparation (APA 12.9-12.13).

Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI)

JPED aims to support the primacy of authors and their intellectual work while accounting for the use of generative AI tools. "Generative" AI tools are those based on large language models (like ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, and others) that generate new information for users, distinguished from simpler predictive AI tools that may offer a word or phrasing suggestion but do not generate novel output. To meet this aim and to provide transparency, authors should adhere to the following guidelines.

The use of generative AI tools must be disclosed when authors use them in manuscript preparation or study execution.

- Any use of generative AI in the research or writing process must be explained in the methods or acknowledgements section, as appropriate.
- Any use of generative AI in the research process must be ethical (e.g., not entering confidential or identifiable participant information into generative AI tools).
- Any text, references, or other content generated by AI must be verified by the authors, who are responsible for the accuracy of information in the manuscript. Be aware of errors, biases, and potential plagiarism when using AI.
- An AI tool may not be named as an author for an article in JPED.

If generative AI is used without disclosure, or these policies are not followed, the Editor reserves the right to reject the manuscript at any point in the process. For clarity, if you did not use generative AI in any part of the research or writing process, please state that clearly.

Additionally, JPED aims to ensure ethical use of authors' manuscripts regarding generative AI:

- No editor or reviewer may upload the text of a manuscript to a generative AI tool, as this violates the author's privacy. Any use of AI in the review process must be disclosed in the notes to the editor when submitting the review.

Manuscript Submission

Before you decide to submit your manuscript, authors are encouraged to read past articles in the JPED to better understand the types of submissions we print. All submissions will be through the Scholastica online system, easily accessed by clicking the "Submit via Scholastica" button on the JPED webpage.

- If this is your first time using our journal management system, Scholastica, you can sign up and create a free account. Directions for creating an account and logging in can be found in the Scholastica Author Guide. Enter your manuscript title, then click "save and continue." After this page, if you have to pause and come back to complete this submission sometime in the future, you may do so by going to your "My Manuscripts" page and selecting this submission.
- Next, you can add the "metadata" for your manuscript (title, abstract, keywords), author information, and manuscript files. For all JPED submissions, we ask that you include:
  - o A cover letter (APA 12.11)
  - o A masked version of your manuscript
  - o Any additional tables, graphs, and/or supplementary materials
- Once you've reviewed your completed submission form, you can "confirm and submit" and check "I understand" before submitting. You will not be able to make any changes to your manuscript once you click "submit manuscript."

For more detailed information about submitting manuscripts in Scholastica, please refer to their Submitting a Manuscript guide. If you have any questions, please contact jped@ahead.org.

Upon Acceptance for Publication

For manuscripts that are accepted for publication, we will request additional information. Once your manuscript has been assigned to a future issue, Valerie Spears (JPED Editorial Assistant) will contact the corresponding author to request: (1) a 40-50 word bibliographic description for each author; (2) and a signed copyright transfer form (Valerie will send templates for both); and (3) approval of galley proofs of the article ready for publication. Galley proofs will include required response to specific copyediting suggestions. Authors may be contacted prior to this step to respond to copyediting, depending on the level and nature of the edits. Although JPED reserves the right to edit all material for space and style, corresponding authors will be notified of changes.

Special Issues

The JPED occasionally publishes special issues which feature a series of articles on a particular topic. The JPED welcomes ideas for special topic issues related to the field of postsecondary education and disability or disability studies. The issue can be formatted as a collection of articles related to a particular topic or as a central position paper followed by a series of commentaries (a modified point/counter point). If the issue has the potential to be valuable to the readership of the JPED, modification to the journal's content or format may be possible. Authors who wish to discuss a special issue should contact the editorial team at jped@ahead.org.

Publication Information

JPED is published four times a year in multiple accessible formats (e.g., printed, DAISY, MP3, Text only, PDF), and each issue is distributed to nearly 4,000 individuals. All back issues are archived and accessible to all on the AHEAD website. These author guidelines are also available online.

JPED's acceptance rate is moderately selective, accepting approximately 20% of all submitted manuscripts during the last calendar year. JPED is indexed in EBSCO, ERIC and Emerging Sources Citation Index. At present, JPED does not have an impact factor but is working with Clarivate Analytics' Social Sciences Citation Index to obtain one.

Editorial and Review Teams

The editorial team is composed of Ryan Wells, Valerie Spears, Richard Allegra, and Cassie Sanchez. The review board is composed of more than 70 international disability scholars and disability services educators with expertise on disabled college students, disability services, disability studies, and research methodologies.

References

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