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# Inclusive Postsecondary Education's Effect on Individuals with IDD: A Systematic Literature Review

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Inclusive Postsecondary Education's Effect on Individuals with IDD: A Systematic Literature  
Review

by

Hunter Wolff

An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts

in

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and

Psychology

Thesis Advisor

Mary E. Morningstar, PhD

Portland State University

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## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this thesis to all the individuals with IDD I have supported in the past, as well as those who I currently and will continue to support. They are the true inspiration for this thesis. Everything I have done to this point in my academic and professional career has been for them and I truly would not be who I am today without having known each of these amazing people.

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## **ABSTRACT**

With the purpose of evaluating the impact of Inclusive Postsecondary Education (IPSE) effects on those experiencing intellectual and/or developmental disabilities (IDD), a systematic literature review was conducted. Proponents of the expansion of these programs often cite participant growth in academic-related skills, socialization, and competitive integrated employment. While several studies document these benefits, few studies present and discuss all the data collectively. This review aims to both locate the data that shows how IPSE programs affect the students within them as well as to provide a location in which all the data can be accessed. A thorough conducting of the research found that IPSE students receive all three benefits detailed above. The authors of this review hope that it can promote further research, understanding, and development of IPSE programs to the benefit of those with disabilities. Providing information regarding these programs and the benefits they provide participants serves to increase access to these programs, thereby promoting opportunities for quality education.

## **INTRODUCTION**

According to the Institute on Community Integration, a research and training center at the University of Minnesota, an estimated 7.4 million people in the United States live with an intellectual and/or developmental disability (IDD). Furthermore, the Institute of Community Integration estimates roughly 70%, or 5.3 million, of the United States' IDD population consists of children under 21 years of age. Navigating the transition between high school and employment and continuing education poses a challenge to anyone; for those with IDD, a lack of opportunity compounds challenges. For students with IDD attending college programs offering integrated support, including enrolling in general college courses with their nondisabled peers, there are 340 programs to choose from (Think College, 2023). Meanwhile, non-disabled students may choose from 5,900 programs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). When it comes to employment, 21.3% of adults with disabilities are working, compared to 65.4% of people without disabilities. Furthermore, people with disabilities experience an unemployment rate of 7.6%, more than twice the 3.5% unemployment rate of adults without disabilities (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). The limited number of college programs to choose from compounded by lower employment opportunities keep this population disadvantaged. To benefit students with IDD, many propose the expansion of IPSE programs. These programs support students with IDD who enroll in and attend college courses alongside peers both with and without disabilities (Stinnett et al., 2023). Advocates for the expansion of IPSE programs cite an increase in academic growth, social engagement, and integrated employment in those who complete these programs. While quality research exists establishing connections between IPSE programs and

these key outcomes, few have conducted systematic reviews regarding such works. This article summarizes the present research measuring these outcomes and provides a concise space in which these findings can be located. Several empirical studies document the outcomes of academic growth of those who attend IPSE programs (Brewer et al., 2021; Corby et al., 2018; Hendrickson et al., 2013; Petroff et al., 2020). Some of these studies measured outcomes qualitatively, while others did so quantitatively. In all cases, students reported a general increased capacity to participate in academic activities both during and after attending classes with their non-disabled peers. Additional research discusses the effects of IPSE programs on the social engagement of students (Spencer et al., 2021; Wilt et al., 2020). Combined, studies suggest a relationship between IPSE program attendance and social engagement. Finally, research from Zhang et al. (2023) and Petroff et al. (2020) explored the impact of IPSE programs on students' ability to find competitive integrated employment during their studies and after graduation. Both studies found that IPSE programs contribute to better employment outcomes.

This review explores data related to measured outcomes via the following structure: first, through detailing the methods used to collect the sample of studies. Such methods consist of a rigorous selection criterion for inclusion in this review, a high standard for the source of procurement, and a large number of articles both reviewed and selected. Next, this review discusses the results of the studies, broken into three sections reflecting each of the three measured outcomes: Academic Outcomes, Social Engagement Outcomes, and Integrated Employment Outcomes. The final portion of this review summarizes each article's findings and discusses potential implications.

## **METHOD**

### **Sample of Studies**

This systematic review primarily draws from literature published by the Journal of Inclusive Postsecondary Education (JIPE). JIPE has been promoting research pertaining to IPSE programs since 2019. The JIPE website currently hosts nine easily accessible collections of research. Additionally, this review features a small number of studies procured through the Portland State University (PSU) library database. The author employed the search terms *intellectual disabilities, developmental disabilities, inclusive postsecondary education, inclusive higher education, inclusive college, academic growth, academic achievement, social engagement, prosocial behavior, and integrated employment* to explore this database. Finally, the author of this review evaluated references from the selection of compiled works for additional articles to include.

### **Selection Criteria**

The selection criterion for inclusion in this review required articles to:

1. Feature participants with intellectual disabilities, developmental disabilities, or both;
2. Feature students who were either currently or previously enrolled in an IPSE program;
3. Measure outcomes related to:
  1. Academic growth;
  2. Social engagement, and/or;
  3. Integrated employment;
4. Be peer-reviewed.

## **Selected Studies**

The review of the JIPE archive and PSU library database resulted in evaluation of sixty-five peer-reviewed articles. Of those sixty-five articles, seven met the inclusion criteria detailed above.

## **RESULTS**

### **I. ACADEMIC OUTCOMES**

Of the seven articles that met criteria, four measured academic growth outcomes. Brewer and Movahedazarhouligh (2021) reported on conducted in-person interviews of four (4) IPSE staff members, (n = 4) professors of courses which IPSE students had attended, and three IPSE students (n = 3). Their work uncovered students' anxiety surrounding the changing workload compared to what they had experienced in the K-12 setting. One student reported feeling severely overwhelmed by the volume and difficulty of homework required. The two remaining students reported similar stress regarding these factors, though they reported completing most of the homework assigned. The second study reflected academic growth outcomes through documentation of several opinions of 27 current and former IPSE students (14 female and 13 male). Students described their perspectives regarding their academic performance. Corby, Taggart, and Cousins (2018) conducted this research through person-centered "I-poems." Participants wrote "I-poems" in response to prompts by the researchers; each poem started with an "I" statement, such as "I am..." or "I feel." Through this approach, researchers attempted to record the lived experiences of IPSE students. In one poem, a student said of their experience:

"I love going to college



I am in bed I jump up

I love it, I love it.

I'm actually learning

I'm learning

I love the experience of that," (Corby et al., 2018).

Another student shared, "The main reason I actually decided to come to college was, it was a learning experience that I think everyone should have a part of once in their lives, just to, learn new things and make new friends," (Corby et al., 2018). Students found academic identities through inclusion in their IPSE programs, these students, providing the foundation for future academic growth and achievement.

In 2013, Henderickson et al. sent a survey to 80 University of Iowa IPSE students about their experiences during enrollment in their programs. Sixty-one (61) completed the four-part survey for a total of 262 completed responses. The researchers documented students' experiences using a 1-4 Likert scale – with 1 meaning "strongly disagree," 2 "disagree," 3 "agree," and 4 "strongly agree." Researchers recorded student responses in a table, which included the prompts, the mean Likert scores, and the standard deviations. Table 1 houses a compilation of responses related to academic growth:

	M	SD
I learned new things in my classes.	3.25	.72
Study tables helped me get homework completed on time.	3.51	.57
The teachers supported my learning.	3.31	.69

(Henderickson, et al., 2013)

**Table 1**

On average, students reported “agreeing” to “strongly agreeing” with having learned new things, utilizing study tables to complete assignments, and feeling as if professors were supporting their learning.

In the final study found to measure academic growth outcomes in IPSE students, Petroff et al. (2020) used a 31-question, multi-part survey with 51 former IPSE students. Using a 5-point (1 = “not at all; 5 = “huge degree” Likert scale, researchers measured how respondents’ IPSE programs prepared them in several areas of knowledge and skills. Across all measured academic outcomes, the majority of participants reported that their programs had prepared them to a “great” or “huge degree” (4 or 5 on the Likert scale). The outcomes measured and the number of respondents reporting feeling prepared were: reading (n = 33, 64.7%), writing (n = 38, 76%), listening (n = 37, 74%), speaking (n = 41, 80%), general knowledge of the world (n = 35, 70%), and problem solving (n = 38, 74%) (Petroff et al., 2020).

Furthermore, a handful of the IPSE students surveyed enrolled in further education after completing their IPSE. Nine (9, 17.6%) enrolled in programs at community colleges or universities; four (48%) took adult school courses; and three (3, 6%) enrolled in online courses. Some participants reported hiring a tutor, participating in day programs, and participating in 5th year programs to continue their academic growth (Petroff et al., 2020)

## II. SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT OUTCOMES

The same studies measuring academic outcomes also measured outcomes related to social engagement. In the interviews conducted by Brewer & Movahedazarhouli (2021), participants reported to have met and befriended several others within the IPSE program in which they were enrolled. However, none of these participants communicated any connections with non-disabled peers who were not enrolled in the program.

Corby and colleagues (2018) reported descriptions of how the IPSE supported students to make social connections within the program but not within the general student body. A current IPSE student stated, "Everyone is really friendly to each other and we talk to each other more and we see each other every day and stuff like that in college, it's great really it's a big step for people, you know," (Corby et al., 2018). Another student shared, "I like it there, I like the college restaurant for lunch and see all my friends again...friends from this service here I know and different friends in college...new friends," (Corby et al., 2018). Another student shared their perspective on meeting new people, stating, "People I know and people I don't know, you get to know the new people...meeting people is very important," (Corby et al., 2018). And lastly, a former student reflected on their experience while saying, "College is really great, I miss my old friends from college. I do miss friends, memories, everything. It was a great laugh I enjoyed...I loved the college, I liked meeting up with my friends to have a chat have coffee," (Corby et al., 2018).

Henderickson et al. (2013) summarized responses to survey prompts found in Table 2, with mean scores on the 1-4 Likert scale as well as the standard deviation.

	M	SD
I learned to communicate better.	3.45	.51
Having a roommate was a good thing.	3.12	.70
I used the hall and community resources.	3.55	.55
I learned about correct public behavior.	3.16	.69
I made new friends.	3.62	.54
I got along with others.	3.29	.61
I enjoyed group activities in the community.	3.15	.69
I was willing to ask for help.	3.20	.67

(Henderickson, et al., 2013)

**Table 2**

Students stated they “agree” to “strongly agree” that their social engagement benefited from their IPSE in all eight of the areas detailed above, placing the mean for each prompt between three and four.

Petroff et al. (2020) measured the frequency and method with which former IPSE students communicated with peers they met during college. The researchers collected data using a 5-point Likert scale, (1 = “not at all,” 5 = “daily.”) They also uncovered that, of those surveyed, none reported having zero contact with their peers. Of the 47 former students who responded regarding social engagement outcomes, the majority (n = 31, 66%) conversed with peers at least once per week. In total, eighteen students (38%) talked to their college friends daily; thirteen (27%) communicated weekly; eight (17%) monthly; and eight (17%)

communicated rarely. The means by which these students communicated with one another included in-person meetings, phone calls, emails, text messages, video chat, and social media (Petroff et al, 2020).

In the same study, the researchers used a second 4-point Likert scale to measure participant satisfaction of outcomes related to their community engagement. For this scale, 1 = “not satisfied,” and 4 = “very satisfied.” Among all participants who responded to this portion of the survey, thirty-six (75%) of participants reported being either “moderately” or “very” satisfied with the amount they accessed the community. The researchers also found that 33 participants (70%) reported that their IPSE program had adequately prepared them for engagement with their communities.

In a study conducted by Spencer et al. (2021), researchers explore both the degree to which the perceived number of social connections changed over time, as well as the density of those social networks. They measured outcomes through the implementation of three semi-structured interviews of six (6) IPSE students and their parents (n=6). The researchers labeled each student with a letter (A-F) to maintain their privacy and conducted each interview individually at three different periods of time (T1, T2, and T3). The first interview was conducted during the year leading up to the students' enrollment in the IPSE program (T1); the second at the end of their first year (T2); and the third at the end of the second year (T3). At all three time points, both parents and students determined how many individuals made up their social networks. Researchers then compared reported data with the number of possible connections to determine the density of their networks (Spencer et al., 2021). The data is summarized in Tables 3 and 4.

<i>Student Perspectives</i>						
<b>Student</b>	<b>Size</b>			<b>Density</b>		
	T1	T2	T3	T1	T2	T3
<b>A</b>	3	10	9	0.17	0.31	0.21
<b>B</b>	4	21	23	0.33	0.12	0.12
<b>C</b>	3	19	16	0.5	0.23	0.11
<b>D</b>	13	15	18	0.11	0.19	0.18
<b>E</b>	2	14	17	0.5	0.24	0.21
<b>F</b>	3	20	22	0.17	0.26	0.18
<b>Mean</b>	<b>4.67</b>	<b>16.5</b>	<b>17.5</b>	<b>0.3</b>	<b>0.23</b>	<b>0.17</b>

(Spencer et al., 2021)

**Table 3**

<i>Parent Perspectives</i>						
<b>Student</b>	<b>Size</b>			<b>Density</b>		
	T1	T2	T3	T1	T2	T3
<b>A</b>	5	12	8	0.45	0.29	0.19
<b>B</b>	9	10	5	0.15	0.2	0.5
<b>C</b>	5	21	16	0.45	0.22	0.24
<b>D</b>	10	9	14	0.23	0.39	0.24
<b>E</b>	6	14	27	0.23	0.17	0.16
<b>F</b>	4	14	13	0	0.18	0.33
<b>Mean</b>	<b>6.5</b>	<b>13.3</b>	<b>13.8</b>	<b>0.25</b>	<b>0.24</b>	<b>0.27</b>

(Spencer et al., 2021)

**Table 4**

The trend in mean number of connections within the students' social networks rises sharply between T1 and T2. Between T2 and T3, the size of these social networks stayed roughly

consistent, but continued to increase slightly. While reported network size and density varied between each student and their parents, trends did increase overall. Furthermore, the density of each student's network maintained consistent levels from the parents' perspectives, though it falls slightly<sup>7</sup> from from T1 to T2 and from T2 to T3 from the students' perspectives.

Peer mentoring was explored in research conducted by Wilt & Morningstar (2020). This relationship was examined using in person discussions among three (3) peer tutors, two (2) peer mentors, and five (5) IPSE students. Everyone discussed their experiences within the program and with peer supports. When discussing the impact of peer mentors and tutors on social engagement, one students reported that:

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.

Another IPSE student remarked that they were able to meet other students on their own through living in the dorm and meeting others who also lived in the building. Overall, IPSE students reported friendships and meaningful relationships with peer mentors and acknowledged that they were more likely to attend community events while spending time with peer supports.

According to the researchers, “above all, they valued the informal, caring, and reciprocal interactions with peer supports that were embedded in such activities,” (2020).

### III. INTEGRATED EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES

Petroff et al. (2020) successfully illustrated the connection between IPSE programs and integrated employment outcomes via their 5- and 4-point Likert scales. Former students identified their levels of preparation as well as satisfactions with the workforce after the completion of their program. The researchers also measured the number of students currently working, the benefits offered, and their type of employment. They discovered that forty-one (41, 80%) of the students were working for pay, and two (5%) of those individuals working full-time. Eighteen (42%) of the students worked 11-34 hours per week. Sixteen (27%) reported receiving vacation and sick time as benefits; eleven (27%) received health benefits; and eleven (27%) were being offered life insurance. Of those who responded regarding the fields they worked in, fourteen (14) worked in office or clerical work, eleven (11) in food services, eight (8) in retail, eight (8) in daycare and childcare, two (2) in health, one (1) in housekeeping, one in transportation, and one in education. When discussing the degree to which they felt prepared for work by their IPSE programs, the majority of students (n = 32, 63%) felt that they had been prepared to a great or huge degree. In terms of satisfaction, thirty-two (78%) employed graduates reported feeling either satisfied or extremely satisfied with their work (Petroff et al., 2020).

In an additional study, Zhang et al. (2023) measured integrated employment outcomes while also taking into account the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. They obtained the data from a survey. While the researchers did not intend to measure the impact of the pandemic on



employment outcomes they pivoted after the disease had begun impacting the ways the world operated. For their research, Zhang et al. (2023) contacted three cohorts of graduates from the classes of 2017-18, 2018-19, and 2019-20 to participate in the study. A total of twelve students responded to the survey. Eight students (66.7%) had been employed after graduating from their IPSE programs, with five (41.6%) being employed in the field in which they were certified. Of the eight (8) students who found work following graduation, five (5) were employed within three months of graduation, one (1) within five months, and two (2) did not answer. Additionally, four (4) of these students worked more than thirty hours per week (3, 25%) and one (8.3%) worked between ten and thirty hours per week. Six of the former students also reported their earnings with one (8.3%) student earning the national minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour, four (33.3%) earning between \$9 and \$10 per hour, and one (8.3%) earning \$12 per hour (Zhang et al., 2023).

## **DISCUSSION**

Of the sixty-five studies vetted for inclusion in this review, seven measured the effects of IPSE programs on three specific outcomes for students: academic growth, social engagement, and ability to find integrated employment. Only Petroff et al. (2020) looked at the effects of IPSE programs across all three outcomes, finding that students held the opinion that they had improved in all three areas. Three of the remaining studies (Brewer & Movahedazarhouli, 2019; Corby et al., 2018; Henderickson, et al., 2013) looked at both academic growth and social engagement factors, finding students reported benefitting from the IPSE programs in which they participated. Spencer et al. (2021) and Wilt & Morningstar (2020) looked exclusively at IPSE programs' effect on social engagement over time, finding positive results as well. In addition Zhang et al. (2023) looked at the effect of IPSE programs on students' ability to find integrated

employment. The findings of this systematic review warrant additional research on IPSE program's effects on outcomes for students with disabilities and favor the notion of increasing access to these programs. IPSE programs are valuable resources that empower students to improve their educational, social, and employment standing – allowing for those with disabilities to flourish.

The primary limitations of this review stem from the lack of studies that exist on this issue. Few studies looked at the effects of IPSE programs on students over time, with only one article researching post-graduation outcomes. Furthermore, the few studies that exist on IPSE programs showcase only the perspectives of researchers residing within western societies. Additional research should be developed from the perspective of diverse cultural backgrounds for more holistic and accurate data. Regardless of these limitations, the rigorous planning, specific inclusion criteria, and comprehensive approach allow for future reproduction of findings, giving this review credibility.

This systematic review aims to observe the extent to which IPSE programs benefit individuals with IDD in academic growth, social engagement, and integrated employment outcomes. Establishing a link between these variables provides grounds for the continued development of IPSE programs. The findings of this review advocate for the expansion of and increased access to IPSE programs and disability inclusion. IPSE programs empower individuals with disabilities to develop as independently supported individuals. However, further research is necessary for fortifying the data presented within the articles reviewed. More research culminates in stronger evidence for the impact of these programs. Additionally, research should

be conducted into other areas of growth experienced by IPSE students. Lastly, more research should be conducted involving adults with IDD who have completed IPSE programs.

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