

## Toward an Inclusive Definition of College Student Development

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Inclusive Post-Secondary Education Programs (IPSE) have emerged as opportunities for young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) to experience college life and prepare for independent living and integrated employment. Although the inclusive higher education is in its relative infancy, more universities and colleges are opening their doors to students with IDD each year, with the most recent Think College estimation at 295 programs in the United States. However, to date there is no standard agreement on what defines a successful IPSE experience. This manuscript proposes a framework for how programs can conceptualize success for their students, grounded in Student Development Theory and Social Role Valorization. Using the Inclusive Student Development Theory framework as a guide, program administrators, university faculty and staff, and families can ensure that the experience is valuable for each participant by providing an environment that helps individuals develop a unique identity and purpose and allows them to establish meaningful reciprocal relationships, in a broader effort to create a more just and equitable society for all individuals with disabilities.

*Keywords:* Postsecondary education, student development, inclusive, college experience

Inclusive higher-education opportunities for young adults with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities (IDD) continue to increase in prevalence each year. To date, there are approximately 295 postsecondary education programs across the United States, with 107 offered at 4-year public colleges or universities (Think College, 2020). Although the programs vary greatly in their goals, offerings, and options, they often share common threads related to promoting an inclusive academic experience and preparing young adults with IDD for inclusive employment and independent living opportunities (GAIPSEC, 2020).

Federal legislative policies have expanded access to educational opportunities for school-age children with disabilities in K-12 settings, including The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Further,

the Higher Education Opportunities Act of 2008 extended the mandate of equal opportunities at institutions of higher education. Although these policies paved the way for future opportunities, “inclusion” is not specifically defined in any of these mandates. As more institutions of higher education expand enrollment to this population of newly college-bound students, the lack of a governing theoretical framework challenges the extent to which we can define what constitutes truly *inclusive* higher education (Gilson et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2015). In the case of administering higher-education programs for students with IDD, this leaves the practice open to interpretation by the decision makers of each institution administering academic programs for students with IDD, which in turn can lead to a lack of clear outcomes for students attending IPSE programs.

The purported intention of an inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) experience is for students with IDD to be treated as equals to their neurotypical counterparts and to be given the same set of opportunities to experience college. Therefore, it is important for the theoretical framework to assess IPSE college success with the same level of robustness as the traditional college experience. Success cannot only be measured from an “outcomes” lens, such as whether students exit with jobs. Rather, the indicators of success must reflect the manner in which we expect these students to grow and develop as a result of the new experiences and opportunities afforded through the IPSE program. Success must be defined from a multifaceted and developmental perspective—one that reflects personal development and growth. As Henninger and Taylor (2014) noted, there is a “need to consider a wider range of outcomes beyond work, living, and relationships, to give a more complete picture of the transition to adulthood for individuals with IDD” (p. 106).

### Student Development Theory

In an effort to create a theoretically sound definition for IPSE success, it is important to review existing theoretical frameworks associated with the education and development of typically-developing college students grounded in student development theory. Early researchers in this field developed a set of questions to produce the information necessary to inform student development practice (Jones & Stewart, 2016). These questions focused on understanding who students were prior to attending college, and the developmental changes that occur as a result of a college experience. Additionally, researchers sought to define best practices by which a college environment could influence student development and growth (Knefelkamp et al., 1978).

These questions yielded a foundational student development theory by Arthur Chickering (1969), titled the “Seven Vectors of Identity Development”. Chickering posited that students in college develop along seven specific vectors: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy to interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity.

Chickering’s theoretical framework represented the nature of early student development theory with an emphasis on a fixed and consistent set of truths and experiences that all students go through during their time in college. Later iterations of student development

theory would continue to focus on the psychosocial development/lived experience of college students and provide frameworks for the way students define themselves based on their individualized social identities, which may be defined by race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or another aspect of cultural identity (Jones & Stewart, 2016). Several multistage models (Cross's Model of Psychological Nigrescence, Phinney's Model of Ethnic Identity Development, Helm's White Identity Model, Cass's Model of Homosexual Identity Formation and D'Augelli's Model of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Development) described a process through which students develop healthy cultural identities as a result of their college experiences.

Gibson (2006) provided a three-stage model for disability identity development that mirrors many other identity development pathways, from passive awareness of disability, to realization of difference, and finally to overall acceptance of disability as a component of identity. Frameworks have been developed to understand the process by which students with disabilities develop a sense of purpose (Vaccaro et al., 2018) and how first-year college students with disabilities find a sense of belonging (Vaccaro et al., 2015). However, these frameworks differ from other student development frameworks in that they do not consider disability to be a function of one's individualized social identity, in the same way that race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality contribute to one's unique composition.

Moreover, student development theories designed to provide an understanding of how students changed as a result of their college experience shifted from being linear in nature to being more descriptive (Abes, 2016). Rather than describing a pathway, more recent lines of theoretical frameworks sought to understand how students make meaning of their experiences, and both how the environment shapes them and how they shape their environment. Success, therefore, was not necessarily defined by a rigid set of outcomes (e.g., employment, income), but rather the process by which students develop their own sense of self as a result of a college experience (Baxter Magolda, 2001a; Pizzolato, 2005).

Theories related to college student development are designed to explain and understand how college students grow holistically as they matriculate through their college experience (Patton, Renn, & Guido, 2016). However, current and historical models are grounded in the experiences of majority and homogenized groups (Abes, 2016). Students participating in IPSE programs are an untapped resource as it relates to theory development. There is little research on how adults with IDD experience college, therefore it is important to begin the processes of defining what "success" means for IPSE students. Success cannot simply be defined by the ascertainment of a job or the development of skills associated with employment.

There is opportunity to integrate student development theory into extant research on how IPSE programs improve self-determination levels of participants (Shogren et al., 2018), thus resulting in a better understanding of the relationship between self-determination and college success for *all* students. Assessment must be driven from a sense that the students will grow holistically, and will develop skills associated with independence, interdependence, initiative and self-actualization, thus resulting in a higher level of employability (Watson & McConnell, 2018).

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## An Inclusive Definition of College Student Development

Thus, our proposed definition emphasizes the reciprocal interchange between college and students, whereby students derive meaning and sense of self from their college experiences. This is an important launching pad and a key consideration in how IPSE programs should be evaluated and defined moving forward. Think College and the Georgia Inclusive Postsecondary Education Consortium offer guidance in their description of the current *transactional* nature of IPSE programs (GAIPSEC, 2020). Specifically, the Georgia IPSE consortium indicates that students who attend these programs should be included and accommodated in all aspects of university life. Programs should be employment-oriented and rigorously evaluated based on programmatic outcomes to ensure future success/continuous development of IPSE programs. For example, a recent study reported that students with IDD who complete these programs focused on paid work experience are almost 15 times more likely to have a paid job at exit than those who did not have a paid job while enrolled (Shogren, et. al, 2018).

However, what these current definitions fail to provide is an understanding of the transformational nature of a college experience. Neurotypical peers are expected to change in a number of ways as a result of attending college. They are expected to develop a sense of independence and purpose (Chickering, 1969). They are expected to make individualized meaning of their experiences, thus allowing their internal voices to emerge (Baxter Magolda, 2009). They are expected to gain competencies associated with transitioning from adolescence to adulthood (Patton et al., 2016). Why do we not hold the same expectations of students in IPSE programs? Indeed, IPSE programs should be defined and assessed by their ability to create a transformative experience for participants, thus better aligning themselves with definitions of success for programs aimed towards neurotypical peers.

Student development theory can and should be utilized to provide models for both understanding and guiding the experience of students participating in IPSE experiences. Baxter Magolda's (2009) theory of self-authorship describes a process by which students develop the capacity to define their own beliefs and identity through three distinct processes: trusting internal voice, building an internal foundation, and securing internal commitments. Baxter Magolda indicates that in order for students to find their internal voice, they must first come to terms with the "external formulas" they've been previously following. In doing so, they come to a crossroads where the assumptions they previously held are unraveled, leading to a new set of uniquely developed values.

This concept of eschewing external formulas directly relates to students with IDD. Even in adulthood, individuals with IDD rely primarily on their parents for support and structure." This support structure can often dictate restrictions on behaviors, based primarily on safety (Callus et al., 2019). Autonomy is granted, but within a carefully constructed system of checks and balances, which are all designed to keep adults with IDD safe from harm.

These often-rigid structures in precedence to attending an IPSE program allow for the opportunity of a transformational experience, one that can be both understood and guided



The idea of reciprocity in a social relationship harkens to a well-established concept specifically in the field of disability called social role valorization (SRV), formulated by Wolf Wolfensberger as a successor to his earlier work on the principle of normalization (Lemay, 1995, Wolfensberger, 1972, Wolfensberger, 1983). Specifically, SRV emphasizes the importance of value attributed to various social roles when shaping their behaviors toward others viewed as valued or devalued. The primary goal of SRV is to shift understanding of socially valued roles for people in society to promote elevated opportunities for those who are typically framed through a deficit-based lens, such as individuals with disabilities. In the example of young adults with IDD attending IPSE programs, their experiences are still largely framed through their deficits.

### Implications for Research and Practice

With the above framework in mind, the next section will provide takeaways for IPSE stakeholders on best practices to create programs focused on the holistic development of participants.

#### *Peers*

Our proposed extension of the student development framework has several implications for students enrolled in higher education, most notably at institutions with IPSE programs (though not exclusively). First, peers are integral stakeholders in ensuring the campus community is inclusive and immersive for *all* students (Gilson et al., 2020; Gilson et al., 2019). As the majority constituents, their attitudes and perspectives often shape the culture and climate of an environment. As a peripheral impact of IDEA (2004) and the “mainstreaming” of students with disabilities into general education, current and future generations, especially those who matriculated through a public K-12 system prior to attending college, likely have greater exposure to and familiarity with students with disabilities than preceding generations. However, it remains unclear how this trend toward inclusion has impacted attitudes and perspectives of their peers. More research is needed to explore the impact of inclusive education on peers’ social and emotional growth as well as their perspectives toward others with disabilities.

Second, much of the language in the current literature portrays peers to be consummate “helpers” of their classmates with disabilities. This idea is reinforced by IPSE programs who recruit and train college students as “mentors” to support the students, potentially in exchange for hourly pay, course credit, or service hours. However, this contrived hierarchy is prohibitive to the establishment of authentic friendships based on relational reciprocity (Wolfensberger, 1983). The notion that peers must be incentivized by some external means in exchange for time spent with someone with disabilities imposes an impenetrable structural barrier that will prevent true reciprocity and authenticity from emerging and sustaining. Here, Chickering’s vector associated with the process of developing mature interpersonal relationships becomes particularly important: IPSE students bear some level of responsibility for the creation and sustaining of an equitable environment, in that they themselves need to feel confident in their role as a partner in a relationship based on reciprocity and respect, rather than feeling solely like the object of support.

Prior research offers an initial snapshot of the impact of peer relationships moving toward reciprocity. Jones and Goble (2012) explored the effects of a mentoring program to support students with IDD in IPSE settings. Participants expressed the positivity of an inclusive classroom climate, free of limitations for all students. Similarly, Izzo and Shuman (2013) conducted a mixed-methods study to understand the extent of peers' attitudes toward students with IDD. Peers' comfort levels and acceptance increased when they had frequent opportunities to interact with students with IDD.

As programs strive to become more genuinely inclusive, the focus on fostering authentic friendships is paramount. We conducted a survey of a peer mentor organization affiliated with the (blinded for review) program at the second author's university. The student-led organization has more than 100 members, all of whom do not receive any pay or community service hours in exchange for their time spent with students in the program. Additionally, the organization is intentional about not having delineated roles indicating a hierarchical relationship, such as mentor and mentee. Instead, the organization fosters the notion that all students share the same roles to support and build friendships with one another. About one-third are education majors; the remaining two-thirds are studying a diverse set of disciplines, including health, communication, psychology, biology, agriculture, business, and engineering. Based on a survey of 41 students at the end of one academic year of involvement with the program, there is burgeoning optimism that inclusive postsecondary education programs positively impact the development of reciprocal friendships. When asked about their agreement with the following statement "I developed friendships with [program] students," all either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Similarly, approximately 95% ( $n=39$ ) of members either agreed or strongly agreed that being in the organization helped them to develop positive attitudes toward individuals with IDD.

### *Parents*

Parents and caregivers play a key role in the development and nurturing of adults with disabilities—a role that extends far beyond the traditional definitions of adolescence (Baumbusch et al., 2015). Parents are often the driving factors behind all decisions regarding their child's mental and physical well-being. The parenting responsibilities do not stop, and can indeed become more intense and complicated as their child ages out of secondary school services.

Many parents also have the tendency to focus their care-related strategies for their adult children around protection, resulting in higher levels of restricted activities (Callus et al., 2019). This bend towards overprotection in the name of safety can contribute to lower levels of self-determination and social development, and higher levels of vulnerability (Callus et al., 2019).

These additional responsibilities can have a detrimental impact on parental mental and physical health as evidenced by parents of adult children with disabilities displaying higher levels of depression and anxiety (Hastings, 2009), which can be attributed to the constant presence of uncertainty of what the future might hold for their child. Moreover, as parents

and their adult children with disabilities age together, parents are forced to face the reality of their own mortality and create pathways of interdependence for their child that are not centered on the parent (Pryce et al., 2015).

IPSE programs can provide parents with a developmentally-focused predictable pathway for adult children with disabilities. By promoting holistic well-being and growth, in addition to strengthening employment-related skills and expanding professional networks, IPSE programs can equip students with the valuable tools associated with creating an independent life, which in turn can assist parents in their efforts to plan for the future (Pryce et al., 2017). By focusing on creating an inclusive and immersive experience for all students participating in an IPSE program, adults with disabilities are given the opportunity to refine their own unique identities away from the often overprotective nature of a parent-driven environment.

Most importantly, when envisioned and implemented correctly, IPSE environments are intended to be transformational in nature. Students should experience both change and growth as a result of their college experience. Parents can feel confident that these programs are purposeful, student-centered, and dynamic environments focused on holistic learning and development with the same learning outcome centered focus as other on-campus programs geared towards peer student groups.

### *Program Staff*

As mentioned earlier, there is a significant opportunity to study the impact of college experiences on adults with IDD. Student development theorists (as detailed above) have created extensive frameworks to understand and define the process by which members of other demographic groups experience and shape their college; however, due to the relative infancy of IPSE programs, such frameworks do not exist, nor have existing ones been applied to this new population. Faculty and staff involved with these programs are faced with the important task of assessing and understanding how these students construct meaning of their IPSE experience in an effort to create transformational experiences for future students.

IPSE programs have the opportunity to shape the discourse surrounding how society should treat adults with disabilities. Creating truly inclusive environments, where students with and without intellectual disabilities are given the opportunity to share ideas and grow together, will result in a change in how adults with disabilities are treated as having equal worth instead of being subjugated to preconceived notions of charity. In doing so, program administrators can make strides towards Friere's (2014) notion of true generosity: "True generosity lies in striving so that these hands—whether of individuals or entire peoples—need be extended less and less in supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which work and, working, transform the world" (p. 2).

## Conclusion

The development of IPSE programs across the country has the capacity to significantly change the landscape of opportunities for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. However, advances in opportunity must be matched by advances in expectations associated with college related outcomes.

Learning outcomes associated with IPSE programs should reflect the aspirant notion of college as a transformational experience. As colleges strive to create inclusive programs aimed at providing opportunity for adults with IDD, the goals must reflect the same high expectations as those held for neurotypical students—for students to change and grow as a result of a college experience, thus resulting in a higher level of employability.

### Positionality of Authors - First Author

The first author is the father of a non-verbal son with autism and cerebral palsy. His goal as a parent is to facilitate opportunities for growth and development for all of his children. In the case of his son with disabilities, this typically occurs through school and interaction with therapists. Both of these environments are driven by clearly articulated learning/developmental outcomes designed specifically for his abilities. This structure will continue throughout his childhood into adolescence with an increasing focus on how teaching strategies can evolve alongside his physical and cognitive development.

To that end, the author seeks to both understand and influence the outcomes that might define a successful college experience, in an effort to ensure that his son has the same opportunities for a transformational college experience as a neurotypical college student would.

### Positionality of Authors - Second Author

The second author is an assistant professor of special education at a large public research university. She is a former special education teacher and currently serves as the founding faculty director of a recently launched IPSE program at her institution. As someone who oversees the development and long-term vision of the new program, she has often grappled with how to define success for her students upon graduation. Thinking beyond the certificate or degree earned, transcending beyond securing a community-based employment opportunity, what else is there? She arrives with urgency at the need for an inclusive framework that truly represents the students enrolling in IPSE programs across the country. Just as coursework, onboarding processes, and matriculation standards have evolved to fit the unique profiles of these students, indeed, so must the guiding framework underpinning these efforts.

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