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### 'How Are You Doing?': College Instructors' Relationships and Communication with Students with Intellectual Disabilities

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## **‘How are you doing?’: College instructors’ relationships and communication with students with intellectual disabilities**

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### Abstract

The Higher Education Opportunity Act has increased the number of postsecondary education programs established to assist individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) in attending college. With the development of these new programs, there is an ever-present need to assess the interactions and necessary strategies to support students with ID in higher education. As college instructors are the primary instructors within these settings and programs, the current study explored this population’s perceptions and experiences related to instructing, communicating, and developing effective relationships with students with ID in their coursework. In-depth interviews were conducted with six college instructors working with students with ID in a higher education program in the United States. Applied thematic analysis identified themes related to the frequency of communication and relationship development, collaboration strategies, and using student feedback to inform future instruction and course preparation. Most instructors found relationships with students developed more effectively via increasing frequency, consistency, and accessibility of communication methods (e.g., scheduling individualised meeting times, video recorded directions, and reminders). Instructors also reported the importance of clear communication with stakeholders, supporting personnel/staff, and students’ peers, which aided student learning and engagement in the classroom. Limitations and implications for practice are discussed.

*Keywords:* higher education, inclusion, college, intellectual disabilities, instructors

**‘How are you doing?’: College instructors’ relationships and communication  
with students with intellectual disabilities**

An encouraging trend is the increasing number of individuals with disabilities attending programs in postsecondary education (PSE) settings (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). A contributing factor to this upsurge, particularly for individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID), is the continuing impact of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA, 2008), which specially focuses on promoting positive employment and independent living outcomes through PSE opportunities. This legislation facilitated the establishment of multiple PSE programs in higher education settings for students with ID, which was followed by significant increases in PSE enrolment for this population (Berg et al., 2017). These programs attempt to address an ever-present need, as indicated by the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS-2; Newmann et al., 2011), showing worrisome outcomes for individuals with ID who do not participate in PSE and remunerated work experiences.

An increasing number of these HEOA programs have been funded by the U.S. Department of Education to meet these needs; the main example being the Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID; Grigal et al., 2022; ThinkCollege, 2020). As of 2022, there are currently 38 TPSID programs in the United States (Grigal et al., 2022a). Students with ID in TPSID programs have access to higher education coursework, institutional services, resources, and opportunities, in addition to specific support programming (Grigal and Papay, 2018). Programs support academic learning and occupational skill development (e.g., internships) as well as independent living and social skills to facilitate employment and enhanced quality of life (Grigal et al., 2022b).

As college students with ID move through their program, they interact with a variety of individuals who support their learning. Although other essential supports provide a unique view of interactions with TPSID programs, college instructors (e.g., professors) are frequently the primary facilitators of learning and academic development for students with ID in PSE settings. Previous studies focusing on instructors have focused on their views (Lombardi et al., 2013; Taylor et al., 2021) and involvement (Burgin et al., 2017) with students with ID, or, for example, class modifications (Diez et al., 2015) and/or specific intercessions (Pistorio et al., 2021).

As the number of students with disabilities increases within PSE settings, there is an ever-present need for faculty self-reflection and feedback in the development of effective supports and strategies to meet these students' unique needs (ThinkCollege, 2020). Research related to faculty experiences requires building upon awareness and perception findings (Taylor et al., 2021) and identifying effective methods for promoting student growth and success both during and after TPSID programming (e.g., employment, independent living). One foundational and under-studied element of a successful higher education experience is the development of relationships and communication between student(s) and instructor(s)/professor(s), as well as the related strategies for supporting and sustaining these connections (Jones et al. 2016; Watts et al., 2023a). However, the current body of research on this topic is limited. For example, Taylor and colleagues (2021) conducted interviews with faculty in seven colleges and universities across the United States and reported on benefits and challenges related to instructing students with ID as well as necessary supports. Jones et al (2016) reported similar results via an online survey of faculty. Pursuing similar efforts, Burguin et al. (2017) examined and reported on the experiences of classroom instructors who hosted audit students with ID in their inclusive courses. Still, a

continued focus is needed to deepen the research base on faculty experiences with students with ID, to better facilitate accessibility, learning, and post-school outcomes.

Relationship development is an emerging area of study and has been associated with improved student outcomes in PSE settings (McKay et al., 2015; Thomas et al., 2020). Faculty members have indicated the benefits of supporting students' developing communication skills and the importance of developing relationships with both classmates and faculty (Jones et al., 2016). These relationships may also facilitate extra-curricular opportunities, new friendships, and the extension of social circles and communities (McKay et al., 2015). McCabe et al. (2022) recently discussed how faculty acknowledged 'fostering relationships' and the related benefits for all students in the class (p. 80). Communication and developing relationships are critical to student academic success, but also assist in the development of social skills and related skills associated with career development and independence (Jones et al., 2016; McKay et al., 2015). These are crucial areas that require additional, focused exploration in the identification of effective practices.

## **Purpose**

This study aimed to uncover new aspects within an existing area of concern (Neuman, 2014). These exploratory goals assist in the identification of new pathways toward the development of deeper levels of inquiry as well as future lines of research (Flynn and McDermott, 2016). To better meet the needs of future students, this study explored college instructors' first-year experiences teaching inclusive courses containing students with and without ID. The following objective and aligned research questions guided the study (Mack et al., 2005). The primary purpose was to identify relationship-building and communication development characteristics and methods between instructors and students with ID, as well as the

perceived effects on learning. Research questions included: (1) How do instructors perceive the development of rapport and relationships with students with ID?; (2) What strategies or behaviours do instructors perceive as effective for developing positive and productive relationships with students with ID?; (3) What strategies or techniques do instructors perceive as effective in supporting effective communication with students with ID?; (4) What are instructors' perceptions of relationships and communication strategies as they relate to student learning and outcomes?

### **Method**

The data from this study comes from a larger study that evaluated the effectiveness and social validity of the TPSID program described below. The university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study containing the procedures and components outlined in the following sections.

### **Settings and Program**

The study took place at a public 4-year university located in Texas, United States. The university is designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution and serves approximately 70% Hispanic students, with over 70% identified as first-generation college students. A large portion of the student population qualifies as having low-socioeconomic status. The Transition University for Career Advancement and Successful Adulthood (TU CASA) program, funded by a Department of Education TPSID grant, is a Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary Program (CTP) designed as a culturally responsive and person-centred 18-month (i.e., 3-semester) program focusing on college courses and internships toward career-readiness and successful employment outcomes upon graduation. The program began during the fall 2020 semester and averages between three to six students per cohort, with two cohorts attending

overlapping-schedule programming per year. The courses and experiences support the development of communication, well-being, independence, and practical work skills within students' career interest areas. Available career tracks include STEM, retail/manufacturing, and service-related fields. In addition to the standard university supports and student services, the program also provides coaching and tutoring for the TU CASA students, as well as family and transition planning, supports aligning with student and program goals for promoting independent living and increasing career readiness.

### **Participants and Procedure**

Qualitative research designs are uniquely suited to enlighten the lived experiences of an under-researched population (Southam-Gerow and Dorsey, 2014). Given that instructors and professors are the most common facilitators of instruction within PSE, this study implemented one-on-one in-depth interviews with faculty currently teaching a course including at least one student with ID. Acknowledging the varying terms for faculty positions (e.g., assistant, associate, full professor, lecturer, adjunct), this study will include all of the above under the term 'instructors', or those who provide the primary instruction within the targeted courses. Students in TU CASA enrol in two inclusive courses per semester.

Purposive sampling identified faculty who would be directly teaching TU CASA students in inclusive courses during their first year within the program. Purposive sampling is a non-probability technique of identifying participants based on inclusion/exclusion criteria that align with the focus of the objective and research questions of the study (Charmaz, 2014). The classroom and instructional experiences of the first-year implementation of the program was targeted to obtain data that may inform future programmatic decision-making and improvement in instructor support(s) and overall effectiveness. Participants met inclusion criteria if they were

listed as the primary instructor on the course schedules of students with ID in the TU CASA program. Recruitment emails were sent to faculty listed on the schedules ( $N = 6$ ), providing information about the study, eligibility criteria, and participation requirements. Instructors received no incentive for participation. Recruitment started before the first semester of program implementation and all six of the identified instructors agreed to participate. Table 1 provides participant demographic information, which, on average, reflects the larger faculty population.

For consistency, the same researcher conducted each of pre- and post-semester interviews. Interviews were initially scheduled to take place on campus within campus classrooms and offices, but due to COVID-19 restrictions, all interviews were pivoted to an online meeting format (i.e., Zoom, Microsoft Teams). The interview protocol was developed by the research team with a focus on identifying instructors' previous (i.e., pre-semester) communication and relationship-building experiences, as well as new perceptions (i.e., post-semester) related to these experiences regarding strengths or successes, strategies or techniques used, challenges or barriers, and future considerations and needs (i.e., suggestions or recommendations).

The pre-semester protocol contained 16 questions with six close-ended questions (i.e., to obtain demographic information) and the remaining questions being open-ended, to allow participants to respond in ways that are relevant and/or meaningful to their own experiences. Post-semester interviews contained 10 open-ended questions. The pre- and post-semester open-ended questions focused primarily on the same content, aligned with research question areas, with differences in phrasing to account for the time of the interview (i.e., pre-/post-semester), and a few specific, targeted questions for pre-semester (e.g., 'What previous experience do you have working with students with ID?'), and post-semester (e.g., 'What are your suggestions or



recommendations for future instructors of students with ID?’). Post-semester interviews tended to contain more frequent and specific follow-up questions to clarify responses (e.g., ‘Tell me more’, ‘What do you mean?’; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009) or to obtain further detail about a specific experience (e.g., ‘Why do you think that strategy worked?’).

Participants were interviewed twice, once at the start of the semester and once at the end, for a total of 12 interviews. Researchers conducted and recorded all interview sessions in private one-on-one meetings via virtual video-meeting software (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams), with interviews ranging from 41 min to 65 min ( $M = 46.7$ -min). After each interview concluded, de-identified audio files were sent to a third-party professional transcription service for transcription and were double-checked for accuracy upon being received by the lead researcher.

### **Coding, Reliability and Validity**

The research team employed applied thematic analysis on the dataset through a formalised codebook containing definitions for structural (i.e., question-based) and deductive codes (Guest et al., 2012). First, the lead researcher segmented the transcripts by applying “meaningful conceptual breaks” (Campbell et al., 2013, p. 304). Next, the researchers immersed themselves in the data through intensive reading and re-reading of the transcripts (O’Connor and Joffe, 2020). After familiarisation and producing initial notes on deductive and emergent codes, the researchers developed a first draft of the codebook containing code definitions and examples of when to use each code. Table 2 provides examples of the codes and their definitions. Researchers also applied structural codes to each of the questions, allowing the team to easily organise and extract data during thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012).

After codebook development, intercoder agreement (ICA) was evaluated to determine reliability between coders. First, the team coded a small quantity of data (e.g., one interview

transcript) by comparing and discussing the coding in unison to identify any potential misinterpretations before a formal reliability check was conducted. ICA was calculated by totalling the number of codes all three coders agreed upon and dividing by the number of total coded sections (McAlister et al., 2017). Following the training session, researchers double-coded one full transcript independently and found the ICA to be acceptable (>80% across coders). There is no currently accepted threshold for acceptability in ICA, a suggested standard of 80% agreement has been proposed and used frequently in qualitative research (Miles and Huberman, 1994; O'Connor and Joffe, 2020). The researchers then double-coded the remaining transcripts before reconvening to discuss emerging themes and subthemes. The researchers developed the thematic structure iteratively with the repeated refinement of themes and subthemes throughout the process.

To determine validity, researchers conducted a member check by sharing the findings with participating instructors and asking if the identified themes and subthemes resonated with them as members of the target population of this study (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Walther et al., 2013). All participants approved the reported findings.

## **Results**

Applied thematic analysis resulted in the identification of four main themes related to communication and relationship development. These themes addressed topics related to frequency and methods of communication, collaborating with stakeholders, and obtaining feedback to inform future course development and accessibility.

### **Theme 1: Relationships Develop as Time Increases**

All instructors reported that the development of their relationships with their students with ID increased over time and developed more effectively within one-on-one and/or small-

group settings. Time was an important factor in both communication and relationship building. Instructors felt that the more time they spent engaging with students with ID in their course, the more comfortable and open those students began to feel in their communication and sharing, which contributed to the development of more reciprocal relationships.

*At the start, I will say they were reactive. I could tell as the semester went on, they got more and more comfortable with the class and me as the instructor. (Instructor 1)*

*I find just that basic one-on-one human communication, especially face-to-face, can really make a student feel very valued and very much like the instructor is here for me, has my back and wants me to succeed. (Instructor 3)*

Instructors also reported that one-on-one or small group settings were the most effective in opening and developing these lines of communication. Some of the identified practices were to setup individual check-ins for students (e.g., individual office hours times) weekly; send video recordings of more explicit assignment directions (i.e., walkthroughs); and organising peer supports where students could rely on one another for clarification, feedback, and/or support for assignments.

*Let's say the time is limited, I have to move into another class or whatever the case might be, empowering them with campus resources that could help them also is very beneficial, including our peer leader who will be right there in the classroom can also be a point of contact. He can offer some wonderful support. Those are the umbrella of things that I've done to help these students be successful and enhance my teaching and communication with them. (Instructor 1)*

The student support groups not only provided additional resources for the students with ID outside of class but also actively facilitated a community dynamic that translated into more

support while in the classroom environment. Participants also provided multiple examples and methods for facilitating lines of communication with students with ID, especially within the digital domain. This particular theme reflects the connection between developing relationships with instructors and peers, and strengthening positive higher education experiences, even via web-based means (Taylor and Burnett, 2021).

*I have to create some virtual meeting videos with maybe some transcripts and be able to send that to them possibly on a weekly basis to ensure that they are keeping up.*

(Instructor 2)

*I'm very grateful that we actually have the GoReact technology in my class. I chose that over our web version of communication as well. They were very familiar with it and they had multiple assignments in it. They knew how it functioned and I was very grateful to actually have that as a separate entity away from Blackboard that housed their ability to still speak. They go for it. They experience all that and they put their heart out, and they are nervous, and they say, "Wow, I just did that." (Instructor 6)*

## **Theme 2: Consistent Communication Facilitates Learning and Community**

A majority of instructors reported experiences related to making early connections with students, one-on-one, to inform their knowledge of students' backgrounds which helped to build trusting relationships. Instructors were appreciative of when students from the TU CASA program 'opened up' and felt comfortable sharing personal information. This was frequently observed as a dramatic shift from being more of a 'reserved' student to being able to have a fully open line of communication with the instructor.

*[They] were so open and friendly, and what I hoped it was a breakthrough moment where [they] could come and just talk about things with me, between student and instructor. (Instructor 4)*

*One day, just before class, he got in there a few minutes early and I was there obviously a little bit early, and he just engaged in this wonderful discussion with me about what's going on in his life and he was going fishing and he talked about things with his family. I enjoyed it. It was only maybe about five or six minutes as I was starting up my classroom and getting ready for the rest of the students to come in, but I just so treasured and valued that moment to speak with him, because he had never really approached me before. (Instructor 5)*

All instructors identified the frequency and consistency of communication with their students with ID as an effective academic support strategy. The majority of the instructors identified increasing the frequency of communication with students with ID as an effective strategy for promoting engagement, assignment completion, and increasing the overall quality of work.

*A strategy that I like is really frequent communication with them. I like to make sure, I am checking in with them more often, communicating with them; taking time to approach them and say how are you doing, how is everything in class going. (Instructor 6)*

Further, this strategy was reported by all instructors as helpful with monitoring the progress of student learning, increasing engagement and/or creating an openness in communication which helped to facilitate a more inclusive and interesting classroom community. An inclusive classroom community was also seen as important in providing an environment where students' self-determination was supported and encouraged. A potential collateral effect of

this community environment was the expansion of instructors' perspectives regarding individuals with disabilities and their potential within higher education.

*It's really important that they see themselves, or a version of their community, within their class. To learn about that, to be able to speak about that, and see that their voice has value most definitely has been something that's not only thought-provoking but also very interesting and intriguing for me as an instructor. (Instructor 1)*

### **Theme 3: Relationships with Stakeholders and Supports**

Additional communication needs were identified outside of the student-instructor domain, as participants reported the importance of involving and communicating with stakeholders and supporting personnel. Instructors perceived collaboration as beneficial in supporting students with ID in their classrooms.

*They [TU CASA coaches] provided a tremendous amount of support and I think they did a lot of great instruction and worked much more with the students one on one than I did. The support resources that you had available to those students, I think, were instrumental in really providing an overall extremely positive experience. (Instructor 3)*

Collaboration with university stakeholders and campus resources was also critical in supporting students with ID. Instructors described collaborative approaches as being effective in facilitating student learning and success within their coursework. This included working with university support specialists and service providers (e.g., tutoring, writing center, library), as well as trained TU CASA staff. Additionally, instructors emphasised the importance of collaborating with other instructors and inviting them to be guest speakers for specific content areas, which increased engagement.

*When we had the resources come on board... we talked, and the way I approached it was: let's collaborate. What can we do to be successful and help these students? We got the resources on board and I just saw these students flourish. (Instructor 3)*

Further, instructors discussed the importance of utilising university resources, including technology and relevant training. Study data indicated several campus resources perceived as beneficial by instructors. These resources, including the Library and Disability Support Services (DSS), have impacted instructional decisions and individual approaches employed by instructors that empowered the students and led to their success. Regarding DSS, emphasis was placed on individual classroom accommodations ranging from extra time on assignments to a personal assistant. Participants also reflected on the importance of training as it relates to supporting students in the classroom settings, with common themes; UDL and DSS-related training.

*I've used a variety of approaches, anything from the traditional presentation of information that we have to do sometimes through lectures, or auditory formats where I'm speaking to the students, or showing them visual aids, but some other ways I deliver and design my instruction are to give the students a chance to wrap with their peers and be involved and share that way. (Instructor 4)*

Instructors stressed the importance of a proactive approach to training and their desire to receive the necessary training in advance. This was also perceived as a barrier when training was not offered or provided promptly, which should be considered by university stakeholders when creating professional development opportunities to improve student learning and outcomes.

These types of supports and training can be further reinforced and operationalized by Minority

Serving Institution (MSI) leadership through strategic campus-wide planning and strategies (Aquino and Scott, 2022).

#### **Theme 4: Obtaining Student Feedback Informs Future Instruction**

Overcoming the identified barriers is key to promoting student success, both inside and outside of the classroom learning environment. Instructors recommended follow-up interviews with students upon completing the semester, which would assist with planning. This allows faculty members to reflect on the approaches taken, missed learning opportunities, and/or restructuring presentations and assignments or integrating useful course tools.

*I think getting some feedback at different points, maybe at the beginning of the semester, maybe in the middle of the semester where I do a check-in, and at the end of the semester would definitely be something I would add. (Instructor 2)*

This progress monitoring and summative approach to utilising student feedback were perceived to provide a global review of course objectives and related student performance. Furthermore, the instructors recommended consistent feedback throughout the semester, allowing opportunities for re-teaching, ongoing adjustment of lessons and future assignments, and provisions for additional course resources.

*You need to ask a lot of questions and be very educated about the needs of your particular students and what it is that they struggle with and how you can help them. (Instructor 4)*

‘Making connections’ was identified by multiple participants as a strategy for instructors to overcome identified instructional barriers. One instructor indicated the desire for the students to be able to interact and rely upon current faculty members and classmates in the future, beyond the course and current semester, which would provide a reliable support system throughout the



student's college career. Another instructor went further and indicated that these systems require active cultivation for these relationships and systems to be developed and sustained long-term. A reported component of these relationships is the development, or requirement, of empathy on the part of the instructor. This characteristic can assist faculty in creating opportunities for the students to connect with the instructor and classmates based on personal interests, experiences, and shared goals, and build upon these connections as they move forward in their academic and career pathways.

*Try to put yourself in the shoes of those [TU CASA] students and say, what can I do to show them that I want you to feel free to come to me, that I'm approachable. (Instructor 5)*

Instructors stated a desire for increased communication and knowledge of students' disabilities and needs. Multiple instructors recommended being proactive in obtaining this background information for the individuals with disabilities enrolled in their courses. Instructors further offered to communicate suggestions to their colleagues who may have students with ID in their courses in the following semesters (e.g., serve as a model or mentor). Additionally, some commonly reported strategies used across participants included: conducting follow-up interviews, obtaining and providing consistent feedback, developing deeper connections with students, and employing empathy. Instructors were motivated to adapt course materials and teaching methods to better serve all students and perceived this proactive strategy as essential to instructional effectiveness.

*I really, really enjoyed working with these students. I didn't see it as a chore or an obligation. It was just a positive learning experience for me. (Instructor 1)*

Faculty reported their observations of student learning and growth throughout the semester were motivating to their own teaching. None of the participants perceived the inclusion of students with ID as a barrier to instruction. Student successes also translated to faculty motivation for future professional development on inclusive instructional practices for students with disabilities. Additionally, participants cited a desire to increase the accessibility of their courses for students with and without disabilities by making modifications to coursework prior to future semesters, showing potential positive collateral effects of inclusive courses for students with and without disabilities.

### **Discussion**

Although a majority of these findings align with the current research base, the results provide further depth regarding the perceived effective practices of instructors' relationships and communication with students with ID. Similar to previous studies, communication between the instructors and students with ID was perceived to be of primary importance to faculty, as well as a key indicator of student performance (Jones et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2021). Establishing clear lines of communication was perceived to positively impact students' overall performance in the course, as well as facilitate the development of positive working relationships over time (e.g., students increased the frequency and detail of communication without/with less prompting). Interestingly, but not surprisingly, instructors found themselves having to develop new and innovative methods to overcome barriers and create effective and accessible lines of communication both inside and outside (i.e., online) the classroom setting. These methods were perceived to aid students' comprehension of directions, comprehension of project/assignment descriptions, and overall engagement. The communication strategies implemented aligned with research-based practices for this population of students, such as video models/recordings,

individualised scheduling/checklists, and targeted check-ins to monitor progress (Snell et al., 2010). These new methods allowed students to replay instructor-provided information/instructions (e.g., reminders, model walkthroughs of assignments) when needed, and then receive follow-up check-ins by the instructor for support, increasing accessibility and overall independence (e.g., utilising resources).

Differing from previous studies, these faculty members typically engaged directly with students with ID rather than fully relying upon classmates and TPSID program staff to support communication and comprehension of directions and assignments. These interactions and relationships contrast with previous reports where faculty observed students with ID relying heavily on peers for communication and engagement support and viewing them as their primary contact or decision-makers for the students with ID (Taylor et al., 2021). Acknowledging the importance and effectiveness of peer supports (Carter and McCabe, 2020; Jones and Goble, 2012), the current study's findings suggest faculty who focus on developing effective and productive student-instructor communication methods may deter over-reliance on one communication mode (e.g., peer supports), and when used in tandem, may allow students with ID to be more successful and engaged using multiple communication resources.

Direct communication between the instructor and student with ID was also perceived to facilitate additional benefits in the development of relationships and related increases in knowledge of student interests/skills, class engagement, and overall quality of work. Instructors perceived the development of relationships with students with ID to increase as the students spent more time directly communicating with the instructors. This focus on student-centred communication differed slightly from previous studies where instructors' communication about student needs was directed toward TPSID program support staff (e.g., requesting enrolment

notification, course approvals; Taylor et al., 2021). The instructors within this study stated that their active participation and prompting of communication with students with ID facilitated increased student successes in class (i.e., delivery of information/direction, checking/assessing student comprehension, and developing relationships/insights into student interests and abilities). This knowledge, in conjunction with an individualised approach, can facilitate effective student learning and overall success within PSE coursework (Stefansdottir and Bjornsdottir, 2016; Taylor et al., 2021). Further, identifying individual needs was found to motivate instructors' decisions to seek additional training to better support diverse populations in their classrooms.

Consistent with recent research, participants described positive experiences when working with students with ID, noting student academic growth, personal advancement, and overall satisfaction (Taylor et al., 2021). Instructors also observed positive student development in interpersonal communication, self-confidence, and overall quality of work. The reported flourishing improvement in student independence and communication skills might be indicative of growth in these areas and the effectiveness of implemented supports. Additionally, participants cited their enjoyment and motivation based on the interactions in a more inclusive classroom. These positive experiences might have contributed to personal satisfaction and influenced instructors' desire for professional advancement. These findings align with similar instructor experiences in teaching inclusive courses, but the perceived unpreparedness to teach students with ID suggests the need for more effective professional development and systematic support for these instructors (Taylor et al., 2021).

### **Implications for Practice**

Overall, the development of, and interactions within student-instructor relationships have been limited in study, especially when focusing on faculty perceptions and experiences. When

faculty own the facilitation of teaching and learning within their diverse classes, the campus begins to reflect 'true inclusion'. Instructors felt motivated by the unique interactions with their students with ID, and even obtained knowledge of student interests and abilities which aided in more effective planning of course content to help increase engagement based on incorporating student interests and/or cultural backgrounds (Burgin et al., 2017), signalling a key area for future study.

Acknowledging this area of need, the present study prompted participants to share suggestions in support of future instructors and their students with ID. Overall, suggestions included identifying where barriers occur within instruction (e.g., students not showing progress or participating) and planning actionable steps such as determining individual student needs and/or strategies, as well as the subsequent, related professional development training(s) or supports necessary for overcoming those barriers. Instructors cited suggestions that fell within two main categories, collaboration with stakeholders and using peer supports to increase engagement and communication. These findings have potential implications for both instructors and students. Learning experiences and outcomes for students with ID can be improved by exploring student needs, instructional barriers, and professional development needs. For example, instructors can listen to student input and consider it in revising future lecture materials and teaching practices. Teaching students with ID may also contribute to the instructor's awareness of the wide range of student learning styles and capabilities.

In particular, this data from the program evaluation has led to the development of program-led trainings on UDL principals and strategies for faculty, offered each semester. Although in the early stages of implementation, faculty have already reported the benefits (e.g., increased accessibility of content) for all learners, including those with ID. Further, the

identification of future, targeted professional development areas in teaching diverse learners has been surveyed as a part of the trainings. By seeking targeted professional development, instructors gain confidence, bolster their teaching practices, and broaden instructional inclusion for students with a wide range of learning styles and abilities (Watts et al., 2023b). Overall, the audit experiences present an opportunity for growth for course instructors as well as their students.

At the student-level, formalising peer-mediated supports has shown benefit for both the mentors and mentees in academic and non-academic (e.g., behavioural, social) skill development (Watts et al., 2020). The program has recently worked to embed peer support systems to assist with in-class engagement and clarify any communication issues, allowing instructors to focus more on adapting instructional practices to better meet individual needs. With more formalised peer-support trainings in place, instructors can more readily supplement lecture time with application-based learning activities (i.e., peer-supported), allowing for more interaction and engagement within the class (Watts et al., 2022). Further, there may be additional benefits for neurotypical students serving as a mentors or peer-supports as well (Griffin et al., 2019; Izzo and Shuman, 2013; Watts et al., 2019). Mentors are provided opportunities to model and practise positive student behaviours (e.g., on-task behaviour), leadership skills (e.g., providing positive reinforcement), and facilitating interactions between classmates with and without disabilities (Watts and McKenna, 2021).

Although peer supports may assist in communication and comprehension, faculty can further support connections and learning by providing purposeful opportunities for direct communication between themselves and their students with ID (Jones et al., 2020). At the start of the semester, faculty might embed multiple get-to-know-you activities in order to prompt the development of personal connections and knowledge of individual experiences to draw upon for

future instruction, engagement, and/or social (i.e., community building) purposes. Another example of a proactive instructor-led strategy would be to schedule individual meetings with students at the start of the semester, and later, reoccurring meetings to remain connected and ensure accessibility. As the students with ID become familiar with this process of meeting with their instructors, the program can support the transition to more student-led scheduling, communication requests, and meeting prompts. Additionally, as the semester moves forward, these meetings can become more student-led and directed, with a focus on updates to individual academic, social, or vocational goals or interests, as well as the related instructional planning and strategies that will facilitate the attainment of those skills and experiences.

Instructors also suggested careful planning in collaboration with stakeholders and related TPSID program staff who bring together and share their expertise to increase student learning and success. Participants in the current study cited a collaborative approach as effective in meeting the individual needs of students with ID. Instructors indicated working with and developing collaborative relationships with program staff, university support specialists, and related campus service providers. Additionally, suggestions included collaborations and relationships developed beyond TPSID program staff and supports, such as working with the office of disability support services, the library, and other campus resources (e.g., tutoring, writing centre, first-generation student resource centre), which align with previous research on practices for this population of students (Plotner and Marshall, 2014). Instructors also emphasised the importance of receiving timely training (i.e., pre-semester/year) and seeking out additional on- and off-campus training opportunities via suggestions from TPSID program staff, as well as self-identified by registering or signing up for related-service provider and/or organisation mailing lists. Content-wise, faculty also suggested beneficial pre-semester training

focusing on components of an inclusive PSE program, coursework, goals, and expectations (Taylor et al., 2021).

Each of these implications aligns or relates to previously identified practices supporting the development of productive relationships and open lines of communication for students with disabilities in higher education (Watts and Kerr, 2022). Further, these implications suggest the need to develop a more formalised infrastructure that facilitates collaborative efforts in supporting the professional development and knowledge of both instructors and the students with ID, who they serve.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Addressing the small sample size, recent findings indicate that 6–7 in-depth interviews will capture most themes in a homogenous sample, and 11–12 interviews will reach a high degree of thematic saturation (95th percentile; Guest et al., 2020). A small sample size could not be avoided due to the newness of the program and current enrolments, but still needs to be considered as a limitation when interpreting the findings. Additionally, the generalisation of these findings is also limited due to the study's focus on a single TPSID program at a single university, but key insights and suggestions for specific programmatic components and practices can be developed or utilised within similar programs.

Addressing limitations can assist in the identification of areas for future research. Although these findings have been compared to previous studies focusing on different TPSID programs, it is suggested that future studies target a larger and broader sample to increase reliability. The holes in the literature base also signal specific areas for future research related to increasing knowledge and strategies for further promoting communication and relationship building in inclusive PSE models (Burgin et al., 2017). One suggestion would be to compare



students' reliance on peer supports in relation to increasing instructor-directed, individualised communication (e.g., weekly video directions/reminders, individually scheduled office hours each week). This investigation may assist in determining the most effective practices, and/or developing an effective 'package' of supports, for promoting student engagement, communication, and/or self-determination (e.g., frequency of prompted/unprompted communication; Gaumer Erickson et al., 2015).

As the number of TPSID and similar programs increase, there is an ever-present need to evaluate effective approaches at the higher education level for improving access and outcomes for students with ID. Instructors play a key role in the instruction of students with ID in PSE settings and the insights into their experiences regarding relationships, barriers, strategies, and successes can, and should, be invaluable data for informing the next steps in the development of future higher education programming for students with ID.

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