

FACULTY PERSPECTIVES

**Faculty Perspectives on the Appeal and Impact of  
Including College Students with Intellectual Disability**

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Funding Acknowledgement:

Partial support for this work came from a Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students With Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) grant from the Office of Postsecondary Education, U.S. Department of Education.

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**Abstract**

Supporting the academic engagement of students with intellectual disability is a central focus of inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) movement. In this study, we used focus group interviews to explore the views of 23 university faculty involved in teaching college students with intellectual disability in traditional courses. We asked faculty about their motivations for offering inclusive courses, how they were affected by the experience, and how they perceived classmates were impacted. Faculty discussed a range of factors that drew them to this inclusive teaching experience and highlighted multiple ways in which they and their students were positively impacted by the enrollment of students with intellectual disability. We offer recommendations for research and practice aimed at expanding and strengthening the academic experiences of college students with intellectual disability within IPSE programs.

*Keywords:* faculty, inclusive higher education, inclusion, intellectual disability

**Faculty Perspectives on the Appeal and Impact of  
Including College Students with Intellectual Disability**

Inclusion has been a dominant theme within discussion of special education policy and practice for many decades. Efforts to provide elementary and secondary students with intellectual disability meaningful access to the full range of learning and social opportunities in their schools have now extended into the world of higher education (Grigal et al., 2013; Kelley & Westling, 2019). More and more postsecondary campuses are establishing formal programs aimed at supporting the active involvement of young adults with intellectual disability in all aspects of college life (Grigal & Papay, 2018). With support from program staff and peer mentors, students with intellectual disability attend classes, join student organizations, participate in campus activities, hold part-time jobs, live in the dorms, volunteer in their community, and enjoy time with friends. The inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) movement has spread to nearly 300 campus in the United States, as well as to many other countries (O'Brien et al., 2019).

Although many experiences and relationships during college can be formative, it is the coursework that forms the foundation for much of this learning. The classes students take expose them to new ideas, deepen their understanding of a discipline, equip them to be lifelong learners, connect them to fellow students, and prepare them for future careers. Although some programs for students with intellectual disability still remain substantially segregated, best practices in IPSE emphasize involving students in typical courses alongside other students without similar disabilities (Grigal et al., 2012). This often involves auditing one or more university courses that align with a student's current interests or future career plans. IPSE program staff typically work closely with faculty to identify the supports students will need to participate meaningfully.

Given the centrality of academic courses to the college experience, it is crucial that researchers examine the experiences of faculty who have included students with intellectual

disability in their university classrooms. To date, only a few studies have addressed this critical perspective (e.g., Almutairi et al., 2020; Gibbons et al., 2015; Gilson et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2016). While much research has addressed how faculty view the inclusion of college students with physical disabilities, learning disabilities, or mental health diagnoses (see review by Kim & Aquino, 2017), including students with intellectual disability within the higher education classroom may comprise a substantially different experience. Research addressing faculty perspectives on IPSE are needed in several areas.

First, it is important to understand what draws faculty to include students with intellectual disability in their courses. On most campuses with IPSE programs, enrollment decisions are made in collaboration with faculty, as students with intellectual disability do not typically take courses for standard college credit (e.g., they audit, unofficially attend, or receive credit only for their credential; Grigal et al., 2019), they may lack prerequisite classes, or they are non-majors. Recent studies indicate that faculty vary in the degree to which they would be willing to have students with intellectual disability audit their courses or enroll for credit (e.g., Gibbons et al., 2015; Gilson et al., 2020). What leads some professors to pursue or embrace this experience while others decline? The motivations of faculty have been addressed in just one study. In their qualitative study, Bauer and Harlin (2016) found that faculty at a religiously-affiliated university who became involved in teaching inclusive courses were motivated by their faith commitments. Additional research is needed to elucidate the wide range of potential factors that may shape faculty decisions in this area.

Second, the experience of including students with intellectual disability is likely to impact the faculty who teach these courses. Although the broad and reciprocal benefits of inclusive higher education are often advertised (Kelly & Westling, 2019), they have been insufficiently researched. In what ways might faculty be positively or negatively affected by

teaching students with intellectual disability? Only one study has explored this area of impact. Jones et al. (2016) surveyed 34 faculty at a regional university who had at least one student with intellectual disability who had been enrolled in their course. Many of these faculty reported their growth and development as an instructor, experienced the value of inclusion on their teaching, and developed new relationships with students with intellectual disability. Expanding access to academic coursework within IPSE programs may be facilitated by better understanding the variety of ways in which faculty are personally impacted by this experience.

Third, fellow college students who have the opportunity to learn alongside students with intellectual disability may themselves be shaped by the experience. Carter and McCabe (in press) identified 24 studies in which college students described the personal benefits (i.e., social, academic, attitudinal, professional) of having formal or indirect involvement in the inclusion of fellow students with intellectual disability. Faculty have a unique vantage point from which to speak to this impact in their classrooms. In their survey study, Gibbons et al. (2015) found that most faculty anticipated classmates would learn how to communicate and interact with individuals with disabilities better if students with intellectual disability were included in regular courses. Likewise, Jones et al. (2016) found that faculty who had this teaching experience said other students in their class benefitted by increasing their disability awareness, developing altruism, and gaining exposure to new perspectives and diversity. Additional research is needed to explore the ways in which these peers might be impacted.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the perspectives of university faculty regarding the appeal and impact of including students with intellectual disability. We addressed three research questions: What motivates faculty to get involved in teaching a class that included students with intellectual disability? How are faculty impacted as a result of teaching these classes? How did faculty describe the impact on other classmates?

## Method

### **Inclusive Postsecondary Education Program**

This study was conducted at a top-tier, research-intensive university that had hosted an IPSE program for almost ten years. At the time of the study, the university had approximately 6,900 undergraduate students, 6,200 graduate students, and almost 1,900 faculty across its ten schools. The four undergraduate schools hosted 40 different academic departments.

Undergraduate enrollment was 51% female and 58% non-White. More than one third (36%) of students had attended private high schools.

The IPSE program supported 35 college students with intellectual disability, many of whom also had co-occurring disabilities. To be admitted to the program, students must (a) be 18-26 years old, (b) have a diagnosis of an intellectual disability, (c) have completed high school and received a standard or alternate diploma (i.e., occupational or special education), (d) not meet eligibility requirements for admission into a traditional college program, and (e) have a strong personal desire to attend college. Prior to receiving federal TPSID funding four years earlier, the program had accepted some students with other developmental disabilities who did not have a co-occurring cognitive impairment.

Students take one or two traditional university courses each semester. These courses are taught by university faculty and taken alongside typically matriculated students without intellectual disability. Students select courses based on (a) their personal preferences, (b) available space, (c) academic pre-requisites, and (d) IPSE program staff input. Person-centered planning also drives course choices along with consultation from each student's advisor. However, faculty are approached before enrolling a student with intellectual disability in their class and have the option to decline. Unlike typically matriculated students, students with intellectual disability audit classes and do not pursue traditional majors as part of their IPSE

certificate. Because students may not have taken all pre-requisite courses, are non-majors, or may be requesting enrollment in a class that has reached capacity, faculty have discretion about enrolling any student who has a special status. Following a student's official enrollment, program staff develop an individualized syllabus (called a "learning agreement"). This learning agreement incorporates individualized modifications that are aligned with course topics and assignments, as well as addresses any distinctive academic and social expectations for the students. The document is reviewed by the student, the academic director of the IHE program, and the faculty member who teaches the course. In addition to these courses, students with intellectual disability also take specialized seminars with other students with intellectual disability (e.g., Health and Wellness, Personal Finance, Interpersonal Skills, Living on Your Own, Sexual Awareness, Emotional Regulation, Food Preparation and Safety). Finally, they complete internships and part-time jobs, participate in student organizations, and attend campus activities. The IPSE program is non-residential.

### **Faculty Participants and Recruitment**

Students with intellectual disability had taken 180 different courses across all four colleges and 40 different departments. We worked with the IPSE program director to recruit eligible faculty (i.e., those who had taught a student with intellectual disability for one or more semesters). We emailed invitations that described the study, the inclusion criteria, and the honorarium (i.e., a \$50 VISA gift card). It included a survey link through which faculty could sign up for a pre-scheduled focus group. If unavailable on any of the dates, we asked faculty to indicate their interest in future dates (if added) or individual interviews. When at least four faculty members had signed up for a scheduled date, an email confirmation was sent. Of the 112 eligible faculty currently working at the university, 38 indicated interest in the study and 28 were available on one of the dates. Twenty-three faculty ultimately attended the four focus groups.

Sixteen faculty (70%) were female and seven (30%) were male. Sixteen were White (70%), three were Hispanic/Latino (13%), two were Black (9%), and two reported multiple races (9%). Their average age was 49 years (range, 30 to 72 years). They averaged 13 years (range, 2 to 29 years) of employment at the university and 16 years (range, 4 to 39 years) on faculty anywhere. During their time at the university, they taught an average of 3.7 students (range, 1 to 10 students) supported by the IPSE program over an average of 2.8 semesters (range, 1 to 5 semesters). Sixteen faculty taught courses in the College of Arts and Sciences, five faculty taught in the College of Education, and two faculty taught in College of Music; none were from the College of Engineering. Specific disciplines are referenced in the results.

### **Focus Groups and Data Collection**

Given the paucity of prior research on faculty perspectives related to teaching students with intellectual disability, we adopted an exploratory approach in this study. We chose focus group methodology because it provided a context for eliciting a wide range of perspectives across multiple faculty. In other words, we were interested in understanding the diversity of faculty experiences at this campus, rather than trying to establish consensus on what comprised a common experience. We anticipated that the considerable heterogeneity evident among students with intellectual disability, the courses they took, and the faculty who taught them would generate rich discussion and a variety of viewpoints.

We held four focus groups—each involving between three and seven faculty members—during the fall semester. Each lasted 90 min and took place in a private space within the university library. The interviews were facilitated by a faculty member who was not affiliated with the IPSE program. Our concern was that involving IPSE staff in the focus groups could impact the degree to which faculty spoke candidly about their experiences. However, she had more than 40 years of experience at the university and in the area of developmental



disabilities. A notetaker was responsible for tracking who was speaking and noting any nonverbal behaviors (e.g., laughter, nods of agreement, gesture to another person). We provided light snacks and beverages.

The facilitator used a semi-structured interview protocol to guide the discussion. The protocol was developed by the research team and is available by request from the corresponding author. It included questions addressing six core topics: motivations for involvement, faculty experiences with their classroom, the impact of inclusion on faculty, the impact of inclusion on classmates, the impact of inclusion on students with intellectual disability, and recommendations for the IPSE program. Follow-up prompts were used to evoke additional detail or request clarity. The protocol ensured consistency across focus groups, although faculty had latitude to comment on other issues. At the outset of the interviews, the facilitator emphasized, “We are not trying to reach a consensus of opinion in the group. Instead, we are trying to hear the range of perspectives. It is okay—and encouraged—to share a different perspective.” Each group was audio-recorded. All focus group responses were transcribed professionally, reviewed for accuracy, and de-identified with pseudonyms.

### **Data Analysis**

We adopted a team-based approach for our analyses. The team was comprised of two graduate students and one faculty member—all working within the field of special education. All three had worked closely with the university’s IPSE program and were familiar with the supports it offered. Data analysis occurred in multiple stages and used the constant comparison method, in which existing codes are frequently compared with previous uses to ensure consistency (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Analyses occurred in multiple stages. The two graduate students began by independently coding the first focus group transcript. They identified transcript segments relevant to each of our overarching research questions and used open coding to assign initial

categories. Coded responses ranged from short phrases to several paragraphs. Before a new category was created, all existing categories were reviewed for relevance. If a new category was needed, it was added. As noted previously, we were interested in capturing the full range of faculty perspectives regarding their motivations and descriptions of impact. Therefore, every different motivation and impact area mentioned by at least one faculty member was coded and reported. The two graduate students then met to compare their preliminary coding and to reach consensus on an initial coding framework. This first framework was shared with the faculty member for input and additional revisions were subsequently made. The graduate students continued coding each of the remaining transcripts in a similar fashion. They held several consensus meetings in which they compared their independent coding, discussed their additions, and revised the coding framework through consensus. In other words, categories experienced changes in content and definition as newly coded sections of the transcript were compared and categorized. Throughout the process, they met with the faculty member who provided peer debriefing, feedback, and a critique of assumptions.

We took steps to ensure to promote the credibility and trustworthiness of our findings by following recommended practices in qualitative research (Brantlinger et al., 2005).

Triangulation occurred in two ways—across sources (i.e., faculty from different disciplines and focus groups) and across analysts (i.e., multiple coders who brought individual perspectives and experiences to the interpretive process). We debriefed at multiple points throughout the process as a way of checking our assumptions and conclusions. We also maintained an audit trail of raw data and products (i.e., iterations of the coding framework) documenting our analysis process. We looked for and reported negative cases that contrasted with most other faculty (e.g., faculty who indicated their approach to instruction was not impacted, faculty who described a negative impact on classmates). Finally, we provided all faculty with a summary of our findings, inviting

them to correct any errors, challenge any interpretations they considered to be inaccurate, and provide any further comments. One faculty member asked to clarify two of her quotes; all other feedback affirmed our framing of the findings.

Although our coding focused on seven distinct research questions, the present article focuses on faculty views across three areas: their motivations for getting involved, the impact of inclusion on faculty, and the impact of inclusion on classmates. A separate paper focuses on the experiences of faculty related to the remaining four areas: their roles within the inclusive classroom, the roles of students within their classrooms, the challenges they experienced, and the strategies they found to be supportive (see Hall et al., in press).

### **Findings**

Table 1 displays a summary of themes identified for each of the three research questions.

#### **What Motivates Faculty to Become Involved in Teaching an Inclusive Classroom?**

Collectively, faculty referenced a diversity of different factors that led them to host students with intellectual disability in their college classrooms. This mix of motivations suggests there is no single reason faculty choose to become involved in these teaching experiences.

#### ***Desire to Educate All Learners***

Six faculty discussed their commitment to educating *all* students as their motivation for becoming involved. They desired an inclusive classroom that served a wide range of students. Michael, a communication studies professor, explained, “On a professional level, I just think it's the right pedagogical choice to make for all of the students involved.” Phillip, a music professor, described his call as an educator to teach classrooms that encompass a range of abilities: “I strongly believe in inclusive classes. And I had also often times had students with all kinds of learning disabilities—even if they were not in the [IPSE program]. And they were absolutely wonderful students!” These faculty concluded that it was their duty to welcome and teach *any*

student who had the desire to enroll in their course. Indeed, one special education professor emphasized the notion of inclusion was grounded in her department's core commitments saying, it is "part of what we do."

### *Curiosity*

Six faculty were prompted by a sense of curiosity about including students with intellectual disability in their university courses. They expressed interest and intrigue into what the experience may involve. As Robert, a pharmacology professor, noted:

[Our department] didn't know much about [IPSE program] to be quite honest. But we thought it was worth giving it a shot and just seeing how it went. It sounded like an interesting idea. I'd never heard of a program like that before coming [here].

Laura, an ecology professor, simply noted, "I was mostly curious to see how that would work."

### *Colleague Encouragement*

Five faculty referenced other colleagues who directly encouraged them to pursue enrolling a student with intellectual disability. These colleagues described personal experiences with inclusive education and persuaded them to become involved. Motioning to another faculty member in her same focus group, Laura noted:

Well, I did talk to someone. Actually, I talked to you and another person that I knew that had [IPSE] students before I took the challenge. And I was super encouraged to do it. And I would encourage anyone that talked to me about it.

Silvia, a human development professor, confirmed this sentiment stating, "I reached out to a colleague in human development—one of the other faculty who I knew had [IPSE] students in her class—and asked a lot of her about what her experience was like. And it seemed like a good idea." Another faculty member mentioned being encouraged by her colleague.

### *Course Topic*

Five faculty mentioned their course topic as a consideration when deciding to involve students with intellectual disability. Some faculty felt the course they were teaching was

especially accessible and appropriate for these students. Joan, who taught a popular music course, noted, “I just thought that it would be a great class. It's music! It's something everybody enjoys. And so that was my motivation.” Silvia added that she felt her course on adolescent development would be relatable for students with intellectual disability saying, “I knew the topic would be interesting to them because they are adolescents. And so I was comfortable that the content . . . I could make the content relevant and interesting to them.” Some faculty said the requirements of their course were fitting for students with intellectual disability. For example, Robert noted that his course was not “particularly demanding for most students in general.”

### *Prior Experience*

Five faculty had a family member with a disability, which may have primed their involvement. Some faculty like Ruben, a media professor, had a sibling with autism. Others had a child with a disability. Each was motivated to support an experience that their children might themselves one day access in the future. As Esther, foreign language professor, articulated, “I have a kid with a disability...and so I'm interested in this kind of program to see how they might work.” Likewise, another faculty added, “More personally, I have a son of the autism spectrum and so I think a lot about inclusion, specifically around individuals with disabilities.”

Four faculty mentioned other prior experiences with disability that motivated them to make their class inclusive. These experiences extended beyond having a family member. Some faculty, like Phillip, mentioned prior professional experiences that shaped his decision: “I had a little bit of experience. I did teach public school before this and I was the choir director. So within that setting it was a very inclusive classroom and so I have a little experience.” Carl, who taught courses on service learning, had previous encounters with students from the program outside of campus that made him aware of its existence: “I knew about [IPSE program], especially as it started to expand. And now some of the kids I worked with in the therapeutic

riding program are in [IPSE program] around campus. I was like, and just for me personally it was like, ‘Oh. They've grown up. They're on a campus.’”

### *Other Motivations*

Several other motivations were mentioned by just one or two faculty each. Two faculty included students with intellectual disability in their course because it promoted greater classroom diversity. These faculty said they were communicating that students of all levels and backgrounds were welcome. As Gabriella, a religious studies professor, commented, “I just saw this as another opportunity to kind of incorporate another layer of diversity into the classroom. I think it's healthy for the environment, for the conversation, and for the other students.” Laura felt similarly: “I think I like human challenges ... and having different students—diversity in my class—that would be an especially interesting one. So, I guess that's what motivated me.”

One faculty member included students with intellectual disability at the request of a traditional student. Sophia, a professor of fashion and costume design, described it this way:

I had a student who interned in the costume shop who I just loved having around. And then another student in the costume shop who's not from [IPSE program], was a senior, and she was the student ambassador to the student just by coincidence. And I really wanted the traditional student to be in my class and she told me she would only take my class if the [IPSE program] student took my class. So that was my first inspiration. And I said “Well, the [IPSE program] student, I've got to get that student in there because I really want the other student.”

Sophia stepped into an experience she might otherwise have overlooked.

One faculty member simply responded to the interest of a student with intellectual disability. As Natalie, a professor of African American studies, said, “that's how I got involved. A student wanted to take a class that I was teaching and they were very, very interested in it . . . I had never even heard of [IPSE program] until that point.”

Finally, one faculty member was drawn to the experience based on their own research

interests. He wanted to combine his academic commitments with hands-on experience. As Michael noted, “Some of my research touches on disability so I don't feel like I could be a good person and study disability and not have some degree of inclusion in my classroom.”

### **How Are Faculty Impacted as a Result of Teaching an Inclusive Classroom?**

Faculty addressed four different areas in which teaching an inclusive classroom affected them—methods of teaching, views of student capabilities, views of inclusive education, and views of campus culture (see Table 1). In contrast, some faculty indicated no substantial impact on their teaching.

#### ***Methods of Teaching***

Faculty in three of the focus groups commented that they implemented a novel pedagogical approach as a result of including a student with intellectual disability in their class. Many faculty found that teaching in an inclusive classroom pushed them to improve the clarity of their teaching, which also served to increase understanding for all students in their course. Gabriella mentioned, “I'm probably much more, you know, succinct and lots of repetition for me and I just want to be clear. This is a good thing for all of my students. So, you know, I made the adjustment and then I said, ‘Oh, you all get it better when I do it this way.’” Michael continued, “[I] became very cognizant about material and how easy it was to digest for students generally.” Elizabeth, a sociology professor, emphasized this point too: “I go off and running and I realize maybe not everyone is getting it and they may not be willing to ask. And so I may need to stop and just say, ‘Wait a minute. Go back to the basics and not just assume that everybody knows what I'm talking about.’” By delivering clearer instruction in response to the presence of students with intellectual disability, faculty found that all students gained a better understanding of materials. Faculty also said other students benefited from new teaching methodologies implemented for students with intellectual disability. Phillip described how he shifted many of

his music projects to include multiple completion options for students:

Having a student play a piece for me or come up with a song that they created or just seeing their reaction when I play a piece of music—it's been very rewarding for me as a teacher. But it's also caused me to kind of re-evaluate not only what they need to know, but how I'm going to know they know it.

Phillip described how his teaching methods also changed as a result of his inclusive classroom when noting that he was, “trying to get away from this lecturing. What I've noticed is both the students in [IPSE program] and those that are not tend to engage with the material better.” By incorporating a new option for a project in her costume design class to better include her student with intellectual disability, Sophia discovered that it benefitted the whole class. Sophia discussed how the student with intellectual disability was able to complete a similar, parallel project to the classmates, with the addition of an alternative project option in the course.

The traditional students had to do makeup designs, so they studied the animals for their makeup designs. And then the [IPSE] student drew them and made a quilt that's now hanging at the Center for Teaching. So, it was kind of like a way to do something new that I hadn't done before and kind of consider what we did in a new way. And the traditional students really loved it and I think we all got something out of it.

Faculty who taught education students also noticed a change in their teaching as a result of facilitating an inclusive classroom. As Meredith described:

So, in the classes that I teach, I have usually a variety of students from across campus; but at least half of my classes will be education majors. So part of what I'm trying to do for them is model the things that they should be doing for all of their students. So modeling is really important.

Alice, a special education professor, agreed, noting that having an inclusive classroom with a student with intellectual disability “reminds me how much I need to model appropriate teaching and an ability to differentiate for my students who are going to be special educators.”

Two faculty members discussed their ability to be more adaptable in their instruction. Sophia described her experiences being flexible and adaptable with her



teaching process and outcomes: “Every class there's been just something else to learn about how to try to make this work. And sometimes it's been more successful than other times.” She continued, “I get nervous every semester about if it's going to work and how it's going to work. And you kind of have to go with the flow because different semesters have been quite different.” The experience was a process of trial, error, and learning.

Esther described her flexibility with grading practices. She said she had to decide “how to evaluate students who cannot participate actively in the classroom. So, I just waive that part and I just take in consideration her written report. But there were very few words [the IPSE student] was able to say.”

### *Views of Student Capabilities*

Thirteen faculty indicated their views about the capacities of students with intellectual disability—both academically and socially—changed for the better. Joan recalled a student who was able to demonstrate his knowledge of music in a test given to the entire class. Joan stated, “When I looked at [the test], a lot of the listings, the connections between what I heard and who it was, and what style of music—it was right. It was *all* right. And I loved that!” This showcased the student’s knowledge and validated her ability to effectively teach the student. Silvia also experienced satisfaction in seeing what her student accomplished:

[She] did a videotape of the [topic] that she learned in the class. And I was really struck by the things that she picked out that were important to her that really hit home . . . And I was just struck by the way that she was able to take the material that I was presenting at a really different level and say, "Here's what hit home to me.”

Robert relayed a similar sentiment when a student with intellectual disability was able to express himself through an art project in his pharmacology course. He recalled, “[The class] got to work on pieces of art, and it’s really nice to see . . . what’s going on inside somebody’s head. It was nice to see him express himself and get kind of a window into

what was going on with him.” For multiple faculty, the student with an intellectual disability was able to demonstrate their knowledge and showcase their thought process. This impacted their view of how students are able to show success in a variety of ways. Alice noted how one student successfully self-managed his own behavior in a modified assignment. Seeing the student becoming more self-aware and discussing his behavior caused Alice to reflect, “as hard as this work is and as frustrating as I get sometimes because I feel like I can't give enough there, when you see those things it's really exciting and it's so meaningful for his life because the skill that he chose is something that he knows he needs to work on.” Julia stated that her teaching experience:

made me think a little bit more about what different folks take away from class, and certainly what [the student] was taking away from the classes, [which is] potentially very different then what my other students are walking away with. But the reality is they all walk away with something different very often, right? And so, I think sometimes a reminder of that has just been useful for me.

### ***Views of Inclusive Education***

Nine faculty members noted that their commitment to inclusive education deepened. Phillip stated, “I think [including a student] adds something to my class. I liked seeing the way [the IPSE program] adapted the syllabus, I thought that was interesting. And the kinds of ways that they took my assignments and made them manageable and adjustable for the students—I thought that was creative.” Henry described the experience as eye-opening, “It’s opened my eyes to the possibility of what [the IPSE program] is trying to do, because we [faculty in his department] had never encountered this before.” Laura noted that although she had to learn how to navigate this new inclusive space, the experience was very natural for the typically matriculating students in her course. She recalled:

[IPSE] is very, very foreign and [students] seem to be possibly even more natural about the whole situation than I [was at] the beginning. And so that was something that I learned. That actually the students are fine with all those

differences more than possibly I am. So, I was glad to learn that.

Martin also affirmed that the inclusive experience had unfolded more naturally than anticipated.

“In a sense, the experience has felt like what I would have hoped. Which is just natural and inclusive.” Silvia was initially surprised that inclusion could occur at a university campus: “With the [IPSE program] and their leadership, it can happen. I think it's really cool. And I'm glad to be a part of it. I don't know that I imagined that something like this could happen so fluidly.”

### *Views of Campus Culture*

Faculty across all four focus groups also described the university culture as changing as a result of having an IPSE program. Faculty found it “rewarding” to teach at a university in which such a progressive program was supported. Many of the faculty were pleasantly surprised that their university included students with intellectual disability and saw it as a positive addition to the campus culture. Alexandra explained:

I've been at [the university] a pretty long while and fought a lot of battles and had a lot of problems. And something about the existence of the [IPSE program] softened certain attitudes I had toward [the university] as an institution. I was shocked to hear that it existed: [The university] is doing this? Which is an odd thing to think . . . I thought . . . why isn't there more of this going on?

Similarly, Natalie commented, “. . . it was an enlightenment for me in the same way it was for Alexandra, that [the university] is actually doing something innovative like this. And pigs can fly.” These faculty members' views of the campus shifted because inclusivity was embodied.

Faculty also said the campus culture shifted for university students without disabilities.

Julia said the presence of the program further emphasized the feeling of community on campus:

I think it's good that it—both for me and I hope for everyone around, everyone who sees them out on campus and in classes—it helps remind all of us that the reason we're here is to grow communities and grow whole people, as you mentioned. Not only to teach geology or astronomy, while that's my goal in that 50 minutes. My *real* goal is this other thing that's bigger.

### *No Change*

Although numerous faculty described the impact on their teaching experience, the approach to teaching of some faculty was not affected by their inclusive experience. Laura said this may have been a result of having less interaction with the student with an intellectual disability. Carl became more mindful of his communication. However, he concluded that was simply a necessity of any faculty member, “I’d say it didn’t change my approach to teaching so much, but it made me think a lot about communication. Which is what we do, right?” Some faculty also noted that they did not alter their instructional plans nor find it necessary to adapt anything within their course for the students with intellectual disability. Several faculty members communicated that no additional time than what was given to all students was required in their experience in inclusive teaching. Julia summarized her experience stating, “it’s a good experience that for me has not increased my workload in any measurable way.” These faculty did not find the inclusion of students with intellectual disability cumbersome or overwhelming; instead, they continued to teach in a way that was natural and familiar. Although new perspectives may have emerged, the faculty did not experience any dramatic shift in the way they would typically instruct.

### **How Did Faculty Describe the Impact of Inclusion on Other Classmates?**

Faculty addressed five ways in which enrollment in an inclusive classroom may have affected classmates without intellectual disability. With only one exception, the portrait of peer impact was framed quite positively.

#### ***Raising Disability Awareness***

Five faculty commented on changes in the disability awareness of classmates who participated in an inclusive classroom. Stephanie, a human development professor, said many students at her university lacked previous experience with inclusive classrooms, so

this experience had a greater impact on their understanding of disability:

I think the higher their income, also, the more of an impact it had on them. Because the higher the income, the more they had been in private schools usually. And private schools—there are some that have inclusive programs . . . but not very many.

Sophia described a transformative shift for a classmate who originally expressed concerns about the inclusion of a student with intellectual disability. Sophia explained the impact on the peer:

After she [university student] complained that I was spending too much time with a [IPSE program] student, a couple weeks later I said, “Well, do you feel any differently about it now?” And she said, “Well, I do because I actually studied this idea in child education of having ‘special needs people’ with traditional people, and I’ve never seen or experienced it before.” And I thought, “You have studied this model, and then you were complaining, and now you recognize that this model you learned about is important and positively impactful in practice.

Sophia saw this student grow in acceptance of including students with intellectual disability across the semester. The student also observed theory being put into practice.

Gabriella noted it changed how classmates communicated, “I think it pushed all the students—challenged them to be more direct and clear in their language.” Similarly, Esther discussed the patience peers demonstrated:

The other students were looking at her and were talking at her . . . and I think that that action of those students made her slowly feel confident and finally speak up without having the fear of being judged by others. Because in the case of this particular girl, she had surely some difficulty speaking but she was able to do so.

The recognition that their classmate with intellectual disability benefitted from more support reflected their increased awareness as it improved the student’s confidence.

### ***Fostering Relationships***

Faculty in three of the focus groups mentioned the strong relationships that developed among students with and without intellectual disability and the ways in which it impacted the classmates.

Julia described her observations of this experience:

I think the students that are sitting near the [IPSE program] students and have the

opportunity to interact—or to be very close up in seeing that student interacting with the student ambassador—I can see positive sort of relationships developing and sort of acknowledgement of what's going on.

When speaking about the relationships that faculty saw forming, Laura used words like “natural” and Gabriella described them as “genuine.” Faculty did not see the formation of artificial relationships, but instead described them as mutually beneficial for all students involved. This reciprocity more closely resembled the types of relationships anyone might form with fellow classmates. Carl described his experiences with classmates who had both had previous experiences with the IPSE program, and those for which the experience was new.

It really changed the nature of the interaction in the classroom because the students were both; I would guess out of the 15 students in there probably four or five of them were already working in some capacity with [the IPSE program]. So here it was they had one of the students in the class with them . . . So, this was a real eye-opener for some of them . . . It was very positive, and I do think a lot of them, my guess is some of them went on and worked with [the IPSE program] afterwards because he was in the class.

Overall, faculty described the positive nature of the relationships formed as a result of teaching an inclusive classroom and the benefits classmates gained from these relationships.

In contrast, one faculty member described any experiences that may have had a negative impact on any classmates. Julia described when a student with intellectual disability was distracting to classmates:

I had a . . . situation with my first student . . . with humming, and making noises during class. And some other students—I had noticed it but it wasn't loud and so I didn't do anything at first—but some other students who sat near him brought it up to me.

Classmates became more reluctant to interact with the student with intellectual disability. Julia explained, “I think it resulted in not many more individual interactions with that student.”

### ***A Way to Relate***

Three faculty discussed how classmates developed a personal way of relating to the

students with an intellectual disability. This helped classmates relate, connect, and include the IPSE program student. Henry details the importance of having this form of inclusion:

There are a lot of things that happen to all of us in our lives where we think we're the only ones. And we have all these secrets. So many of our students have a brother, an uncle, a cousin, a neighbor, who has some sort of disability. But we don't talk about this stuff. By actually having them in the classroom, I think it's really good for everybody.

Henry saw the benefits his students were reaping as a result of the inclusive classroom. He felt most of his students knew someone with a disability, but emphasized that it was impactful for them to be classmates together. Sophia shared a more personal way a classmate related to her peer with intellectual disability whom she worked alongside:

I had all the students respond in writing "How did this go for you with the [IPSE program] student?" One student responded, "I love watching those two work together, because I have a sister with Down syndrome, and seeing the ability of that [IPSE program] student in this classroom, collaborating with the traditional student and presenting joint projects that have been strengthened by their friendship, was amazing.

This student was able to relate to her classmate with intellectual disability because of her own sister. Finally, Phillip observed that his university students were better able to relate to their classmate with intellectual disability as a result of their more inclusive schooling:

I kind of see a difference with the students too, as long as I've been doing it and maybe this speaks to the way special education in the public schools and in classrooms are becoming more inclusive because certainly when I was in high school and I graduated in '93 and '94 and that wasn't the case at all, you know. If you weren't in band or choir or an extracurricular activity, they grew very separated. And so, I think a lot of the students now, especially this generation and even the millennials, are much more . . . they have more experience than I have in some ways of participating and interacting within an inclusive classroom. So, I've actually been watching them take those students in and have conversations and treat them almost equal, in a very equal way.

Because his students grew up in schools that were inclusive, Philip felt they were better positioned to interact with and engage their classmate with intellectual disability.

### *Positive Experiences*

Five faculty members reported hearing positive remarks from classmates about being in class with a student with an intellectual disability. Jennifer, a lecturer in the area of talent development, offered an example: “I’ve gotten good feedback from those [peers] who have worked and done group work with students in [IPSE program] and I’ve found that to be very gratifying often to watch.” Michael also explained the feedback he received after group work: “the students that worked with her [student with intellectual disability] in the small-group projects had a great experience and reported back that they thought that was good for them.” Two faculty felt that the experience was beneficial for peers as a result of learning in the inclusive positive environment. Alice explained that it was “so positive—very positive—to have him in class. And all the students appreciated having him in class.” Esther explained that the experience was great for *all* students in the course.

Likewise, multiple faculty members more generally described the experience of having an inclusive classroom as being valuable for typically matriculated students. Henry described how diversity presents peers with a worthy experience. He noted:

I think the value of having that kind of diversity in the classroom is valuable for the other students . . . I actually think from my experiences with the students [with intellectual disability], the biggest impact on those students [with intellectual disability] in my class is on the other students [peers]. There’s a huge value added in all sorts of ways to having the students [with intellectual disability] mixed in the class, and having the other students [peers] know that they’re there.

Julia summarized the value of the experience as reminding everyone on campus that the main priority of education is to “grow communities and grow whole people.”

### ***Professional Growth***

Three faculty addressed how the professional goals and interests of classmates may have shifted as a result of being in an inclusive classroom. Sophia noted that one classmate discovered she had a passion for working with individuals with intellectual disability:



I'm just remembering one class where a student took the [IPSE] student under her wing and really loved... it turned out that this student recognized through having that [IPSE program] student in the class, that she's always loved working with special needs kids. Now she's with Comcast and she's working with the vice president because Comcast is especially keyed in to accommodating customers and staff with intellectual disabilities. So it has now transferred into her professional life.

Whereas this inclusive experience exposed some people to new career paths, it reinforced existing career interests for others. Alice explained:

I think it's so important for my students because it's an area in which many of them work. And it's funny because the current class that I'm teaching, the students that are on the severe disabilities track in special ed are also in a transition class. So, they are living it out in the field with their transition class and then they are also seeing it in one of their other classes at the same time. So, I think it gives them a nice experience kind of across the spectrum there for them.

She found great value in her students getting hands-on experience within an inclusive course, along with learning about the transitions students are going through.

### **Discussion**

The college classroom lies at the center of a high-quality postsecondary education. Compelling coursework shapes how students see the world, prepares them for future careers, and helps them develop new relationships. Faculty who teach and support students with intellectual disability in their university courses have a unique vantage point from which to address the broader impact of this inclusive higher education movement. We asked 23 faculty from diverse academic disciplines about their motivations for including students with intellectual disability in their courses, the ways in which it affected them personally, and the impact of inclusion on classmates without similar disabilities. Our findings extend the literature in several ways.

This study illustrates some of the myriad reasons college faculty may be motivated to include a student with an intellectual disability in their courses. The factors that led individual faculty to agree to this teaching opportunity varied widely (e.g., curiosity, colleague

recommendations, course topic, student interest, research interests). As IPSE program staff approach faculty about involving students with intellectual disability into their courses, they should recognize the multiple entry points for faculty into this experience. For example, staff could ask current faculty to share their experiences with colleagues, approach faculty who are committed to inclusion and diversity, encourage IPSE peer mentors to advocate for inclusion in their home departments, and disseminate information about the IPSE program more broadly.

Two factors, however, were given particular prominence. First, a number of faculty referenced their commitment to educating *all* learners. They felt compelled as an educator to model inclusivity or they sought to promote diversity within their classroom. Such views resemble those of elementary and secondary educators regarding the inclusion of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities in their classrooms (e.g., Pocock & Miyahara, 2018). In an age when equity and diversity are now emphasized on a growing number of campuses, the IPSE movement provides colleges a tangible way of demonstrating their commitment to these values. Staff should reference how the IPSE program advances this mission when advocating for expanded access to the campus or additional resources for the program. Second, a number of faculty had prior connections to individuals with intellectual disability—whether in their family (e.g., child, sibling) or through personal experiences (e.g., teaching in inclusive K-12 classrooms, volunteering for disability organizations). Indeed, prior contact is commonly cited as a predictor of intentions and future behavior toward people with disability (Scior & Werner, 2016). Having prior personal experiences has also emerged as a factor influencing the motivations of college students who volunteer within IPSE programs (e.g., Carter et al., 2019; Griffin et al., 2016).

Many faculty indicated they were personally and positively affected by teaching within an inclusive college class. Some recent studies have found mixed views among faculty regarding the inclusion of students with intellectual disability in typical college courses (e.g., Gibbons et

al., 2015; Gilson et al., 2020). Yet, in the present study, the overall portrait among faculty who actually had these teaching experiences was fairly favorable. IPSE staff can reference these potential benefits when making presentations about their program to colleges and individual departments. Knowing that other faculty have described their involvement in beneficial ways could help alleviate any reluctance they may have with welcoming students with intellectual disability into their courses. For example, some faculty indicated their instructional methods expanded or improved as a result of teaching students with intellectual disability (cf., Jones et al., 2016). This may have involved communicating information more clearly or expanding the ways in which students could demonstrate their understanding of course content. Indeed, several faculty in this study described how the changes they made benefitted their other students and improved the overall quality of the class. Other faculty spoke of the ways in which their views about individuals with disabilities and inclusive education changed for the better. Seeing first-hand the capabilities and contributions of students with intellectual disability in their class challenged their pre-conceived ideas about what these students could do or what inclusion entailed. At the same time, it is important to note that the overall experience was much more neutral for other faculty. It neither changed how they taught, nor did it produce substantive personal benefits. Regardless, none of the faculty we spoke with described the experience as largely negative.

Finally, faculty described multiple ways in which learning alongside a student with intellectual disability affected other college students enrolled in the same classes. With the exception of one situation, this perspective was framed as fairly positive. One area of impact related to disability awareness. Faculty indicated that peers also become more conscious of the abilities and strengths of individuals with intellectual disability. As one faculty noted, this may have comprised the first inclusive classroom experience for those classmates who had attended

private schools in elementary and secondary school. Another area of impact was the development of new relationships. Friendship formation is frequently addressed beyond the college classroom (e.g., Giust & Valle-Riestra, 2017; Hafner et al., 2011). Faculty in this study described multiple instances in which the opportunity to learn alongside one another naturally led to new friendships among students with and without intellectual disability. These benefits echo those expressed by students themselves in qualitative studies of college students who took inclusive courses (e.g., Bauer & Harlin, 2016; Casale-Gionnola & Kamens, 2016). Likewise, a review of research focused on inclusion in elementary and secondary schools addresses the myriad ways in which peers are positively impacted by the time they spend with students with intellectual disability (Travers & Carter, 2020). The prospect that these encounters might shape the future attitudes, pursuits, careers, and relationships of these college students is important to consider. A stronger, more sustainable, case for higher education inclusion can be made when there is evidence that all members of a particular community—those with *and* without disabilities—benefit from learning together (Carter, 2018). As with the findings on faculty impact, IPSE staff should address the reciprocity of these experiences when highlighting the potential benefits of their program to faculty, administrators, alumni, and donors.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Several limitations should be addressed in future research. First, the study addressed the experiences of faculty from a single university. The institution was unique in many ways—it was a top-tier research institution, it had nearly a decade of experience with inclusive postsecondary education, and it had an explicit commitment to equity and diversity. Thus, the experiences and viewpoints of faculty may look different on other campuses that serve different students, have different histories, or hold different priorities. Studies are needed that span multiple campuses to understand the multiple factors that might shape faculty perspectives. Second, all of our data

were derived from focus groups. Additional context could be helpful to situating what faculty shared. Combining interviews with classroom observations could provide additional insights into how students with intellectual disability participated in these classes, the interactions they had with classmates, and the ways in which instruction was delivered. Third, faculty self-selected involvement in this study. Although every eligible faculty member was invited—regardless of whether their experience was positive or not—it is possible that our sample leaned in a more positive direction. Although participating faculty were candid about the challenges they faced, they may have accentuated the positive because of the group interview format. Individual interviews could diminish the possibility of social desirability. Likewise, interviews could be combined with a survey of all faculty to gauge the extent to which perspectives were representative. Fourth, we did not solicit the perspectives of students with and without intellectual disability on this important topic. Understanding the experiences of all members of the inclusive classroom could extend these findings and provide a richer portrait of the impact of inclusion. We especially encourage future researchers to involve students with intellectual disability in these studies.

### **Implications for Practice**

This study has several implications for supporting the inclusion of college students with intellectual disability in academic coursework. First, these findings could inform a campus' initiatives in the areas of diversity, culture, and inclusion. University administration should be made aware of the potential benefits faculty and students experience as a result of involvement, particularly the benefits of increased disability awareness among students and improved instructional practices for all students. As a result, faculty involved could be encouraged to improve curriculum and teaching strategies to be more universally-designed, which in turn, might strengthen a university's diversity mission as a whole.

Second, the findings suggest a strong motivator of faculty participation focused on a faculty member's prior connections to individuals with intellectual disability. As a way to build strong faculty-student rapport, IPSE program staff should consider connecting students with intellectual disability and faculty members before the semester begins. By providing this platform for communication and personal connection, faculty might have the ability to strengthen their class inclusivity, increase their own personal awareness, enhance their overall teaching philosophy, and incorporate best practices into their teaching.

Third, these findings could be drawn upon to advocate for the inclusion of students with intellectual disability in a wider range of courses across the university. By referencing the potential benefits of inclusive education for faculty and classmates alike, IPSE program staff could encourage additional faculty to open their classes to students with intellectual disability who want to audit those classes. Such efforts could broaden the types of courses and academic experiences available to students with intellectual disability in ways that more closely mirror those of other college students.

### **Conclusion**

This study provides new insights into the academic inclusion of college students with intellectual disability. Although questions endure about how best to design and deliver inclusive postsecondary education, faculty in our study addressed the positive impact the experience had on themselves and the students in their classes. The case for higher education inclusion is strengthened when there are reciprocal benefits students with disabilities, their classmates, and faculty alike. Institutions committed to this movement should continue to document and disseminate the ways in which their entire community is impacted by their investment in inclusive higher education.



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Table 1

*Summary of Research Questions and Findings*

Area	Themes
Faculty motivations	Desire to educate all learners Curiosity Colleague encouragement Course topic Prior experiences (e.g., family, professional experiences) Other motivations (i.e., diversity, classmate request, student interest, research interest)
Impact on faculty	Methods of teaching Views of student capabilities Views of inclusive education Views of campus culture No change
Impact on classmates	Raising disability awareness Fostering relationships A way to relate Positive experiences Professional growth