Participatory Action Research and Student Perspectives in a Rural Postsecondary Education Program

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Participatory Action Research and Student Perspectives in a Rural Postsecondary Education Program

Abstract
Students with intellectual disabilities have a unique pathway into college, and for many rural areas, this is a relatively new pathway. The reauthorization of the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-315) prioritizes inclusive postsecondary education opportunities with an emphasis on students accessing academic, social, and meaningful employment experiences. However, in this legislation, inclusion is vaguely defined and left to postsecondary education institutions to structure within their program model. This article provides perspectives from students with intellectual disabilities from a postsecondary education program situated on a college campus in a rural town. Through participatory action research, students shared their experiences using a variety of communication modalities and offered a meaningful perspective on the challenges and opportunities faced in a rural setting.

Disciplines
Education

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Students with intellectual disabilities have a unique pathway into college and for many rural areas, this is a relatively new pathway. The reauthorization of the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 prioritizes inclusive postsecondary education opportunities with an emphasis on students accessing academic, social, and meaningful employment experiences. However, in this legislation, inclusion is vaguely defined and left to postsecondary education institutions to structure within their program model. This article provides perspectives from students with intellectual disabilities from a postsecondary education program situated on a college campus in a rural town. Through participatory action research, students shared their experiences using a variety of communication modalities and offered a meaningful perspective on the challenges and opportunities faced in a rural setting.
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Introduction

Postsecondary education (PSE) programs for students with intellectual disabilities (ID) in the United States increased 40% from 2011 to 2017 (Grigal & Hart, 2010; Grigal, Hart, & Weir, 2012; Papay & Griffin, 2013; Think College, 2017; Ticoll, 1995; Westling, Kelley, Cain, & Prohn, 2013). This momentum is due in part to the Higher Education Opportunity Act (P.L. 110-315) (HEOA) of 2008. The HEOA contains several provisions that encourage access to postsecondary educational opportunities for students with ID (Grigal & Hart, 2010; Hart & Grigal, 2010). This is now a primary pathway to community inclusion for students who continue to access the K-12 school system until the age of 21. Programs are praised for providing meaningful access and socially inclusive experiences to students. However, the quality of inclusion and the scope of access to campus life remain unclear and inconsistent (Hendrickson, Therrien, Weeden, Pascarella, & Hosp, 2015; Papay & Bambara, 2012; Uditsky & Hughson, 2012).

An increase in employment-based experiences and securing competitive employment reflects the success of PSE programs (Butterworth, Hall, Smith, Migliore, Winsor, Timmons, & Domin, 2011). Recent data suggests that 68% of students with ID in Transition Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) (i.e., a PSE program) in years 2013-2016 participated in individualized paid employment opportunities either on their campus or in their communities (Grigal, Hart, Smith, Domin, & Sulewski, 2013; Grigal, Hart, Smith, Domin, Sulewski, & Weir, 2014; Grigal, Hart, Smith, Domin, & Weir, 2016). According to the 2016 American Community Survey, the rate of employment for individuals with ID ages 21-60 in the United States was 26.4% (Erickson, Lee, & von Schrader, 2017). In rural communities, nonprofit
disability agencies tend to organize employment opportunities for people with ID with limited fiscal and human resources; thereby forcing agency personnel to limit individualized programming and offer more enclave (i.e., group) work experiences (Molina & Demchak, 2016; Wehman, Brooke, & West, 2006). Careful planning of resources, consideration to employer access, and access to public transportation create added barriers in rural communities where poverty and stagnant job growth are concerns (Kinnison, Fuson, & Cates, 2005; Thiede, Greiman, Weilier, Beda & Conroy, 2017; United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016).

**The Rural College Experience for Students with Intellectual Disabilities**

There are two relevant rural college programs in the literature. Think College Vermont is a nationally recognized program (previously funded by TPSID) situated at the University of Vermont that offers students a continuing education certificate, including (a) person centered planning to map out interests and preferences, (b) peer mentor supports, (c) college courses, and (d) employment internships through coursework or field study based on career interests (Ryan, 2014). The second, Think College Wyoming provides access on several campuses, including Laramie County Community College, Casper College, and the University of Wyoming, offering college courses, peer mentor supports, and employment supports (Tracy, 2017). Both utilize person-centered frameworks to individualize student experiences on the college campus.

Ryan (2014) noted that the lack of transportation presented challenges to rural communities and respective colleges which compounded additional concerns of funding programs like Think College Vermont. Limited options for securing employment amplify this concern with local businesses in the rural communities. In the study, families believed that supports were necessary in order for their children to meet employment outcomes, find
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appropriate transportation, and learn necessary independent living skills. Kirkendall, Douech, and Saladino (2008) indicate that some of these skills mentioned by families can also be supported by residing and participating on college campuses. However, in order to successfully facilitate students going to college in rural communities and returning to rural communities, PSE programs must prioritize meaningful career activities with the goal of paid employment.

Understanding Challenges of PSE Programs

When identifying any college challenges experienced by students with ID, research emphasized parent or guardian perspectives (Neubert & Redd, 2008; Zafft, 2006); faculty, staff, or classroom lecturers perspectives (Gibbons, Cihak, Mynatt, & Wilhoit, 2015; Jones, Harrison, Harp, Sheppard-Jones, 2016; Stefánsdóttir, G., & Björnsdóttir, K. 2015; Wintle, 2012; Zafft, 2006); or nondisabled college student views (Gibbons, et al., 2015; Griffin, Mello, Glover, Carter, & Hodapp, 2016; Griffin, Summer, McMillan, Day, & Hodapp, 2012; Hafner, 2008; Westling et al., 2013). While these perspectives yielded useful information to the field, students enrolled in PSE programs had an equally important view—if not the most important view—to expand the fields’ understanding of college students with ID. Promising studies in the field included student voice and perspectives (Causton-Theoharis, 2009; Mock & Love, 2012; Ryan, Yuan, Karambelas, Lampugnale, Parrott, Sagar, & Terry, 2015) and a few studies that gathered perspectives using multiple methods research (Paiewonsky, 2011; Paiewonsky, et al., 2010; Prohn, 2014). This study aimed to identify a research method solution to what many researchers cite as a significant challenge to exploring perspectives with a population of individuals that may require additional communication supports and modalities. The purpose of this study was to strengthen the understanding of student perspectives in PSE programs through the use of
participatory action research methods. The research question addressed in this study was: How do students with intellectual disabilities who are going to college through an alternative pathway describe their college experiences and what is the significance of those experiences to their lives as they define them through words, pictures, and videos?

Methodology

Participatory Action Research (PAR) allows for a diversified mode of communication and expression of perspectives and actively engages students in the process of development of and reflection upon their own perspectives (Lorenz & Kolb, 2009). While the methodological approach to the study was PAR, it was complemented by additional descriptive qualitative methods to increase triangulation and reliability of data collected. PAR is “inquiry that is done by or with insiders of organization or community, but never to them” (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p.3). Fals Borda (2006) describes the movement of action research as a period when people develop empathy towards others and their experiences, called vivencia (meaning life experience). This study employed an action research framework for exploring student perspectives of PSE experiences with emphasis on capturing their voices as opposed to exploring outsider perspectives from program staff and other nondisabled college students. The study focused on a PAR process of students identifying topics relevant to them; revealing emerging issues and themes for discussion with students; and creating a path for engagement through an action-based activity to advocate in order to present ideas and incite change.

Caldwell, Hauss, and Stark (2009), in addition to Paiewonsky (2011), utilized PAR techniques by adopting PAR approaches in various points of their research plan. Caldwell et al. (2009) provided multiple interview techniques (i.e., telephone surveys, focus groups, electronic surveys)
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to ensure participant responses were collected and properly interpreted within research.

Similarly, Paiewonsky (2011) offered multiple interview techniques (i.e., video responses, focus groups, and individual interviews) and provided opportunities for students’ participation in the data analysis process by asking them to identify emergent themes in their videos. This is a methodical approach common in video data analysis (Lemke, 2007). Additionally, Paiewonsky assisted students with publishing their research findings as well (see Paiewonsky et al., 2010). The current study expanded on the techniques of earlier researchers by developing a schedule that included facilitated support with brainstorming, concept mapping, and technology usage.

Table 1

*Video Project and Sessions Timeline*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Data Collection Timeline</th>
<th>Session Length</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured focus group</td>
<td>Week 1</td>
<td>75 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to video project</td>
<td>Week 2</td>
<td>120 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to use iPads/Cameras</td>
<td>Week 3</td>
<td>120 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical support</td>
<td>Week 4</td>
<td>120 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concept mapping</td>
<td>Week 5-6</td>
<td>120 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking pictures/media</td>
<td>Week 7-9</td>
<td>120 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing raw footage</td>
<td>Week 10</td>
<td>120 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking pictures/media</td>
<td>Week 11-12</td>
<td>120 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editing media</td>
<td>Week 11-12</td>
<td>120 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Publishing stage</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>120 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual interviews</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5-20 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student feedback on themes</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>120 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presenting project to community</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>240 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Collection

The “College Experience Program” was located at a college that is characterized as a four-year liberal arts, residential college located in a rural town in the Northeastern United States. The college served approximately 2,000 students, of which 1,200 are described as full-time, most of them resided on campus in residential housing. Approximately 75% of the campus population identified themselves as female, and the student-to-faculty ratio was 12:1. The program was affiliated with the college for approximately ten years as an established initiative on campus and served 12 school-age students with ID between the ages of 18 and 21, from a local school district in the community. At the time of the study, the program enrolled 5 young women and 7 young men with the primary classification of ID. Students applied to the program during their final year of high school at the age of 17 or 18. They were accepted based on their desire to attend college and the number of slots available in the program. The program was overseen by a special education teacher (from the school district), a teacher assistant, and also supported by nonprofit disability agency staff members on campus that supported adults with ID attending the college. None of the College Experience students lived on campus, they resided at home with their families; this was due to lack of dorm availability on the college campus. Students
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Participated in the College Experience Program between two and four years, based upon interest level and funding. At the time of the study, this program was defined as a hybrid-model program in which more than 50% of a student’s day was spent participating in nondisabled, inclusive college experiences on campus (Grigal & Hart, 2010).

The lead researcher served as an external consultant on inclusive postsecondary education programming for the program staff prior to the study. The researcher had no prior relationship with the students in the study. The College Experience Program students were invited to participate in the study to describe their college experiences. Of the 12 enrolled students, six students agreed to fully participate in all aspects of the study for fifteen weeks. As previously stated, the study explored student perspectives on their PSE experiences—not to find categorical truths of their stories or time on a college campus, but to construct a thick description of students’ lives in higher education which is a concept framed within a grounded theory approach to research (Charmaz, 2000; Silverman, 2005).

Table 2

*Types and Frequency of Data Collection*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Collection Strategy</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant Observation</td>
<td>Field notes</td>
<td>4 sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff interviews</td>
<td>Audio recorder</td>
<td>4 interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student focus group</td>
<td>Audio recorder</td>
<td>1 session</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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The authors collected qualitative data through a student focus group session, individual follow-up interviews, and staff interviews. In addition, researchers collected student-created media projects (including photos and videos). Multiple sources served as data collection points for the students.

Table 3

Brief Descriptions of the Participants in the Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years at Program</th>
<th>Interests</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Mark”</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Sports and friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“John”</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Sports, nature, friends</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Students each participated in a semi-structured focus group session with 20 open-ended interview questions, a video sharing session, and individual follow-up interviews. During the follow-up interview, the lead researcher asked the following questions of students:

1. How would you describe your access to the campus?
2. How would you describe your experience at college to others?
3. In what ways has the program and/or college changed you as a person?
4. Tell me about the mentors in the program.
5. Tell me about some of the pictures that you took.

Through the focus groups and interviews, additional open-ended questions were asked to gain more insight into student perspectives as needed. The authors ensured triangulation of data by
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asking four staff members’ similar open-ended questions. Staff longevity ranged with four staffing having a minimum of two years and two staff members having four years of experience.

Video Data

Participating students collected hundreds of pictures through the use of iPads and digital cameras. Students decided which pictures and videos to share with the group and which images were collected as part of the study. As part of the video sharing session, students discussed many topics, including classes, campus activities, favorite locations on campus, and people they knew on campus. The lead researcher transcribed and analyzed the video projects aligning with basic elements of the grounded theory methodological approach as described in the analysis section (Charmaz, 2006). The lead researcher asked students the following questions to interpret video data with students:

1. Why did you choose to take this picture?
2. Tell me what you see in this picture.
3. Why do you think this event is important to you?
4. How do you feel about this picture?

Aggregating the video project transcripts with the remaining student data ensured that the video projects were a collective part of understanding their perspectives and capturing the essence of their experiences.

Analysis

The lead researcher initially coded the transcripts line-by-line, resulting in over 175 individual codes for students. The qualitative analysis software tool, NVivo10, assisted the
researcher in organizing the codes; initial codes were grouped into 19 focused codes as a way to reconvene the data, a strategy employed by Charmaz (2006). Focused coding is a process for creating categories from line-by-line codes (Charmaz, 2006). The lead researcher gave emphasis to line-by-line codes related to social, developmental, and educational topics as described by students to begin analysis. However, once categories were formed, the category of employment emerged as an additional category from the line-by-line codes. From these focused codes, emerging themes developed, forming the basis of a concept. Throughout the study, the lead researcher sought students’ agreement of all concepts and themes during focus group sessions and interviews.

The researchers added an additional coding process to examine student experience called theory coding. This coding process provided a way to integrate explanatory information to create substantive concepts to key topics (Glaser, 1978). The specific codes used during analysis were: 1) contexts as it relates to student experiences, 2) contingencies of experiences based on staff involvement, 3) degree of inclusion for students on the campus, 4) interaction on campus for students, and 5) identity of students. The lead researcher analyzed areas of the transcripts where these five concepts were explained, described, or illustrated, in an effort to determine how students defined their experiences, interactions, and extent of membership. The lead researcher presented emerging ideas to students during focus groups where they discussed the topics. In addition to identifying relevant meaning, the researchers used the following conceptual questions as a framework for analyzing the data to ensure that priority was given to student perspectives and the context of their experiences as they described them:

1. How are students describing the program and/or college?
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2. What are the contingencies for students on the campus?

3. How is growth described?

4. What are the similarities and differences in perceived experiences?

5. What is the role of staff and mentors with student experiences?

6. How do students view themselves on the campus and within the larger community?

The extensive coding and questioning allowed for student perspectives to be prioritized and conceptualized into larger themes within the study.

Results

Students believed that having physical access to the campus and an opportunity to develop relationships with other people led to their overall growth as adults. However, students remained concerned about their ability to seek paid employment once they exited the program.

This section addresses key findings from the student video presentations and interviews that related to their employment experiences and perceptions of access and growth.

Career Development Activities versus Paid Employment Opportunities

In addition to becoming more independent, students recognized that pursuing paid employment was a primary factor for attending college. The authors found that five of the six students expressed significant concern over the limited opportunities for paid employment as part of their college experience. Although students shared positive experiences with developing relationships, being independent, and learning new skills, their lack of employment opportunities overshadowed many of the positive experiences, particularly for those exiting the program during that year.
Students participated in a vocational class as part of the PSE program that taught specific employability skills and provided students with an opportunity to practice those skills on the campus and in the community through volunteer experiences. The required course was offered every semester only to students with ID. John shared one of the skills he learned in the class was “how to interview for a job.” Monica shared that she “learned how to get a job.” Aside from these comments, students expressed concern and frustration about the lack of vocational preparation they received. When asked about the employment skills John had specifically learned, he commented, “Not as much as you would think.” In agreement with John, Monica expressed, “I didn’t learn anything, but I did jobs, yes, I did. Just because I did jobs doesn’t mean I learned stuff.” Christine said she was “still waiting” for paid employment.

Students believed they demonstrated effort in finding paid work and establishing themselves as employees in their communities. Monica shared, “I try to get a job, but it’s not working out.” When asked if she knew why she had difficulty, she explained, “Because I am in a program, so I don’t get paid for working. I am working for free.” Monica described the volunteer component of the program where students were placed in the community for a few hours a day to practice employability skills. Staff explained that most students exit with volunteer experiences as part of their employment training. During the time of the study, the program received a cut in school-based stipends for employment internships. These stipends did not originate from employers, but from the school. This fiscal change made visible the glaring problem of employers not paying students to work in their businesses. John, who was about to exit the program, felt frustration about his employment opportunities. John said, “I don’t like the volunteer part because I have been volunteering at the [store], but I would like to work there and
get paid.” Students expressed uneasiness about their futures, but they believed they would eventually obtain paid employment. Mark expressed this sentiment by saying, “I don’t know where I will be working, but it shouldn’t be far away from home, so I can walk there.” When the lead researcher asked if everyone agreed about transportation barriers, all students resounded “yes”. Students did not capture any pictures or videos of their vocational experiences even though they had full access to cameras during the study. This omission could infer several key concerns. Students may not value those work experiences, or they may not realize those experiences are an aspect of their college experience.

**Important Skills for Life**

Students definitively believed they had learned critical daily life skills as a result of their college experiences. Students talked extensively about the importance of being independent and having self-sufficiency. When asked about skills learned, Hanna and Monica commented, “college helps me go to classes, be on time,” and “it basically helps you [to get] oriented in life.” The students felt that a large part of participating in college was learning time management and organizational strategies. Alex reflected on his strategy for getting to class on time: “You have to work hard and be on time. That’s why I am always checking the clock. To make sure I am going to be on time for class.” Skills are relative to their own level of independence and are contextualized as part of their past and current experiences on the campus. For two students, being independent meant having the physical freedom to explore the campus on their own and with that, the ability to go from place to place as noted in this conversation with two students:

**Interviewer:** What comes to your mind when you think about college?

**Mark:** More freedom.
Interviewer: How is this different from high school?

Alex: There’s more time between classes. Time to unwind before we go back to classes.

Interviewer: Give me another example.

Mark: I can go to the gym by myself.

Alex: I can go around campus by myself.

Later in the focus group session, Alex remarked that working on these skills took time and practice and he compared his understanding of working on skills to his nondisabled college peers as noted in this conversation:

Interviewer: How does college prepare you?

Alex: Well, people work really hard here, because if you don’t, you won’t get a good grade in your classes and you won’t be able to come back. You also have to know how to talk to people in your class and not make rude comments. I’m working on that.

An important skill reported by students during the focus group was learning budgeting and money management. In several examples, this translated to students feeling a sense of financial responsibility and independence at college. Students consistently used the word “budgeting” to describe any mathematical skills they had learned at college. Christine shared, “I learned counting change and budgeting, so math.” Mark focused on other aspects of financial literacy and expressed that he “paid for [his] own lunch” and “[had his] own money at college.” All six students had at least one picture of a meal and the cafeteria in their media clip. This indicated meals or the cafeteria space was an important aspect of socializing at college which allowed for a sense of autonomy on the campus.
Students making choices and being independent emerged throughout the media projects. Two students, John and Monica, began their video projects with a dialogue from a staff member about why college was important. In the videos, the staff member said:

My favorite part of [college] is that you guys get to decide where you go and what you do all day long and that you are in charge of driving your own bus and working on all of your goals and dreams for the future. And all we get to do is help you, so you get to be in charge and decide that the things that are important to you, you can do.

What was significant about this clip was that students choose to interview this staff member and independently select this clip to add to their media project. During the follow-up interview when both students were asked about why they chose to include this media clip, the students agreed that it represented their program well. Monica shared that she included it because “this explains my program and why I like it” and John said “because here [meaning college] we get to make choices.” Being encouraged to be independent and make choices was a new concept to all of the students (as compared to high school) and one that students valued enough to prioritize in their description of college.

**Sense of Self**

Student identity and expressing oneself was an essential aspect of several students’ college experiences. A particular example of this was Alex who shared his experiences of going to a musical as part of a college class. He shared how going to college transformed his outlook on life:

It was so beautiful that when I was a kid I never got to see this musical…. [Now at college] when I saw the musical, it changed my heart and my decisions and
personality. Like I used to be foolish all the time for all these teenage years, but I gave up the foolish nonsense and started to focus on really nice things. Things like from my childhood and things of having fun with my family.

Alex shared outside of the interview that he was shy prior to coming to college and in this passage, it is evident that he found a sense of self in his experience with music in this college course.

Another student focused her video project on an experience she had with a college student in one of her classes. By capturing images of tattoos, Christine shared personal aspirations of others in her classes. This intent was captured in the following conversation with the lead researcher:

Interviewer: Tell me about your project.

Christine: I took picture[s] of people’s tattoos on campus. I like tattoos and I like their meaning.

Interviewer: Tell me about one of the tattoos you have a picture of [in your project].

Christine: Well, this one here (points to the tattoo of “Never Lose Hope) … she had difficult times in her life and got this tattoo to remind her to never lose hope when things are difficult. I like that idea.

Interviewer: What about this one (points to the tattoo of symbols at the end of the video)?

Christine: She is a girl in my class who has a neat tattoo. I asked her about it and she said she wanted to be different from others, so she got this tattoo. She is different and I like that.

Interviewer: You mentioned you were getting a tattoo. What will your tattoo be like?
Christine: Not sure yet, but I want to show I am different and that I won’t lose hope either.

This experience for Christine demonstrated that she critically reflected on aspects of introspection of others and made comparisons to herself. She translated each person’s tattoo and attributed it to a positive quality about that individual. Her entire video project was overlaid with tattoos and one or two words to describe each tattoo. All of the students had similar connections but with different topics, such as boyfriends or friends they met.

**Discussion**

All of the students expressed their deepest interest in being a part of their communities and being able to contribute as working members of that community. Unfortunately, a majority of the students felt unprepared for paid employment. There was general consensus that their college experiences allowed them to become more independent and establish important relationships at college in their classes and on campus. However, students believed that their volunteer-based work experiences presented considerable challenges as they tried to secure employment post-program. Within this study, there was an exception to this, the program staff clarified that one student was participating in paid employment, but the other five students were participating in unpaid volunteer experiences in their communities. In addition, two of the participants were in their first year of the program and the staff would not expect all six students to feel as equally prepared given their length of time in the program. These key points still raise concerns about paid employment for students in the program and continue to highlight a major barrier denoted by students. Furthering this concern is that at least one student was unaware they were receiving wages from an employer. In an already limited resourced community, every
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employment opportunity matters and for these students, their experiences deviate from their desired outcomes post-program.

This is not an uncommon story in rural communities as Morgan and Openshaw (2011) explain that employment rates in rural communities for individual with disabilities is significantly lower as compared to urban communities. Further diminishing this rate is that students with ID are significantly less likely to obtain paid employment once they transition into their communities (Kinnison et al., 2005). The students in this study shared a similar concern that Morgan and Morgan (2006) mention about rural communities having additional challenges with individualized work opportunities such as transportation. What makes this study unique is that the students had those individualized opportunities, but they were volunteer-based. However, it was unclear if the employment site was connected to individualized goals. Customized employment experiences are an essential step for best practice (Wehmeyer et al., 2009), but for rural communities, limited options may require that programs begin with paid employment opportunities rather than internships or volunteer experiences.

Students in this college experience were engaged in a variety activities, all in pursuit of learning new skills and fostering more independence. Students reported a tremendous benefit to learning budgeting and banking and having opportunities to manage them own money on campus. This was a particularly common theme within Mosoff, Greenholtz, Hurtado, and Jo (2009) which explored experiences of a PSE program from students with ID. Mosoff et al. (2009) found that students believed attending college classes, participating in social activities, and learning new skills were all critical to their success after college. The authors cited numerous instances where students felt a sense of independence on the campus and were able to make
connections with nondisabled peers. This can be recognized as well in this study when Alex compared himself to nondisabled peers when thinking about study habits. Another example occurred when Christine reflected on personal meaning through tattoos. As one should expect, each student emphasized different skills they learned such as budgeting, learning to positively communicate in a college class, being on time, or paying for food independently at the college cafeteria.

Attending college represented a higher level of independence not previously afforded to students in high school. Students navigated the campus independently, which helped them define “becoming an adult.” Arnett (2004) describes what adulthood means for any college student by indicating that “becoming an adult today means becoming self-sufficient, [and] learning to stand alone as an independent person” (p.209). The student perspectives on adulthood shared in this study correspond with most college student views; they increased their self-sufficiency, responsibility, and financial independence. However, careful evaluation through a community-based instructional lens must be utilized to determine if instructional activities have relevancy and authenticity within the community. Collins (2003) offered community-based instruction guidelines for rural settings on how students can learn functional skills while using local resources and instructional approaches within the community. College settings allow for a smooth transition into the community; particularly so, for rural communities with technical schools or postsecondary institutions. For some students, like Hannah and John, independence denoted walking to the gym by themselves. Alternatively, for Alex, independence was defined by making social connections and maintaining relationships without staff support. Given individual student perspectives on independence, growth signifies personal development. A
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successful program framework provides both a clear path to independence (student-defined) and an individualized program with skill building, access to resources, and community-based instruction.

A large number of students in the PSE program worked in unpaid positions through volunteer-based community assignments. Although students expressed concern about the unpaid nature, these work-oriented experiences were encouraging given the previously cited lack of experiences and outcomes for students with ID in other school-based settings (United States Government Accountability Office, 2012). It is evident that placing students in the community was a step forward for this program. However, these opportunities may be more beneficial if there is a focus on obtaining competitive employment earlier in the program. For rural communities, this is especially critical to consider as there are fewer resources and employment opportunities. While PSE experiences demonstrate a clear linkage to increased gainful employment, the student perspectives in this study suggest that programs need to expand customized, paid employment experiences to improve outcomes for students in rural communities.

Conclusion

When considering college-aged students without disabilities, Arnett (2004) notes that 43% of full-time college students pursue some form of employment during their first year of college. Reasons for pursuing employment varied for students, but generally, students are finding jobs because they want access to short-term cash or to refine their career interests (Arnett, 2006). Students within this study echoed similar reasons for wanting to obtain a paid position and indicated a lack of opportunity to have paid employment as defined by the program model to
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support employability skill development. This finding expands, in a qualitative sense, what we already know about the limitations with paid employment for students with ID. Programs should think critically about the use of volunteer experiences, as a temporary solution for skill development. If programs focused on customizing experiences with paid employment in mind, this could maximize the use of resources in a rural community and further support the notion for all that individuals with ID are employable and valuable to the workplace. Next steps for programs are to consider natural employment pools at college, through the use of work study programs or customized employment goals that focus on applying and securing employment immediately in the first years of the program. Other considerations are to emphasize entrepreneurial efforts or support students in finding employment that allows them to work remotely at home.

The Action in Participatory Action Research

Immediately upon completion of the study, several of the students and program staff planned to present their video projects to others in the program and additional program staff. Initial planning efforts included the idea of a small gathering. However, as interest grew, a larger community forum emerged from discussions with students and staff. The community forum was well attended with over 75 people participating in the event, including college faculty and staff. Students presented their videos and led a discussion about their perspective on their college experiences. This served as an important outlet to share their work and engage in effective action planning.

Based on the information collected from the student focus group, video presentation, student-led video projects, and discussions generated at the community forum, program staff
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began taking action on the following items: 1) increasing vocational preparation and paid employment experiences, 2) diversifying the recruitment of paid peer mentors, and 3) increasing access to campus facilities throughout the college day. Most notably for this study was the first recommendation that students presented.

Program staff responded to these recommendations in several ways. First, a strategic plan was implemented to assess and improve vocational preparation for students in the program. As a result, the program focused efforts on customizing employment options for students on the campus and in the community. The program included paid employment goals on transition plans for most students. Second, the program increased the diversity of peer mentors to make them representative of the students in the PSE program. Finally, staff implemented a project-based curriculum to increase independence on the campus and opportunities to engage with more college students. Each student receives an individualized schedule, project plan, and work-based training plan to support their growth in the program. While all three recommendations were addressed, the planning and implementation of those changes is too early to report tangible outcomes.
References


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