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January 2018

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Manikas, Alexandra; Carter, Erik; and Bumble, Jennifer, "Inclusive Community Service among College Students with and without Intellectual Disability: A Pilot Study." (2018). *Educator Preparation & Leadership Faculty Works*. 5.

Available at: <https://irl.umsl.edu/epir/5>

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Inclusive Community Service Among College Students With and Without Intellectual Disability: A Pilot Study

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Abstract

Although community service is a widespread practice in most higher education institutions, few studies of inclusive community service experiences have appeared in the literature. In this pilot study, 10 college students with and without intellectual disability worked together to jointly plan a community service project, carry it out, and reflect upon their experiences. Qualitative interviews with and observations of participating students and staff revealed several important findings related to their perceptions of the experience, the nature of students' interactions, and suggestions for future inclusive service opportunities. We present ways for structured, inclusive service experiences to be incorporated more fully into the collegiate experience for students with intellectual disability.

Keywords: Students with disabilities, postsecondary education, inclusive programming, higher education, intellectual disability, community service

Legislative and policy support for the creation of inclusive postsecondary education (PSE) programs has made it possible for increasing numbers of young adults with an intellectual disability (ID) to access collegiate experiences alongside students without disabilities (Kleinert, Jones, Sheppard-Jones, Harp, & Harrison, 2012; Newman, Wagner, Cameto, Knokey, & Shaver, 2010). Over 260 inclusive PSE programs now exist at technical schools, colleges, and universities across the United States (Hart, 2017). The rapid growth in both enrollment and programs has been fueled by federal funding for model program development, the establishment of a national technical assistance center, and emerging research addressing the benefits for students with ID who participate in these programs. As the inclusive higher education movement expands in reach, key questions surround what it means to support students with ID to access all aspects of the college experience (Carter, 2017). Campus life encompasses a wide range of activities—the courses students take, the internships and jobs they hold, the organizations and clubs they join, the campus programs and resources they draw upon, and the social events and relationships in which they participate. The importance of supporting access to

this breadth of experiences is firmly advocated within prevailing standards and best practice recommendations (Grigal, Hart, & Weir, 2012, 2013).

One aspect of campus life that has received limited attention in the literature is the area of engagement in inclusive community service. Since the National and Community Service Act of 1990, service has been increasingly incorporated into the mission, vision, and values of higher education. Institutions have adopted a variety of approaches to increase service opportunities (e.g., creating community-engagement offices, coordinating days of community service, connecting students to diverse volunteer and philanthropy opportunities in the community, offering service-learning courses). For example, as many as 45.5% of college students participate in some form of community service (Campus Compact, 2016). Indeed, an array of academic, social, and personal benefits have been documented for college students participating in a diverse range of service experience (e.g., Astin & Sax, 1998; Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011; Smith et al., 2010).

Unfortunately, young adults with ID often have limited involvement in these important community service experiences (Lindsay, 2016). Findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 indi-

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cate only 13% of students with ID (ages 19-23) completed a volunteer or community service activity in the past year (Sanford et al., 2011). Although early findings from an evaluation of model demonstration projects funded by the Office of Postsecondary Education found that 45% of students with ID participated in some type of volunteering or community service (Grigal, Hart, Smith, Papay, & Domin, 2017), the extent to which these activities were carried out as inclusive endeavors is unclear. The purpose of the present research project was to examine the experiences of students with and without disabilities who participated together in an inclusive community service experience. We designed this study to address three important gaps in the current literature on inclusive higher education.

First, little is known about how students with and without disabilities might benefit from their joint involvement in inclusive community service. Studies addressing the experiences of adolescents with disabilities and their peers suggest students may benefit substantively in areas such as social skill development, enhanced learning, increased self-determination and independence, personal growth, exposure to career-related skills, and new peer relationships (e.g., Burns, Storey, & Certo, 1999; Dymond, Renzaglia, & Slagor, 2011; Kleinert et al., 2004; Miller et al., 2002, 2003). Understanding this impact at the college level—where service opportunities may be more prevalent and inclusive experiences tend to be more limited—could lend support to the creation of new volunteer opportunities. Prior studies have not yet addressed the benefits students perceive for themselves and their peers as a result of their shared experience of serving others. Instead, available research has emphasized the benefits peers accrue from volunteering to serve students with ID on their campus (e.g., Farley, Gibbons, & Cihak, 2014; Griffin, Mello, Glover, Carter, & Hodapp, 2016; Izzo & Shuman, 2013).

Second, the interactions students have within inclusive community service experiences are important to examine. Research involving adolescents with and without ID indicate that students interact with one another quite differently depending on whether peers without disabilities are assigned helping roles versus similar roles relative to students with disabilities (Hughes, Carter, Hughes, Bradford, & Copeland, 2002). For example, Burns et al. (1999) documented very different experiences and outcomes among high school students who volunteered to support students with ID in a community activity versus students who served jointly within them on a community service project. Studies examining the perceptions of college students toward students with ID also reveal a wide

range of attitudes and expectations that could influence the nature of students' interactions with one another (e.g., Gibbons, Cihak, Mynatt, & Wilhoit, 2015; Westling, Kelley, Cain, & Prohn, 2013). Because prior studies have not included an observational component, little is known about the roles, reciprocity, and group dynamics that may be evidenced within an inclusive community service experience.

Third, the perspectives of students with and without disabilities are important to consider when designing new inclusive PSE experiences. Although a growing number of studies have solicited the insights of students with disabilities on topics such as a campus accessibility, accommodations, and self-advocacy (e.g., Agarwal, Moya, Yasui, & Seymour, 2015; Kurth & Mellard, 2006), few have included students with ID and none have addressed the design of inclusive programs. Qualitative studies involving interviews with adolescents with intellectual and developmental disabilities have provided valuable insights into the design of social-focused interventions (Bottema-Beutel, Mullins, Harvey, Gustafson, & Carter, 2015), leadership experiences (Carter, Swedeen, Walter, Moss, & Hsin, 2011), and support models (Tews & Lupart, 2008). Additional efforts are needed to give greater voice to students with ID on issues related to higher education inclusion. As students with ID become more prevalent on college campuses, institutions will be called to increase opportunities for inclusion across all dimensions of the college experience, including community service.

The purpose of this pilot study was to examine an inclusive community service project for college students with and without ID. We sought to examine four research questions:

1. What benefits were perceived to accrue for students with ID?
2. What benefits were perceived to accrue for students without disabilities?
3. How did students with and without ID collaborate during the community service project?
4. What advice do participants suggest for creating more inclusive community service projects on university campuses?

Method

Participants

Primary participants were 10 university students with ($n = 5$) and without ($n = 5$) ID. Primary participants with ID were enrolled in a two-year, non-residential PSE program which required students (a) be 18-26 years old; (b) have a diagnosis of ID; (c) have

completed high school and received a standard or alternate diploma (i.e., occupational or special education); (d) not meet eligibility requirements for admission into a standard college program, and (e) exhibit adaptive communicative and functional skills. Participants without disabilities were enrolled as traditional university students. These peers ranged in age from 18-22 years ($M = 19.7$). Ethnicity, gender, and year in school varied across these peers (see Table 1). These primary participants are referred to as “students” throughout the remainder of the article. Secondary participants included the career director for the PSE program and the volunteer coordinator from the service site (i.e., a memory care facility; see Table 1).

Settings

Two group meetings—one before and one after the service phase of the project—took place in a campus classroom. Students sat at rectangular tables, engaged in small and large groups, and attended to presentations projected on a large screen. Facilitators served light snacks at both meetings. The service phase of the project occurred at a local residential memory care facility, serving individuals with Alzheimer’s disease and other types of dementia. Prior to meeting with residents, students and the PSE career director met in a large conference room with the volunteer coordinator from the service site to discuss service logistics. The volunteer coordinator also provided a brief tour of the facility. Students met with residents in a multi-purpose area where they typically host guests, take part in group exercises, and participate in diverse leisure activities.

Recruitment

Study procedures were approved by the university’s Institutional Review Board. All students with ID enrolled in the PSE program were sent a recruitment email and flyer by the PSE program director outlining the study goals and time commitment. Students with ID expressed interest in the study to the program director and the primary researcher, and then we obtained consent. Undergraduate students without disabilities were primarily recruited through emails with electronic flyers and basic study descriptions, and through in-person presentations. Because our intention was to include students who were not connected with the PSE program, we first recruited only from the campus community service organization listserv. However, due to low response levels, we extended our recruitment to students serving as peer mentors within the PSE program and students pursuing a special education degree. We conducted this recruitment via emails and in-person; however, in-person recruitment was most effective.

Inclusive Community Service Project

At the outset of the project, the PSE director chose the focus of aging adults based on previous community service work conducted by the students and the goals of service program. The structure and design of the project drew upon the general structure of a service-learning framework, including: planning and preparation, action, and reflection and celebration (Dymond, Renzaglia, & Chun, 2007). Unlike traditional service-learning, however, the experience was not anchored to an academic course, did not involve students in all aspects of service planning, and was designed with a shorter duration. Although we planned to have four sessions, scheduling challenges required us to condense these phases into three sessions.

Session 1: Planning and preparation. Participants gathered for the planning and preparation session in a university classroom. The PSE career director facilitated the first 90 minute session for 11 students (following this session, one student without disabilities left the study due to a scheduling conflict). We held a brief meeting with the facilitator prior to the session to relay our session objectives and review materials (i.e., lesson plan and PowerPoint presentation). The session began with short introductions. Students then engaged in a large-group discussion to address three questions (a) what do you already understand about the population you are serving (i.e., aging adults), (b) how will you work together to provide a service for the community, and (c) what do you hope to gain from this service experience? The facilitator then shared ways to support and communicate with aging adults with Alzheimer’s disease and other types of dementia.

This large-group instruction provided a foundation for subsequent small-group discussions about possible pathways for the service project including planting and gardening, group exercise, art therapy, and group games/activities. These options were based on recommendations from the volunteer coordinator at the service site. Each small-group shared their project preferences, and together the students came to consensus on the group exercise service project. This project included a list of several options for service, and students chose to engage in seated balloon volleyball. They selected an exercise basics class as a backup activity. Students then discussed and assigned roles they would take on during the service project (e.g., referee during the game, assist with setup) and set personal service goals (e.g., be reliable, be there with a smile).

Session 2: Action. One week later, after planning the service project at the first session, all 10 students completed the action phase of the project. Session two was 75 minutes and took place at the memory

care facility. Two staff from the PSE program and two university graduate students provided transportation and background supports (e.g., moving students from one area to another, retrieving materials). Upon arrival, the volunteer coordinator led students through a short orientation about volunteering, spoke briefly about strategies to effectively engage with residents, provided a brief tour of the facility, and talked through the logistics of the group exercise activity. As part of seated balloon volleyball, students passed balloons back and forth with residents as they were seated, interacted with the residents, and retrieved balloons that fell out of reach. Although students chose individualized roles (e.g., referee, set-up) during the planning and preparation phases, these roles were not as clearly defined by the service site, requiring students to step in and out of roles as requested by the volunteer coordinator. After approximately 30 minutes, the volunteer coordinator introduced the exercise basics class. Although students did not expect this activity (i.e., it was previously identified as only a back-up activity), they remained flexible to the needs of the service site, and quickly assembled as a group to decide how they would conduct the class. Students stood at the front of the room and modeled simple exercises for the residents (e.g., raise your arm, lift your leg). Each student led the group in at least one exercise. Students closed the activity with meditation and breathing exercises. At the end of the session, the volunteer coordinator provided time for students to socialize and connect with residents one-on-one.

Session 3: Reflection and celebration. One week after the service activity, students met to reflect on and celebrate their community service project. The primary researcher facilitated session three in the university classroom. The session lasted 34 minutes, and was attended by six students (three students with ID, three students without disabilities). Four students could not attend due to conflicts (e.g., illness, work schedule). To start the session, students engaged in a large-group discussion with guiding prompts to reflect upon the service experience and celebrate their efforts. Reflection prompts were: (a) what did you learn from this experience, (b) how do you feel that this service experience impacted you, and (c) how will you apply your experiences to all areas of your life? Celebration prompts were: (a) let's talk about some of the best parts of this project and (b) let's talk about the whole service experience. In addition to these prompts, students participated in a hands-on reflection activity called a "graffiti wall," in which they had the opportunity to creatively express their thoughts about two questions in the form of drawings, poems, or sayings (a) why serve others? and (b) any thoughts about this service experience?

Data Collection

Sessions. We documented the three sessions using field notes and audio-recordings. The primary researcher recorded field notes during all three sessions. Across sessions, field notes included observations on the (a) atmosphere, (b) participants' level of engagement, (c) dynamics of any small- or large-group discussions or activities, and (d) any challenges that were encountered. During session two, field notes were expanded to include student interactions with each other and with residents, and any supports that were provided to students during the service project (e.g., assistance reading exercises, prompts to speak louder, encouragement to join in the service activity). We audio recorded the first and third sessions to examine student interactions.

Individual interviews. Following session three, the primary researcher completed interviews with nine students, the service site volunteer coordinator, and the PSE career director; we were unable to reach one student with ID via phone or email (see Table 1). Interviews were conducted over a three-week period at times chosen by participants. Interviews ranged from 16 min to 62 min ($M = 32$). Nine interviews took place in-person on the university campus, one interview was conducted by phone, and one took place at the service site. Each interview was audio-recorded. Audio-recordings were transcribed, checked for accuracy, and de-identified by the research team.

We developed four, distinct semi-structured interview protocols for students with ID, students without disabilities, the volunteer coordinator, and the PSE career director (available from the first author). All protocols included questions about participants' backgrounds, prior volunteer experiences, views on community service and the service project, and how their perceptions of service or aging adults might have changed over the course of the project. Participants without disabilities, the PSE career director, and the volunteer coordinator protocols also included questions about the impact of the experience and the community's capacity for more inclusive service experiences. Additional protocol distinctions were questions about the memory facility and its mission (volunteer coordinator); questions about future plans to continue volunteering and lessons learned from the service project (students with and without ID); and perspectives about the service experience (students without disabilities).

Data Analysis

We coded each interview transcript—as well as the transcripts and field notes from the reflection and celebration meeting—using a constant comparative approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). After an initial

review of the data, the primary researcher and a faculty advisor met to develop three broad coding categories including (a) perceptions of different participant groups on the impact of the experience; (b) the nature of participant interactions within an inclusive setting; and (c) advice for creating more inclusive service opportunities. Using these initial coding categories, the primary researcher independently coded four interviews, creating subcategories and definitions based on emerging themes from the data. Coded items and their definitions were reviewed by the faculty advisor, who provided feedback and edits to clarify the coding scheme. We repeated this process with the remaining eight interview transcripts and the session transcript to develop a final draft of the coding scheme. Then, we shared this coding scheme with a doctoral student familiar with inclusive service projects who provided peer debriefing and critique. Final edits were made through consensus of the primary researcher and faculty advisor.

Throughout data collection and analysis, we used multiple strategies to support the trustworthiness of our findings (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Prior to data collection, the lead researcher developed relationships with the PSE staff and students and learned about the program's day-to-day operations. Advanced contextual understanding from these field experiences informed our approach to recruitment, data collection, and analysis. We used two types of triangulation—multiple data sources (i.e., interviews, field notes, audio-recordings) and multiple investigators—to examine how findings converged and diverged across sources. We reduced bias by employing a team-based approach to coding and a peer debriefer in the final stages of the process. We maintained an audit trail of raw data (i.e., audio-recordings, project artifacts, field notes) and analysis products (i.e., iterations of the coding scheme, meeting notes, coding memos) documenting our analysis process.

Results

We draw upon our interviews, transcripts, and field notes as we present the primary themes aligned with each of our four research questions.

What Benefits were Perceived to Accrue for Students with ID?

We identified seven areas of benefits for students with ID participating in this inclusive community service experience. We describe each below and illustrate with participant quotes.

Took on new service roles. Three students with-

out disabilities and one student with ID discussed a shift in roles as students with ID became the ones *servicing* in their community (versus the ones being served). For example, Isabel described a natural role reversal that took place, “That’s not a type of activity they might typically do, like being the ones who get to go out and help others. And so now, hopefully in the future, they’ll want to continue doing different types of service.” Ron, a student with ID, described how this service project helped him “experience things that you [he] never um experienced before,” about aging adults. In addition, two students without disabilities described how volunteering helps students with ID challenge society’s stereotype that they are always in need of help. Lucy affirmed this role reversal and potential for inclusive service experiences to empower all people:

Right, so they’re the ones who like are usually seeking help and who need to be helped...and so perhaps they would think that they can’t be the ones that’re helping...so I think that it’s so important for them to see that that’s not true...like anyone really whatever condition you’re in in life, you can always reach out to someone else and lay, lend a helping hand, so I think it was just great for them to see that you know they can go and hang out with the elderly and truly create like such an amazing impact.

Experienced the satisfaction of servicing. One student without disabilities described her own feelings of enjoyment and excitement as students with ID served and impacted their communities. Lucy discussed how happy students with ID were when they saw residents smile and enjoy their company. She also explained how the benefits of the experience were felt equally by all students:

I don’t think there’s a difference in how they [students with ID] see it and how we see the impact of it, I think it’s just again seeing that you know, you can bring like...a smile onto someone else’s face, I think everyone gets to feel joy from that... if you have a disability or not.

Developed self-determination skills. Students found that the inclusive experience allowed them to build their leadership skills and be more independent. One student without disabilities, Grace, discussed how the experience provided students with ID the confidence necessary to lead and carry out the project. She talked about the leadership opportunities embedded throughout the project’s planning and implementation mentioning:

I know a couple of students voiced opinions about like what, like what type of service like we wanted to do and gave really good justifications for like why they thought that that would be...helpful for the residents for us to like do this kind of service.

Eric, a student with ID, expressed the enjoyment of getting to complete activities independently, as he led group exercises during the service project and interacted with the residents at the end. He felt he impacted the residents by “getting to interact with them, getting to be a part of their life, and getting to make them feel good about themselves.” The PSE career director felt these opportunities to gain self-determination skills helped students feel empowered to create change and make a difference in their communities, stating:

I would think that it was probably really empowering for them, just because they pretty much got to be in charge of what we did and got to be the ones helping others. And where like the residents would look to them for anything that they needed.

Formed relationships with new peers. Some students suggested that the relationships were more likely to develop because the project was a student-led activity done with fellow students, as opposed to being a class requirement with teachers present. Caitlin suggested, “if [the students with ID] have done service before, it might have been with family or friends from church...it might not have necessarily been friends from college, which is definitely a different experience.” She further explained the nature of working alongside same-age peers when she said:

So like volunteering just with your same-aged peers is, is really exciting. It’s like, okay, my friends are doing it, everyone’s doing it, it’s cool, it’s fun, we’re all doing it together, that’s part of what makes it so cool and fun.

Built and refined social skills. Three students mentioned the impact of the interactions, dispositions, and attitudes of their peers as they served. Students with ID discussed learning from their peers who had experience with aging adults and knew how to interact with them. One student with ID, Eric, who we observed as initially hesitant to join the service activities, mentioned that watching his peers interact with the residents helped him learn how to do the same. Ron, another student with ID, noted how he was impacted by the general dispositions and attitudes towards aging adults shown by the other student

volunteers when saying, “I thought that the other... service members, I thought they really did show a lot of affection, more understanding towards them [the residents] when they [the other volunteers] were speaking to them.” Chris, another student with ID, noted that he learned how to “have a good time” and enjoy the service experience from being with other student volunteers. The PSE career director also discussed how the inclusive service experience allowed students with ID to use and refine their social skills in a real-life setting to meet new people, engage in conversations with peers and residents, and navigate group dynamics and interactions.

Learned about differences and diversity. Both the PSE career director and the volunteer coordinator mentioned the capacity of students with ID to perceive, understand, and become comfortable with different characteristics and modes of communication used by the residents they served. For example, Nancy stated, “I don’t know how often they would see somebody...who might not be able to talk or might not be able to sit down or something like that.” In both cases, Nancy and Anna acknowledged that the service experience allowed students with ID the opportunity to interact with and understand a population different from them.

Connected service to personal experiences. Students were able to connect the service experience with their family members, aging adults in the community, and their own strengths. All students with ID explicitly mentioned connections they made between the service project and their own family members who were either aging adults or had Alzheimer’s disease. Students without ID observed this as well. For example, Nancy said, “I know one [student with ID] said ‘well I go to my grandmother’s house you know all the time on the weekend and you know I spend the night and you know she cooks,’ and so I think there was some connection.” Beyond family connections, students with ID learned about how they might treat others and their positive qualities that surfaced through the experience. Eric discussed the idea of mutual respect when interacting with aging adults, and even talked about the impact of his interactions with aging adults “it put me in my spot to tell me and then remind me about things that I need to be aware of in life.” Ron focused on the qualities he discovered about himself throughout the experience: “how kind I am, understanding, and definitely giving them affection...and showing them that I am listening, I am here.”

What Benefits were Perceived to Accrue for Students without Disabilities?

We identified three over-arching benefits for college students without disabilities participating in this inclusive community service project.

Learned about strengths and abilities. All students without disabilities and the volunteer coordinator described increased recognition of the abilities and strengths of students with ID as a result of this experience. Students said they were reminded throughout the experience that students with ID are “capable of serving” and “are not always like the population that should be served.” Isabel realized “that there really was no difference in like how I served the residents and how [the students with ID] did.” Lucy shared that the project really “was just shining a light on the fact that...they can do just anything that anyone else can do.” Other students did not change their views about the capacity of students with ID to serve, but did emphasize how the experience helped reinforce what they already believed. Caitlin said, “I knew that people with disabilities can definitely engage in service and be wonderful volunteers.” In addition, Jenny noted that “I didn’t really have this notion that they can’t serve...but this service project really, kind of gives us the, like concrete...thing that yeah...they have disabilities, but they still have a lot more.” The service site staff member said she was influenced by the interactions she witnessed and felt that “students without disabilities...were impacted seeing the students with disabilities working with the residents,” thereby showcasing their abilities

Developed a passion for inclusive programming. Two students without disabilities discussed the need for more inclusive service experiences and recognized opportunities for their development on campuses and in the community. For example, Jenny said:

[w]e still have so many different areas, like that maybe you can contribute...to other people, to other communities, so...I think it’s something that should’ve happened a long time ago, but like it’s great that it’s...happening right now.

Jenny also highlighted why inclusive experiences were so important, noting “it was the first time I got to see firsthand...them serving so I guess they kind of, I expected them to be successful with it, but it was cool actually getting to see it.” Another student described how the project would have been different if students with ID had been the recipients of service or served exclusively by themselves. This same student explained that service is not typically an activity shared between students with ID and students without disabilities as part of the PSE program, so this

service experience provided exposure to a new activity that could be shared between students. Caitlin, a student without a disability, expressed that having gained firsthand experience, she could advocate for their success:

and now I can say that, I have seen them, I have been a participant in an inclusive service experience and seen that unsurprisingly it was, it was wonderful and benefited not only the people we are serving, but the [PSE] students and [students without disabilities].

She also felt confident that when given an opportunity in her life to speak up for new opportunities for community organizations or schools, she would be able to suggest inclusive service and all its benefits as a potential activity

Learned about benefits of collaboration. Three students without disabilities discussed the equal, collaborative nature of service they witnessed. Jenny talked about how her views of service as a collaborative effort were confirmed through her participation:

I have this, idea like that service is supposed to be like more collaborative, more like equal...like in terms of respect...but this experience really showed, like proves that it, it can be that way, and it should be that way.

When asked if the inclusive nature of this service experience made it different, other students discussed how they “didn’t notice that big of a difference.” Lucy talked about how all students who attended the service project were eager and “willing to help,” and “no one was complaining” about the service. Isabel specifically discussed how students with ID “were really helpful and knew what they were supposed to do.”

The PSE career director specifically discussed the potential impact on students without disabilities as they worked to include and interact with students with ID during the planning portion of the project. Anna talked about the effective strategy of ensuring students with ID and students without disabilities were mixed in groups during the planning session. She noticed that students from both groups exhibited “smiles and patience.” She discussed the impact on students without disabilities when she said

It gave the students...without disabilities an opportunity to learn...new ways of... approaching teamwork and um, you know approaching a situation with someone that may have limitations in certain areas.

How did Students with and without Disabilities Collaborate During their Community Service Project?

Interviews and field notes highlighted three areas of inclusive student engagement.

Group dynamics. Participants discussed the dynamics of the service group as students came together to plan and engage in the service project. Multiple students and staff discussed the level of engagement, collaboration, equality, and cohesiveness that contributed to the team working together. Teamwork was evidenced during the planning session, as Grace described how students were “working together to find... the majority vote” on which type of service project they wanted to engage in. Students then collaborated to refine the nature of their volunteering experience by “planning...which type of exercise we all wanted to do and...assigning roles.” The university staff member thought students without disabilities learned “new ways of...approaching teamwork” during planning by working in inclusive groups and the service site staff member spoke about one student with ID who “got the group together...in a little huddle, and decided okay—this is what you’re gonna do, then you’ll do this one, so who’s gonna go first” during group exercise. Field note observations also captured this moment of spontaneity, as it was noted how students had to think on their feet to organize the group exercise.

In addition, two students with ID and one student without disabilities described the pride and unity they felt because they were serving with a supportive, familiar group. Eric noted that because of his interactions with other student volunteers, he “got to have fun with them...got to just be a part of them” and felt more a part of his university campus as a result. Ron said, “I thought that the other...service members, I thought they really did show a lot of affection, more understanding towards them...I definitely felt more...proud that I was part of this project...and just working alongside with the others.”

Student roles. Several students talked about the roles they took on to ensure meaningful interactions and friendships emerged during the experience. One student with ID referred to volunteers without disabilities as “peer mentors” and described how he, “met like...different people that were in the, that’re our peer mentors or...they’re helping me in the project...” Students without disabilities expressed a different view of their relationships with students with ID. Grace felt that she took on a “peer” (versus helper) role because she thought all students “were like learning together and like working together to like figure out how to best serve that population.” Caitlin affirmed this view by expressing that when working

with people with disabilities, she is “there as a friend” and then provides help if necessary. Isabel was the only participant to mention the theme of acting as a role model. She said that during the project she “just wanted to be sort of a model of what they [students with ID] should be doing.” She observed that,

some of ‘em at first weren’t as...eager I guess to maybe go up and either talk to the residents or go play volleyball with them...or speak loudly when um reading off the exercises...so I wanted to be sort of that model of that like, “It’s ok, this is what you should be doing,” like for them to look to.

Reciprocal support. Four students without disabilities and one student with ID talked about the help and support provided by the group Chris, Grace, Lucy, and Isabel discussed the exercise portion of the service project and how volunteers received help and support from each other, especially when reading the list of exercise activities to the group. For example, Chris said, “if one of us couldn’t speak up...louder, then another person, one of our friends, will help us speak up clearly...to understand the echo in the room.” Grace added, we “all kind of helped each other like find where we were in the class ‘cause we had all of the instructions on a list.” Isabel also spoke about how volunteers helped each other during the balloon volleyball game. She described times when participants would notice residents sitting in “an area that needed...someone to go over and play,” and would suggest for other participants to move around to those areas and keep those residents engaged. Caitlin noted her support of other volunteers, as she “would toss...a balloon to other peer mentors” who she felt needed a push to be more engaged in the project. Finally, field note observations of the service project confirmed students without disabilities assisted students with ID in reading some of the exercises and that some students had to be prodded to engage all residents in the group exercise and to speak loudly.

What Advice do Participants Suggest for Creating Inclusive Community Service Projects?

All participants offered some insight regarding the feasibility of inclusive programming, and suggestions for creating more inclusive service opportunities on campuses and in the community. Four themes were identified: (a) provide meaningful planning and follow-up opportunities, (b) link to educational experiences, (c) specific design of inclusive programming, and (d) involving the community in inclusive efforts. These recommendations, along with definitions, are displayed in Table 2.

Discussion

Community service is prevailing practice in most institutions of higher education (Campus Compact, 2016). Despite high levels of student participation and the myriad benefits of service experiences, inclusive volunteer experiences involving college students with and without ID are not well represented in professional literature. This study extends the literature on inclusive community service experiences in several important ways.

First, students with ID are positively impacted by engaging in community service, can offer important perspectives on their service experiences, and learn important lessons through volunteering. This is important to emphasize because students with ID are so often viewed narrowly as the beneficiaries of service (Burns et al., 1999; Olnes, 2008; Van der Klift & Kunc, 1994). However, this study highlights the considerable benefits students with ID experience when given the opportunity to serve others. Students with ID discussed the myriad ways they were personally impacted by the service experience, such as opportunities to develop self-determination skills and learn through their interactions with peers. All of the students with ID also spoke about the lessons they learned about service and aging adults (e.g., having mutual respect, being reminded to serve others) and identified personal connections to this issue. Such findings extend a small, but growing, body of literature describing the important impact serving can have on individuals with disabilities (Carter et al., 2011; Lindsay, 2016). This study affirms the importance of creating opportunities for students with ID to engage in service, as well as to design these experiences to be inclusive so all students can learn from and alongside one another.

Second, inclusive service projects may provide a platform for shifting the focus from deficits to strengths, from the challenges students with ID experience to their achievements. This focus on ability is crucial because it can change how individuals with ID are perceived (Carter et al., 2015). In the present study, all of the college students without disabilities had prior experience with individuals with ID; thus changes in perspectives were raised by only some of the students. However, they all reported being reminded about students' capabilities and indicated this experience reinforced and confirmed their beliefs that individuals with ID have important gifts to bring to their communities. Other studies have shown the effectiveness of explicitly designed opportunities to create contact between individuals with and without disabilities characterized by optimal frequency and

duration, a sense of equality, prior history of exposure to individuals with ID, and quality interactions (Santiago, Lee, & Roper, 2016). Moreover, future inclusive service experiences should be explicitly designed so students who do not have prior exposure to individuals with ID might benefit from these experiences and develop meaningful relationships with diverse peers. In addition, the potential attitudinal changes that might be associated with this reciprocal form of engagement should be explored in future studies.

Third, inclusive service projects have the potential to expose all students to new experiences as they meet community needs alongside one another. Such experiences can be especially important for students with ID, who enroll in PSE programs to access the benefits of typical college experiences (Kleinert et al., 2012). In the present study, volunteering was identified as an avenue for students with ID to participate in typical campus experiences alongside their fellow college students. In addition, students without disabilities discussed how serving alongside students with ID provided them new ways of spending time with these peers—not as mentors, but in more balanced and reciprocal ways. In light of these mutual benefits, inclusive volunteering should be incorporated more frequently into inclusive PSE programming.

Fourth, additional refinements may be needed to promote the equity and reciprocity that characterize truly inclusive experiences. Consistent with past studies, most participants discussed how all students assumed similar roles and worked with equal collaboration (Burns et al., 1999; Dymond et al., 2007). In addition, most participants described the teaming as effective and described the students with ID as either peers or friends. However, one student with ID still viewed his partners as “peer mentors” who “helped” him during the project. Likewise, one student without disabilities talked about being a “role model” for students with ID during the experience. These descriptions suggest additional efforts may be needed to further support balanced roles and interactions throughout the service project (Van der Klift & Kunc, 1994).

Fifth, inclusive community service experiences should be explicitly designed to include preparation and follow-up sessions that are accessible to all students and provide support as they take ownership of their project. In addition, community awareness and education may be needed to create lasting partnerships and connections that allow students opportunities to volunteer over time. These suggestions are important because they offer a certain structure to service opportunities in order that they be reproduced and easily programmed into inclusive PSE settings. In addition, they were provided by individuals who

participated in this experience. Participants identified diverse ways to structure these experiences, connect them to educational opportunities, provide planning and follow-up opportunities, and involve the community in these efforts.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations to this study should be addressed through future research. First, all students without disabilities had prior volunteer and work experiences with people with disabilities and served as peer mentors in the campus' inclusive PSE program. Future studies should recruit college students who have limited or no prior experience with individuals with disabilities to better understand how the experience shapes their views and outcomes. For example, the volunteer coordinator, who had limited experience seeing individuals with disabilities serve at the memory care facility, shared how her perceptions had changed as a result of the service project, and noted that her organization needed more education to understand the benefits and importance of inclusive service.

Second, despite incorporating some elements of a service-learning framework, this study did not fully reflect a service-learning experience. Due to the design of the PSE program, students in this study did not all share similar classes or access the same academic material, so the common curricular connection required of typical service-learning experiences was not met. In addition, due to the time constraint placed on the study, students were unable to plan all aspects of the entire experience, instead taking ownership in selected aspects of the planning. Moreover, service-learning experiences are typically longer in length and provide more extended opportunities to plan, serve, and reflect. Future research should focus on embedding service-learning projects in inclusive college courses taken by students with ID.

Third, the duration of the service project itself was fairly short and involved a one-time experience. Although some studies have shown short-term service projects can still yield numerous benefits for students (Dymond et al., 2007; Reed, Jernstedt, Hawley, Reber, & DuBois, 2005), some participants (along with the service-site staff member) saw value in pursuing more consistent and longer-lasting opportunities. One planning session, service project, and reflection session, may not have been enough time for participants to get to know one another and learn about each other's strengths and interests. In addition, a one-time service project does not allow volunteers to establish long-term relationships with the people and organizations they serve. Future researchers might develop

inclusive service projects at the collegiate level that span entire semesters.

Fourth, several students without disabilities spoke about the potential impact of inclusive service activities on the broader community, such as reduction in stigma related to ID, the role reversal that takes place when individuals with ID are the ones who serve, and the willingness of the community to be open to people with ID serving. Although we did not verify these perceptions by querying others at the service site beyond the volunteer coordinator, they do highlight an intriguing possibility for additional research. Future studies could take steps to capture potential changes in the understanding and views of people with ID among individuals who are the recipients of their service.

Conclusion

Inclusive community service experiences amongst college students with and without disabilities have not been well documented. This study shows how participating students benefited from being part of a volunteer experience in which students worked together to plan aspects of a service project, served aging adults in the community, reflected upon the experience, and shared their personal insights. The burgeoning number of PSE programs across the nation should strive to incorporate such inclusive experiences as part of curriculum classes or as structured, organized activities so that more students have opportunities to serve alongside their peers.

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Table 1

Participant Demographics

Role/Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Race	Disability	Major(s)	Types of Prior Volunteer Experiences
Students						
Caitlin	21	F	W	-	Disability studies/child development	Individuals with disabilities; homeless; literacy; youth
Chris	19	M	W	ID	-	High school athletics
Eric	22	M	W	ID	-	Homeless
Grace ²	20	F	W	-	Elementary education/child studies	Individuals with disabilities; youth
Isabel	19	F	W	-	Elementary education/child studies	Individuals with disabilities; youth; homeless
Jenny	20	F	A	-	Early childhood education/second language studies	Individuals with disabilities; youth; literacy; education
Lucy	21	F	W	-	Civil engineering	Individuals with disabilities; animals; youth tutoring; environmental; hunger issues
Maria	18	F	AA	ID	-	Hunger issues; underprivileged youth
Nick ¹	19	M	W	ID	-	n/a
Ron	18	M	W	ID	-	Youth
Postsecondary Education Program Career Director						
Anna	30	F	W	-	-	n/a
Service Site Volunteer Coordinator						
Nancy	28	F	W	-	-	Homeless; literacy; youth

Note. A = Asian; AA = African American; W = White; ID = Intellectual disability; - = No disability; n/a = Not asked; ¹ = did not sit for interview; ² = special education minor.

Table 2

Advice for Inclusive Programs

Themes	Definitions
Provide meaningful planning and follow-up experiences	
Preparation before service experiences	Inform and train students in order to create expectation, provide clarity, and foster relationships beforehand
Student ownership in planning	Utilize student voice and abilities during planning to increase their interest and involvement
Follow-up after service experiences	Provide opportunities for students to share their insights, highlights, and challenges about a service project following their experiences
Link to education experiences	
Preparing for the workforce	Use a variety of service experiences as an avenue for career exploration while in school
Embed inclusive experiences into postsecondary programming	Adjust current postsecondary or community programming to reflect inclusive experiences
Early incorporation of inclusive programming in schools	Expose students to inclusive service experiences early on in school to foster a sense of inclusion that builds over time
Consistent opportunities for service	Create consistent community service projects as part of programming so students and beneficiaries develop mutual, long-lasting relationships
Use university resources	Use resources of university campuses in order to recruit and support inclusive experiences
Design of inclusive programming	
Increase accessibility and support	Find ways to adapt service experiences and provide support to accommodate a wide range of abilities and needs
Align experiences to range of students' abilities	Ensure that service experiences are a good fit for students by aligning experiences to students' functional abilities
Provide structured service experiences	Structure service experiences to include explicit planning and organization
Hold equal/shared roles	Design inclusive service opportunities that give all students the opportunity to take on similar roles and interactions during all stages of the experience
Involve the community in inclusive efforts	
Increase community awareness and education	Develop opportunities to increase the visibility of and inform the community about people with disabilities and their capacity to contribute and provide for others
Increase community partnerships and connections	Strengthen connections and partnerships between disability organizations and community service organizations
Advocacy from local and state organizations	Seek out local and state organizations to advocate for the feasibility, necessity, and success of inclusive service experiences in the community, and to assist in their formation
Meet community needs	Ensure inclusive experiences meet the needs of community organizations and that people with disabilities can meaningfully contribute to meet these needs

Note. Themes in each subcategory are organized from most to least emphasized by participants.