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Student Perspectives on Peer Supports in an Inclusive Postsecondary Education Context

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This qualitative study investigates the experiences of students with intellectual disability with peer supports at a large Midwestern university with an inclusive postsecondary education program (IPSE). Participants were students with intellectual disability and peer supports (i.e., mentors or tutors) associated with the IPSE. Students with intellectual disability are valued as partners in developing and sustaining peer supports, and their perspectives are emphasized in this study. Results revealed similarities and differences between the students with intellectual disability and peer supports in their perceptions of friendship, college life, and supports. Amount of time in the program also emerged as a factor in student and peer perceptions. Students described various activities and peer mentor qualities that supported academic success as well as positive, trusting relationships. Implications for research and practice are discussed, including suggestions for peer support training and fostering personal growth toward inclusive mindsets.

Keywords: peer mentoring, postsecondary education, inclusive education, intellectual disability

Inclusive postsecondary education programs (IPSEs) for youth with intellectual disability, often known as transition to postsecondary education for youth with intellectual disability (TPSIDs), aim to support endeavors demonstrating values of human difference and contribution (Grigal & Papay, 2018). These programs recognize students with intellectual disability as contributing members of the broader campus community through academic engagement, career development, and social activities (Jones et. al, 2015). An established model for promoting natural and inclusive supports is through peer mentors. Research in the K-12 settings has found that peer supports can promote positive academic, social, employment, and mental health outcomes (Carter, 2017). Peer-mediated interventions in high school facilitate significant increases in peer interactions, social connections, and learning outcomes for students with intellectual disability (Asmus et al., 2016). Brock & Huber (2017) identified peer support arrangements to be an evidence-based practice for promoting social interactions for secondary students with severe disabilities in core academics and elective courses. Translating these impactful peer support practices to IPSEs is a recent and ongoing venture.

Ninety-two percent of IPSEs offer mentoring as part of the overall supports offered (Grigal et al., 2018) drawing from existing research-based resources, such as those compiled by Think College (ThinkCollege.net), a national organization for supporting and improving inclusive transition to postsecondary education for youth with intellectual disability. While research is emerging associated with the outcomes of peer mentoring programs, little is known about the experiences of students with intellectual disability involved in peer mentoring as described by the students themselves. The purpose of this study is to better understand the impact of peer supports from the lived experiences of students with intellectual disability attending an IPSE, as well as their peer supports. We use the overarching term “peer supports” throughout to reference both types of peer supports offered by the particular IPSE in this study: peer tutors (i.e., peers whose primary task is to support IPSE students with academic life, such as coursework, study habits, and organizational skills) and peer mentors (i.e., peers focused on social and emotional supports for building connections and a sense of belonging on campus).

Social engagement has been identified to enhance one’s quality of life, academic performance, increased happiness, and a network of supports; whereas social and emotional isolation is linked to depression and suicidal thinking (Eisenman et al., 2017). Despite the known benefits of inclusive education, including social engagement, students with intellectual disability largely receive their education in settings separate from their peers without disabilities (Morningstar et al., 2017), thus limiting social engagement opportunities while in school. Social engagement strengthens the social capital for students with disabilities, which in turn expands transition and adult life outcomes (Trainor et al., 2012). Social capital refers to intangible resources embedded within interpersonal relationships or social institutions and friendships, and is particularly valuable for youth with disabilities because of the potential to access both tangible and intangible support networks as they face challenges in the adult worlds of employment, postsecondary education, and community (Trainor et al., 2013). One way to enhance the social capital among students with intellectual disability enrolled in IPSE programs is by broadening their social networks within the university. Social networking can help all students locate supportive and reciprocatory relationships, as well as facilitate broader opportunities for building social capital (Daly, 2010). The IPSE where participants from this study were enrolled has a specific focus on broadening student social networks to support engagement and social capital through meaningful and facilitative relationships with others, including peer mentoring.

Research on social inclusion and intellectual disability calls for going beyond simple location in the community (Amado et al., 2013), and the peer support model used in this study promotes peer support as dynamic and reciprocal, utilizing both formal and informal relationships to facilitate personal development and social inclusion. We conceptualized a mentor as a same-aged peer who listens and guides while providing perspectives, resources, and friendship (Brown et al., 2010), as well as serving as a connector to the broader campus community. Through efforts of IPSEs in promoting natural and inclusive social supports, students with intellectual disability will be better prepared to engage in relationships and social networks that can increase social capital leading to positive academic, employment and community participation outcomes (Trainor et al., 2013).

We have expanded the lens of extant research by examining peer mentor programs through the voices of the students with intellectual disability themselves. We emphasize the perspectives of students with intellectual disability in investigating the impact of peer supports and believe they are essential in understanding complex social experiences during this critical time in their lives. Furthermore, as opportunities for postsecondary education increase for students with intellectual disability (Grigal et. al, 2015), the findings from this study can inform future efforts to develop respectful and reciprocal social and cultural supports. Therefore, we were interested in understanding the experiences and perspectives of students with intellectual disability and their peer supports as they both were engaged in this relationship. This study adds to existing literature to extend our knowledge of the actions and impact of peer supports within IPSE contexts by asking:

1. In what ways do students with intellectual disability perceive and experience supports provided by peers in an IPSE context?
2. How do peer supports view the impact of their roles on themselves and their peers with intellectual disability?

Method

This qualitative study includes two sets of participants: peer supports (n = 5) and students with intellectual disability (n = 5; see Table 1). All peer support participants in this study engaged in their roles with IPSE students for at least two hours per week. Our peer supports sample included peer tutors (n = 3; and peer mentors (n = 2). Both types of peers were trained to be peers first, meaning that they were not “in charge” of IPSE students, and communication should be relational and reciprocal. Each type received additional training on their particular set of objectives, through various tools, strategies, and information as needed. For example, peer tutors were trained on how to support students in using individualized writing strategies. In this IPSE, peer tutors do not attend class with IPSE students. Peer mentors were trained in how to support IPSE students in finding and participating in campus clubs and activities that aligned with their interests. Furthermore, all peer supports attended by bi-weekly meetings with IPSE staff for the purpose of problem solving and action planning to better meet the needs of IPSE students.

Peer tutors in this IPSE are not assigned to one student, but rather offered support in small group settings within the natural campus context on a weekly recurring schedule. For example, studying in a large group study area within the library where there may be more than one peer tutor and IPSE student present or attending a sporting “watch party” at the union. The peer mentors who participated in this study were affiliated with Greek life. Therefore, they were supporting IPSE students who had shown an interest in Greek life to offer social inclusion into their particular sorority or fraternity. In this circumstance, only one student with intellectual disability was engaged at a particular house; however, there were often small groups of sorority or fraternity mentors providing support. From here on out, data on peer supports will be distinguished as either peer mentors or peer tutors. IPSE students were purposively sampled to include students during their first (n = 2) second years (n = 3) in a two-year IPSE program.

All ten participants attended a large Midwestern university of nearly 30,000 students and were between 18-23 years old during data collection. This IPSE is run by the university and does not partner with a school district, therefore all IPSE students had graduated from high school. Furthermore, the IPSE is a two-year-long non-degree seeking program leading to an approved university certificate with an emphasis on career preparation. Students with intellectual disability enroll in typical college classes for college credit as a non-degree student. They receive needed accommodations through the university's disability services supporting their access to their academic program. Extended and modified academic supports from the IPSE program are provided in partnership with course instructors. Students also receive career development opportunities, including paid internships and campus and off-campus employment in areas of career interest.

Peer tutors involved with the IPSE were recruited for the study during a regularly scheduled meeting. Peer mentors were members of the Greek life community on campus and volunteered on behalf of their fraternity or sorority. They were recruited during a regularly scheduled meeting with the IPSE peer supports coordinator. Students with intellectual disability were recruited during their regularly scheduled advising meetings with IPSE support staff. All participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that either participation or refusal to participate would not impact their standing in the IPSE in any capacity.

Data collection comprised of two focus groups with peer supports and two focus groups with students with intellectual disability. Peer supports and IPSE student focus groups were conducted separately to allow participants to share potentially sensitive information that they might not be comfortable sharing in the presence of their peer supports or mentees. Focus group inquiry served as the primary data collection method specifically because of its interactive nature, as we hoped that discussion among group members would elicit a range of responses. Focus groups offered the participants an opportunity to examine and critique the peer support experience from both their individual and distinct perspectives as well as through the collective viewpoint of the group (Gibbs, 2012). The lead researcher, a former high school special education teacher and graduate research assistant trained in qualitative methodology, facilitated all focus groups using a semi-structured guide with questions and probes for eliciting information associated with each research question (see Table 2). Each focus group contained two to three participants and lasted between 25-50 minutes. At the time of data collection, all participants had been or were a peer support or student for at least one semester. Audio recordings of each focus group were transcribed by the lead author and entered into the data management software Dedoose (Dedoose 8.1.8, SocioCultural Research Consultants, LLC) for analysis.

This qualitative study used a grounded approach to data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2009), in which directed yet open-ended discussion allowed for deep inquiry around emerging themes rather than starting with an established set of explicit questions and themes (Bhattacharya, 2017). Open coding was conducted on all transcripts by both authors (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This involved first segmenting data into meaningful expressions with emergent codes for organizing the data. Once organized in this fashion, data were then coded using a set of codes using agreed-upon definitions (see Table 3).

All excerpts were then sorted by codes and examined for emergent themes (Saldaña, 2013). Data triangulation, a qualitative research procedure for establishing trustworthiness (Brantlinger et al., 2005), was employed by engaging with extant literature related to specific themes to define and conceptualize how the themes aligned with existing information (Tracy, 2010). Finally, axial coding was used to reorganize and refocus initial categories (Saldaña, 2013). These methods supported the identification of themes, outliers, and potentially disconfirming data.

Confirmability of the data analysis and results occurred across several stages. First each researcher independently coded transcripts and then met at multiple points throughout the data analysis process to discuss discrepancies, reach agreement in code definitions, and identify summative themes (Denzin et al., 2018). Dedoose (Dedoose 8.1.8, SocioCultural Research Consultants, LLC) was used to identify, organize, extract and analyze code-specific results. This online qualitative analysis system is capable of identifying frequencies, patterns, and themes across all data. Throughout the process, the researchers wrote analytic memos describing emerging themes and potential relationships among codes (Charmaz & Flick, 2014) and frequently met to discuss findings. An audit trail was conducted by the second author with established qualitative research expertise to substantiate that sufficient time was given to establishing dependability and confirmability throughout the data collection and analysis (Brantlinger et al., 2005). This involved first examining and reviewing a subset (25%) of the transcripts, the codebook, and all coding procedures to confirm consistency of both the coding procedures and thematic findings. Finally, the researchers reached out to all participants to member check the accuracy of findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Two participants, one peer tutor and one IPSE student, responded and met with the lead researcher individually by phone to provide feedback on findings. These measures reduced the potential for researcher bias that may have been derived from the lead researcher's personal relationships with participants as the peer supports coordinator for the IPSE under study.

Findings

Findings indicate peer support has a positive impact on both peer supports and students with intellectual disability, although divergent findings between and within the two groups emerged. IPSE students with intellectual disability described their experiences with peer supports in terms of personal connections and individual goals for social engagement. Peer supports primarily reported new understandings of intellectual disability and inclusion, positive relationships, and personal growth and development in preparation for future careers. The analysis also revealed differences among participants based on how long they had been involved with the IPSE program. Findings are organized into three sections: IPSE student findings, peer support findings, and across-group analysis.

How do Students with Intellectual Disability Attending an IPSE Perceive and Experience Peer Supports?

IPSE students reported academic supports when in high school were provided by paraprofessionals or were described as non-existent. In the IPSE, differing perspectives emerged regarding the role of peers and the types of peer supports IPSE students were

seeking. For example, two of the five students lived in campus dormitories, which enhanced their social opportunities and day-to-day life pertaining to the campus social contexts. Students largely viewed peer supports as helping them with whatever they might need, whether that be course assignments, getting around campus, or attending a social event. In other words, IPSE students were comfortable with being supported by a peer to navigate college life. Two of the five students reported they had never had peer supports before, and two said they had had peer mentors in the past (i.e., high school), but did not find them helpful or supportive. Four types of social supports were evident across student comments: academic-focused, emotional, informational, and receiving feedback. These supports were valued to a varying extent and at different points in the program, revealing the individual and dynamic experiences of college life.

Academic Support.

All students indicated academic-related supports as important, particularly during the first semester of the program. Academic supports were not limited to course content, but extended to important organizational and technology skills necessary to access course materials and complete homework and assignments. Two students in their first year described peer tutors' primary roles as helping them "get work done" in reference to homework. Jake, who lived in the dorm, considered all persons working for the IPSE to be there to help him with his classes; this included IPSE staff (i.e., non-undergraduate IPSE employees with coordinating responsibilities) and peer supports. Most students, however, recognized peer supports as their same-age peers and described connecting with them over shared experiences of college life and with the specific cultural norms of the university. They described spending time in the library "just hanging out" with their peer tutors as one of their favorite social activities:

Nicole: Well, um, I love hanging out with the peer mentors, and I hung out at the Union and I just like, I love to hang out with people because I love to join lots of people hanging out with me. It's really fun and I really enjoyed it, hanging out with peer mentors.

Typical undergraduate life comes with less structured time than high school, and this student illustrated how they often enjoyed filling that time with informal social exchanges with peers in settings around campus that were conducive to also studying together.

Emotional Support.

Academic and social supports were entwined with emotional support, especially when students were challenged by higher expectations and new university experiences. The stress students felt about academic and social performance was mediated by the emotional support provided by peers. For example, this student described her agency in disclosing personal struggles with a trusted peer support:

Maggie: I always knew I wanted to take ASL [American Sign Language] classes here and so I had my Coms [Communication Studies] class, my ASL class. I loved my Coms class but um, there was a speech I had to give. I was very nervous. I was

very, because it was, um, a part of my past and like I had to bring it up, and, it was very like, challenging and hard and that's when like, I talked to [Peer Tutor] for the very first time about like what I was feeling and like, stuff like that, and, I have really enjoyed talking to him about that.

While academic activities often offered a focal point of shared success or struggle, multiple IPSE students described peer tutors as emotionally supportive in other ways. To illustrate, first-year IPSE students attended university events geared toward welcoming all incoming freshmen. Students described those experiences as fun but overwhelming, and they were glad they were with a peer tutor to ease the worry of fitting in.

Nicole: I really liked [Peer Tutor's name], cause he was enjoyable. He was nice, and he did a good job on working with me on my homework, and I just, I like him as a friend. He's funny, he's nice, he's kind, and I really enjoyed him a lot. He was always working on homework with me and he's always saying hi to me. That's a good relationship.

Nicole went on to talk about how she often sees this peer tutor around campus, on the bus and at work, and seeing a familiar face whom she knows when she is navigating different locations on the large university campus was emotionally supportive.

Informational and Feedback Supports.

Other ways in which peer mentors and tutors were viewed as supportive did emerge but were less prevalent than perceptions of academic and emotional supports. Informational supports (e.g., navigating campus, looking up university clubs to join) were noted by some of the students. Marcus noted that a peer tutor helped him call his manager at work:

Marcus: They've helped me with like, calling my manager at work. I work on campus.

CW: Can you tell me more about that situation?

Marcus: Uh, I had something else so I couldn't go to work. I called my boss to tell him I wouldn't be at work.

CW: Were you nervous to do that?

Marcus: I was at first but [Peer Mentor] helped me.

CW: Cool. So in the future do you think you would be able to call your manager and tell them that on your own?

Marcus: Yeah.

This quote illustrated an example of how a peer tutor engaged in supporting students in meeting expected adult roles, in this case communicating with their employer, a new situation not previously experienced. In addition, opportunities were mentioned whereby peers engaged in feedback dialogue with students particularly related to their struggles with social skills. One student described that just knowing that the peer support was there for her if she potentially needed support was affirming.

Social Networking.

IPSE students described peer supports as offering a unique social network. As one student explained, “I kind of like how everybody’s different and not the same, cause if everyone were the same that would be really boring and I would just be uninterested.” Three students described feeling more comfortable engaging in new experiences with peer mentors, such as taking a road trip or going to a family-style dinner at the sorority. While IPSE students’ interests toward building connections across campus varied, most students welcomed the presence of peer supports, especially early in their college experiences when they were less connected to campus life and not yet confident in seeking out social experiences on their own. Lauren reflected:

I think at the beginning of freshman year I know it was emphasized a lot that we try to branch out of [IPSE] a little bit so I remember, I think it was like the second day when we had to go to orientation and there’s all sorts of lights in there and had this like, huge giant picnic thing, and they [IPSE staff] really wanted us and the peer mentors to try to connect with other people, so I think that helped, because now I’m noticing that I don’t really need that support in that area of like, talking to other people, like I have made friends in my English class this semester and outside of [IPSE], so I think that’s kind of helped me.

Some of the IPSE students, like typical college students, arrived on campus with already-formed friendships and connections that facilitated increased social networks. To illustrate, one student connected with students from her church when she arrived on campus. Another had friendships from his high school whom he turned to when engaging in campus activities and events. A third lived off campus and was in a serious romantic relationship in which she spent most of her free time with her partner, rather than engaging in campus activities. Two participants gained social networks from living in the dorms, although their experiences differed; Marcus described making friends through introductions to others by his roommate, whom he was “kind of” friends with, whereas Jake described making friends on his own:

CW: Have the peer mentors helped you make friends or connections outside of [IPSE]?

Jake: Um, no. I made friends on my own. I’ve made some friends on my own.

CW: Nice. How did you make friends on your own?

Jake: Well, I have a lot of girls that are my friends so basically everybody knows me at [Dorm], so it’s not that hard for my name to cross ... to travel from one place to another place.

These different experiences reflect the social opportunities afforded by dorm life and also the individuality of IPSE students in social preferences and confidence. Students felt that the initial presence of peer supports helped them get through the stress of starting out on a large university campus and in the unique IPSE program. For example, Nicole recollects:

Nicole: First week at [University], kind of nerve racking. Also met the peer mentors too and was kind of getting a feel for what college life will be like and, on this

abnormally huge campus. It was in the beginning, and then also just trying to figure out the bus system. That was really tricky at first but with the technology nowadays with my phone, um, adjusting to new classes each semester and also with college finals and the homework assignments, that was kind of stressful.

Nicole's story illustrates how she was able to consider the peer mentors as guides and examples of how to be a college student, but not necessarily someone with whom she had to be friends. Overall, IPSE students cited the peer mentors as essential to their positive college experience and mentioned that they had developed meaningful friendships with at least one peer mentor over time. Overall, IPSE students indicated that they were more likely to engage in planned or spontaneous social events and activities when a peer support was present. Above all, they valued the informal, caring, and reciprocal interactions with peers supports that were embedded in such activities.

Peer Supports Views of the Impact of their Roles on Themselves and their Peers with Intellectual Disability

Themes that emerged for peer supports focused on understandings of their primary roles, and how they learned to co-construct a reciprocal relationship with the IPSE students. These included uncertainty about roles and evolving assumptions about intellectual disability and relationships with IPSE students. All peer support participants in this study reflected upon how their unique relationships developed with one or more IPSE student. Most of these narratives began by describing some trepidation with getting to know the IPSE students. They often described confronting their own assumptions about what students with intellectual disability would, or should, be like. One described reflecting on her own social life to rethink her expectations of IPSE students, "I have to remind myself like, if I'm at the library with my friends I'm not 100 percent focused 100 percent of the time. Like, I take little breaks for myself, so you have to remember that I think." Another peer tutor described a time when an IPSE student exceeded his academic expectations:

Mark: I was getting really stressed out cause of course I'm stressed out with my classes and everything and I was like "okay [IPSE Student], you can work on it. I'm going to take a walk." And he was just like, "okay." And I came back and he had, he had finished three questions by himself and I looked at him like, "see, you can do this, like you really don't need my help on this. Like, you can do this." It was really cool. I remember I was so excited.

Mark is open about the stress he felt in helping this student with academic work. Similarly, another peer tutor described dealing with role ambiguity caused by the tensions between academic tutoring and social support:

Hailey: Yeah, and I think it was from when I started a couple falls ago to now, like, it's so much easier when you just have the mindset of like, this is my friend, this is my peer. Cause like in the beginning I was unsure, like, I was hired to do this job.

Hailey's quote captures a common concern initially raised by participants who were serving as peer tutors, that is, misunderstood pressure to ensure IPSE student academic

success as their personal responsibility. Over time, these peers developed more typical expectations of IPSE student capabilities, which led to being comfortable when students experienced academic consequences of not studying or completing homework. Even more, the peer tutors developed their own systems for supporting IPSE students, and each other, stay organized. For example, they developed communication strategies such as text messaging and Google Docs to help students stay organized. This was largely accomplished outside of initial IPSE staff supervision and was noted to be a critical missing component to the peer training and supports needed to be successful.

Social Networking.

Peer tutor perceptions of social networking on a college campus revealed an initial reluctance to extend beyond the IPSE program “walls.” When asked whether they think social networking is important for IPSE students, Grant commented on the group sentiment:

There’s a lot of like, “make sure you’re getting outside the program,” which I think is super important. But I think a lot of them have very meaningful relationships within the program that should be emphasized as well.

Even more so, Grant juxtaposed hanging out with each other versus doing things outside of the IPSE: “At the end of the day I also don’t want to punish them for just wanting to hang out with each other...or with us, or with [IPSE] people, which I think is a comfort zone for them.” The following quote illustrates how peer supports engaged in campus events with IPSE students but without a focus on social networking.

Hailey: Yeah, [Coffee Break] is fun but I don’t think we like, stepped outside of, like [Coffee Break] was a really great way for us to all like, like family, like everyone gets closer but it doesn’t really step out of that [IPSE] bubble [sounds of agreement] cause we’re all together.

Unlike Hailey, the two Greek life peer mentors were more inclined to value and promote social networking:

Emily: The diversity you get within the house and within that community in general is extremely, extremely diverse and when you get people from all sorts of backgrounds, with all sorts of majors, with all sorts of histories, that just sort of presents an opportunity for um, to get to know a lot of different people.

Greek life peer mentors themselves felt the benefits of engaging with their own social networks, which enabled them to understand the benefit of providing similar opportunities to peers with intellectual disability. For the Greek life peer mentors, however, it took more time for them to engage with the IPSE students at their fraternity or sorority house. For example, one fraternity volunteer described how he and another fraternity member would take an IPSE student out to eat, but that eventually they stopped doing that and would just “hang out and watch TV” at the fraternity house. Another sorority member described the fun experience of bringing an IPSE student to their family-style dinners, something

that happened after she had been volunteering as a peer mentor for a couple of months. All peer supports, whether tutors or part of Greek life, mentioned texting with IPSE students individually and in groups on an ongoing basis, although none indicated that those groups included people from outside of the IPSE program affiliation.

Peer Transformations

All peer mentors and tutors connected their experiences to future career plans, which included studying to be a special education teacher, behavioral therapist, doctor, and lawyer. Two described how the experience prompted them to change their majors:

Hailey: Recently I decided I wanted to be a teacher, which is, I always kind of knew but I wanted to get away from it and try to pursue medicine or higher ed, and just recently, I was like, this is where I'm supposed to be. I think [IPSE] steered me back into that direction.

Peer supports disclosed their own struggles during their first year of college to explain how they related to IPSE students. One described how his relationship with an IPSE student became close after learning that they both dealt with depression and anxiety, bonding over their ongoing struggles with mental health. The realizations that individuals with intellectual disability experience similar struggles served as a bridge to reframe views, and thus, interactions, from a traditional helping role to one of equality and reciprocity, where supports are based on personalized needs rather than blanket disability tropes. Another shared how common interests helped solidify the personal relationship:

Mark: I think about the beginning of the year, we kind of went towards each other just because he liked talking about sports. I liked sports. We found a connection right away like that ... recently it's been a lot about the Cubs and the Royals, and him showing me videos on Instagram, stuff like that.

These types of comments reveal that peer mentors were eager to engage with IPSE students in common areas of interest through common modalities (e.g., Instagram).

Peer supports displayed transforming perspectives of community inclusion for people with intellectual disability. Two peer mentors expressed how the IPSE impacted their thinking about services for adults with intellectual disability, and what constitutes meaningful relationships:

Emily: Cause I feel like [IPSE Student] is my friend and I want her to know that I'm her friend, too. And like, I don't need to just hang out with her, um, in the context of like, being a peer mentor, like being in this program. I think everybody has someone they feel like they can call or they feel like they can ask to help. Um, just even if it's just like, go get ice cream or go to get food, everybody deserves that. So I think [IPSE] definitely fosters that in a way that other programs don't.

This mentor discussed how she wants the IPSE students whom she supported to feel like they have a real friendship that extends outside of the bounds of the IPSE program.

Another Greek life peer mentor who had been volunteering for one semester described his recent realization about another campus organization providing social events to people with intellectual disability where he was involved:

Hunter: I was a part of [Name of Program] for the first two years of college and I um, thought it was really a great program, but one of the things that I noticed that sort of bothered me a little bit is that a lot of the relationships that sort of are, somewhat shallow, or the people that are involved in it don't really know how to interact and have like a meaningful relationship with somebody who's disabled. And what I really liked about [IPSE] was that it sort of, not just one day a week for an hour just sort of like, walk around and like have this big group of people, you know, it was actually like a one on one, like a real conversation. And like, it was geared toward developing them to being like contributing members of society as opposed to like, holding someone's hand for an hour.

This understanding underscores how the inclusive model for this IPSE had been communicated and modeled for this peer mentor, and how he was able to think critically about traditional ways people with intellectual disabilities have been treated, and thus, to extend his own personal views.

Overall, peer supports experienced some role ambiguity due to dissonance between what they anticipated the experience to be and what they learned through the relationships they developed. Previous experiences and aspirations provided a launching point for peer supports to reflect on what it means to include people with intellectual disability in college life. Peer supports were motivated to carry what they learned into their future relationships and careers. All peer support participants described developing interpersonal relationships that likewise influenced their understandings of inclusive communities.

Discussion

Our first research question, how do students with intellectual disability experience supports provided by peer supports in an IPSE context, centered on the lived experiences of students with intellectual disability. Students described minimal past experiences with peer supports in inclusive settings. Despite a lack of experience with peer mentors or tutors, most of the student participants were comfortable receiving support and emphasized how helpful and engaging it was to have peer supports. IPSE students and peer supports engaged across interconnected dimensions of academic, emotional, informational, and social networking supports. Moreover, participants with intellectual disability described experiencing many of the same struggles as any other college student. This was evident especially pertaining to mental health issues and the pressures to achieve academic success. Therefore, this study contributes not just to the needs of IPSE students but highlights the need for undergraduate supports offered to all young adults as they transition to college life.

Findings from this study revealed that IPSE students enacted agency for cultivating the social aspects of their college experience in ways that aligned with their unique goals. This was particularly evident in how they utilized peer supports offered by the IPSE.

Students with intellectual disability listed organized campus activities they enjoyed doing with the peer mentors, yet the social experiences they valued most were spontaneous (e.g., meeting up for lunch) or new (e.g., going on their first road trip with friends). Students described relationships in which they developed a friendship with a peer support as happening over time and with opportunities to just “hang out” and get to know each other. For both peer supports and students, a common interest or personal struggle was often noted as a launching point for developing a deeper and reciprocal friendship. Because the peer mentors in this study were members of Greek life, this study highlighted the potential of peer mentors from existing living groups on campus to serve as an untapped support for encouraging students to take more social risks and facilitate more extensive social networking.

Implications for Research

Results of this study have several implications for future research associated with postsecondary social supports for all students, not just those with intellectual disability. Findings reveal that peer supports can facilitate social networking opportunities for students with intellectual disability. Social Networking Theory (Daly, 2010) could be applied to peer support programs to help locate points of relational disconnect and better understand how to engage peers in supporting students by developing a web of connections and building social capital. Specifically, studies that aim to understand the socio-centric networks of students attending the same university would be useful in preparing peer supports with strategic plans for connecting IPSE students to relevant networks within what the university has to offer. Additionally, given the finding that IPSE students were adamant that peer supports were helpful, however they did not automatically view peer supports as their friends, future research should incorporate more robust social theory to better articulate peer relationships.

All peer support participants indicated some level of personal transformation from their experience, and most were tied to changing previously held bias about people with intellectual disability, particularly in areas of academic capabilities. Previous IPSE peer supports research indicated participants held high expectations for students with intellectual disability across employment and social aspects of adult life, but lower expectations about abilities to live independently, get married, or have children (Carter et al., 2018). This study adds to the literature in that peer support does facilitate an increase in peer expectations for students with intellectual disability through genuine and reciprocal relational experiences, but more extensive research is needed to sufficiently understand how beliefs about intellectual disability and rights emerge and shift over time.

Implications for Practice

The findings from this study hold importance for shaping future peer support practices. Distinct themes that emerged from the data on informational and feedback supports offered by peers provide compelling implications for IPSEs. For example, IPSEs could target these types of supports to ensure stronger integration of IPSE students across social, academic, and employment experiences. Recognizing the value of peers versus program staff providing feedback could strengthen the authenticity of inclusive programs.

This could be done by articulating these types of supports when training and supporting peers to better address student needs.

Through this analysis, we can better understand the tensions that peer supports and students negotiate, as well as the innovative and personalized ways they support each other. IPSEs can and should continue to learn from all students, both peer supports and students with intellectual disability alike, in developing and organizing personalized supports. Furthermore, although this study utilized two types of peer supports (mentors and tutors), the findings highlight the inextricability of social interactions across all dimensions of the college experience, including academics. This is not surprising, given that peer-mediated interventions in high school have been shown to increase social connections and learning outcomes for students with intellectual disability (Asmus et al., 2016). Both peer tutors and mentors developed relationships with IPSE students that went beyond their initial roles and responsibilities associated with tutoring and social networking. From these findings, it is essential that we consider carefully how to translate evidence-based peer supports identified during high school (Brock & Huber, 2017) to the unique contextual factors and social expectations present on postsecondary campuses and into adult life. What works well within the boundaries of a high school may not be as effective during the college years. It is essential that this is understood explicitly from the perspectives of the college students themselves.

Many colleges and universities offer tutoring for unique student populations (e.g., first generation college students) and disability services to ensure access to college programs. These more individualized services could potentially be considered as part of the array of support mechanisms available to IPSE students, particularly related to their academic needs. This may allow IPSEs more room to focus on enhancing social supports and networks. Research indicates that if students with intellectual disability receive accommodations and supports from the university's office of disability services, they are more likely to engage in activities that further their self-determination (Shogren et al., 2018). Peer supports could ideally support students in accessing and self-advocating for academic assistance already offered by the university. Because students with intellectual disability emphasized the importance of academic support (e.g., help with homework, staying organized), IPSEs should structure peer support to meet the needs of first-year students in entering and adjusting to college life.

Although not the focus of this study, the two IPSE students who lived on campus had natural and consistent interactions with a wide range of peers outside of the mentoring program. Frequency and quality of relationships can ward off the negative effects of social and emotional isolation (Eisenman et al., 2017), and on-campus living arrangements seemed to provide these protective functions for the IPSE students. Thus, this is a component of IPSE programming that can be woven with peer supports to provide optimal social support in students' daily lives by strategically recruiting peer supports from campus living arrangements.

Dialogue about inclusive education in higher education typically signals issues of educational equity for underserved populations (e.g. students of color, first-generation students, and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds; Klonoski et al., 2017),

leaving out issues of disability. This study signals a continuous need to expose college students to expansive notions of inclusion in all areas of adult life and that reaching peers could be particularly impactful, given the broad future career plans held across peer supports (Carter et al., 2018). Peer supports can act as future advocates and allies for people with intellectual disability in their communities and workplaces.

Limitations

This study contains limitations that can be viewed as avenues for concern regarding the findings. First, the two peer mentors who agreed to participate were members of Greek life, which brings a confounding variable to findings related to social networking (i.e., fraternity or sorority). This is because Greek life members may be more effective and robust social networkers. These factors could help IPSE students connect to a larger network and learn from more varied social models and interactions, yet this study was unable to control for differences in peer mentors connected to Greek life from those who were not. Certainly, future research must continue to examine the wide range of existing social networks on postsecondary campuses and continue to extend the work to such living groups. Second, the small number of participants (both students with intellectual disability and peer support participants) limited the scope of experiences reflected in the findings. While this sample size allowed for deeper inquiry with individuals around their experiences, we were unable to develop a strong grounded theory from the findings. Follow-up interviews would have added a depth of understanding of outcomes and impacts over time, such as peer support careers and IPSE student social networks after graduation. Third, each participant only participated in one focus group. Future research should include multiple opportunities and modalities (e.g., focus groups, interviews, observations) for collecting data. Furthermore, future research should attend to more robust member checking (Creswell & Miller, 2000), in which participants check researcher interpretation and add to the validity of findings. This would be an important aspect for future research, especially given that the voices of students with intellectual disability are emphasized as paramount to building inclusive postsecondary supports. Irrespective of the limitations, given the emerging nature of the research, this study offers unique findings that extend what is currently known about peer supports on college campuses.

Conclusion

This study foregrounds the perspectives of students with intellectual disability who attend an IPSE at a large Midwestern university. By doing so, we encourage further discussion on whose voices are represented in research on inclusive IPSEs. Individuals with intellectual disability of all ages report experiencing stigmatizing interactions across many aspects of their lives (Ali et al., 2012). In the effort to develop inclusive networks of support and inclusive cultures across university campuses, this study is important to the field in centering the perspectives and experiences of students with intellectual disability. The analysis displays the social complexities of college life, such as making friends, taking risks by trying something new, and dealing with stress. Strategies for preparing peers to support and enhance social integration, academic success, and overall school culture toward inclusion, can be drawn from this data. Findings offer evidence of creative,

informal, and intimate ways peer supports and students with intellectual disabilities come to understand each other as peers.

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Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Role	Year in Program	Career Aspiration/Major
Maggie	IPSE Student	2	Sign Language Interpreter
Nicole	IPSE Student	2	Veterinary Assistant
Lauren	IPSE Student	2	Early Childhood Educator
Marcus	IPSE Student	1	Environmental Science
Jake	IPSE Student	1	Undecided
Hunter	Peer Mentor	1	Pre-Med
Emily	Peer Mentor	1	Pre-Law
Mark	Peer Tutor	2	Special Education Teacher
Hailey	Peer Tutor	2	Special Education Teacher
Grant	Peer Tutor	2	Behavior Analyst

Table 2

Focus Group Guides

Example Peer Support Focus Group Questions	Example IPSE Student Focus Group Questions
Please tell me your name, year in school, and what your interests or career goal is, and briefly explain why you applied to be a peer mentor/tutor.	Please tell me your name, year in school, and what your career interests or goal is.
What kinds of activities or things do you do with IPSE students that you feel are the most meaningful to the relationship you have developed?	What kinds of activities or things do you do with the peer mentors or tutors, and what activities are the most meaningful to your relationship with them?
How have you supported IPSE students in making connections and friendships with people outside of the program, such as people in the dorm, in clubs or activities of their interest, or other students in their classes?	Have peer mentors helped you in making friends or connections outside of the IPSE program (like clubs, in the dorm, or in other university activities)? If so, how did they do that?
Think about an IPSE student with whom you feel you have a strong positive connection or friendship with. How did your relationship with that student evolve? What were the major milestones in the process of developing that relationship or friendship?	Have you ever been in a peer mentor program in high school or elsewhere? It might have been called something different, like social skills club. How are the peer supports at [name of IPSE] different from other programs?
What were your challenges in connecting with an IPSE student? In what ways have you reached out or what different things have you tried in order to be a good peer mentor/tutor to that student?	How will the experience of engaging with peer supports impact your future (career, social life, volunteer/activism, etc.)?
Has your view of disability changed since becoming a peer mentor/tutor, and if so, in what way?	What did the peer mentors support you with that was the most beneficial?
What kind of impact do you think this experience will have on your future (career, social life, volunteer/activism, etc.)?	What problems or issues arose with the peer mentor? How did you work through these problems?
How did the IPSE staff prepare you that was the most beneficial to working with students? What problems or issues arose that you didn't anticipate, or that you weren't prepared for?	Think about a peer mentor or tutor with whom you have a great relationship. How did you build that relationship? How long did it take? How comfortable are you in asking them for support?
How do you know if you are doing a good job?	Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences with peer mentors or other friendships at [University]?

Table 3

Application of Codes and Sub-Codes Summary

Parent Code	Sub-Codes	# of Times Code Applied
Activities	Academic Activities	13
	New Experiences	8
	Planned Social Events	12
	Hanging Out	16
	Professionals	18
Career Goals		14
Peer Support Training		35
Length in Program		20
Outcomes	Academic	13
	New Understandings	16
	Social/Friendship	10
Past Experiences with Peer Supports		4
Peer Support History		8
Positive Peer Support Qualities		13
Relationships	Between IPSE Students	8
	Between Peer Supports	5
	Between IPSE Students and Peer Supports	19
	Changes in Relationships	13
Social Networks		25
Support from Peers		39