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Perceptions of Postsecondary Experiences and Supports That Advance the Personal Goals of Students With Extensive Support Needs

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Abstract

Inclusive postsecondary education (PSE) programs at institutions of higher education are emerging as opportunities for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), including those with extensive support needs (ESN), to progress toward their desired outcomes. This qualitative study aimed to understand the experiences and supports that current and recently graduated students in a dual enrollment nonresidential PSE program perceive as contributing to their self-directed employment, education, and social goals. Furthermore, this study explored how students' perceived PSE affected their goal achievement and future lives. Findings from interviews with 10 participants with IDD, including eight with ESN, revealed that obtaining and maintaining competitive employment was negatively impacted by COVID-19, paid employment during PSE was not aligned with participants' employment goals, internship experiences led to participants learning about their work preferences and changing their employment goals, and peer mentors impacted the achievement of participant's employment, education, and social goals. Implications for practice and research and study limitations are described.

Keywords

inclusive postsecondary education, goals, employment, peer mentor, intellectual and developmental disabilities

Inclusive postsecondary education (PSE) programs for young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), including those with extensive support needs (ESN), have emerged at institutions of higher education across the nation. Individuals with ESN require ongoing support across domains (e.g., communication, academic, behavior), most commonly have a disability label of intellectual disability, autism, or multiple disabilities, and likely took the state alternate assessment during K–12 schooling (Taub et al., 2017). Students in PSE programs obtain real-life experiences to gain skills to learn in their communities and to obtain competitive integrated employment (Grigal & Hart, 2010). Competitive integrated employment is full- or part-time work in which an individual with a disability is compensated at or above minimum wage, interacts with people without disabilities, and receives the same benefits and opportunities

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for advancement as other employees (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, 2014). Individuals with IDD and particularly those with ESN face barriers to securing competitive integrated employment, primarily because employers perceive that they lack work skills (Kocman et al., 2018); however, the correlation between attending PSE programs and increased employment of students with IDD is well-documented (Grigal et al., 2019; Ryan et al., 2019). Enrollment in PSE programs is also associated with increased starting salaries and self-determination (Grigal et al., 2019).

Self-determination is essential for student success in PSE (Shogren & Shaw, 2016). Self-determined people act as causal agents by taking actions that are aligned with freely chosen goals (Shogren, Wehmeyer, Palmer, Forber-Pratt, et al., 2015). Guidance given to PSE programs identifies self-determination as a primary focus (Grigal et al., 2012) and emphasizes the importance of student involvement in the development of employment, education, and social goals (Shogren et al., 2018). Developing and working toward goals increases self-determination skills which contribute to outcomes such as competitive employment, community integration, and increased quality of life (Shogren, Wehmeyer, Palmer, Rifenbark, & Little, 2015). National standards for PSE programs also emphasize the importance of students developing goals aligned with their desired work and education outcomes (Grigal et al., 2011).

The importance of self-directed employment goal setting is also emphasized in PSE inclusive individual support models. PSE programs range in their student eligibility requirements (e.g., dual K–12 enrollment and age) and program offerings (e.g., residential and length; Becht et al., 2020). However, three main PSE models exist, mixed/hybrid, substantially separate, and inclusive individual support (Hart, 2006). In the mixed/hybrid model, students participate in social activities and/or academic classes alongside peers without disabilities as well as in separate classes for only students with disabilities. In the substantially separate model, students may participate in generic social activities or employment experiences and only participate in separate classes for students with disabilities on campus. In the inclusive individual support model, students receive individualized services across their program including in academic classes alongside their peers without disabilities. These programs focus on establishing student-selected employment goals that drive their program of study and work experiences (Hart, 2006).

Although PSE national standards and inclusive individual support models emphasize the need for self-directed goals to drive students' academic and employment experiences, minimal research has explored PSE students' goals and goal attainment (Papay & Grigal, 2019). Furthermore, the perspectives of college students with intellectual disabilities (IDs) are absent from national college surveys including surveys intended for college students with disabilities (Grigal & Hart, 2010; Paiewonsky, 2011). Instead, the success of PSE programs is often measured quantitatively (e.g., percentage employed) or descriptively (e.g., program description; Papay & Grigal, 2019). Qualitative measures are vital to obtain a more complete picture of the lived experiences of PSE students. In addition, they provide a platform for participant voices that extend beyond what quantitative data can capture. Out of 60 peer-reviewed articles published on PSE for students with ID between 2010 and 2016, Papay and Grigal (2019) found only five qualitative studies on the perceptions or experiences of PSE students. Furthermore, only three studies have explored post-PSE student outcomes, none of which used qualitative methods to obtain the perceptions of PSE graduates. Papay and Grigal conclude that the most important next research steps are "determining the impact of PSE on employment and other outcomes and identifying which practices have the greatest evidence for supporting students with ID who enroll in PSE in achieving their desired goals" (p. 436). Their call to action informs this study's focus on student outcomes and goal achievement while highlighting the voices of PSE students with ESN.

Qualitative researchers have documented findings in which PSE students convey that obtaining a variety of experiences allows them to discover their preferences (Paiewonsky, 2011) and refine their goals to align with their desired outcomes (Mock & Love, 2012). Paiewonsky (2011), for example, supported nine students with ID in participatory action research. The students discussed having access to many different classes compared with high school, which allowed them to discover their preferences and strengths. Mock and Love (2012) touched on goal achievement when they explored the perspectives of 24 PSE students with ID during 4 day-long summits in New York. Students described how continued learning was important for

achieving their employment, relationships, and independent living goals. Furthermore, students expressed increased opportunities to learn, make choices, explore careers, and make friends.

PSE students also expressed the importance of same-aged peer mentor support for academic success and social goal achievement. Wilt and Morningstar (2020) conducted focus groups with five PSE students with ID to understand how they perceived the support provided by peer mentors. Students found peer support helpful in multiple realms: academic, emotional, feedback, and social. All students stated that academic support from peer mentors was important to succeed in class. Consistent with the research on perceptions of PSE peer mentors (Carter & McCabe, 2021), some students reported that they developed genuine friendships with peer mentors and achieved their social goals (Wilt and Morningstar, 2020). Butler et al. (2016) discovered similar results when surveying 19 PSE students with ID, finding that 83% of students had friends to converse with or activities to participate in. PSE programs that provide inclusive and natural supports, such as peer mentors, prepare students to engage in social networks resulting in positive employment, education, and social outcomes (Trainor et al., 2013).

Researchers have also used survey methods to compare students' goal achievement across PSE models. Moore and Schelling (2015) surveyed 34 students with ID in substantially separate ($n = 23$) and inclusive individual support ($n = 11$) PSE models to identify their goals and if they accomplished them. In all cases, the students reported high degrees of goal accomplishment, including improving academic and social skills, gaining independence, making friends, and gaining competitive employment after graduating. However, students in inclusive PSE reported greater diversity of employment outside traditional positions for people with ID, such as food preparation and custodial work, and received a higher hourly rate compared with students in specialized PSE programs (Moore & Schelling, 2015). Greater diversity in employment suggests that students in inclusive PSE may have opportunities to explore more variety of employment options, learn their preferences (Paiewonsky, 2011), refine their employment goals (Mock & Love, 2012), and obtain competitive employment aligned with their refined employment goals.

The purpose of this study was to understand how individuals who are currently or have recently been in a PSE program, perceive the program's prioritization of academic and employment experiences aligned with their self-directed goals and the effect of their experiences on their goal achievement and future lives (Papay & Grigal, 2019). This study expands the literature base by sharing the voices of current and recently graduated PSE students with IDD including those with ESN who are underrepresented in the extant research, informing practice in similar PSE programs, and providing testimonial support for PSE programs to exist. We used qualitative methods to solicit the perspectives of 10 students in one inclusive individual support PSE program. Two research questions guided this study:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): How do students with IDD and ESN perceive their PSE experiences and supports as contributing to their self-directed employment, education, and social goals?
Research Question 2 (RQ2): How do students with IDD and ESN perceive PSE affecting their self-directed employment, education, and social goal achievement, and future lives?

Method

Participants and Setting

After university Institutional Review Board approval, we recruited participants who attended a 2-year (four semesters) inclusive individual support PSE program for students with IDD housed at a large 4-year public university in the southwestern United States. Current second-year students and those who had graduated within the prior 2 years were recruited to participate. Second-year students had over two semesters in PSE and would have adequate time to develop goals and gain experiences. Students who graduated within the prior 2 years would likely more accurately recall their PSE goals and experiences than students who graduated many years past. The first author had been a teacher for the PSE program and was able to contact eligible students and their parent(s). Recruitment emails were sent to 31 students and included a simple study description and a Qualtrics questionnaire link. The questionnaire provided

students with details about the study and asked them "Do you want to do an interview?" By selecting "yes," they provided consent to participate if they were their guardian or assent to participate if they were not their guardian. Emails were also sent to the parent(s) of all potential participants that included a brief description of the study and a separate Qualtrics questionnaire link. This questionnaire described the study, requested parental consent for their child to participate in an interview if they were their child's guardian, and requested information about their child. Seven parents filled out the questionnaire. Three students (Olivia, Stefon, Zoe) who were their own guardians and whose parents did not fill out the questionnaire, chose to fill it out themselves.

A total of 10 current and recently graduated students with IDD participated in the study. See Table 1 for participant demographic data, number of semesters completed, graduation year, and interview accessibility supports. Eight participants (except Chloe and Olivia) were considered to have ESN based on mutual agreement from the first two authors. To make this determination, the authors reflected on the intensity of supports each student needed during the PSE program and if these supports were provided across multiple domains. Data obtained in the student questionnaire was also considered, such as their high school supports and services (e.g., one-on-one adult, behavior support plan) and if they were eligible to take the state alternate assessment. Four students were eligible for the alternate assessment, one student was not eligible, and five students did not have responses to this question. Eight students were graduates and completed all four semesters of the PSE program. Five of those eight students graduated in 2020 and, due to the university's COVID-19 closure in March 2020, transitioned to remote learning for their final semester. Two participants were current students and completed two and a half semesters. These students learned remotely for about one semester when they were interviewed.

The PSE program typically admitted 10 students with IDD per year with a total enrollment of 20 students. Students were dually enrolled, meaning they took college courses that counted toward the completion of their high school diploma or certificate; however, all services were provided at the university. Upon completion of the PSE program, students received a PSE certificate at the university's graduation and their high school diploma or certificate. Postgraduation, the PSE program did not systematically check in with graduates; this interview was the first opportunity for many students to provide feedback on their experience.

Students in this PSE program attended courses and participated in internships and campus activities with college peers without disabilities. During the first two semesters, students took two classes and worked 3 to 10 hours per week at an internship. During the final year, students took one class a semester and increased their internship to 8 to 20 hours per week. One student (Chloe) had a goal to continue at the university after the PSE program. She took two or three classes each semester and took her second-year courses for credit. All other students audited courses so the content could be individually adapted. Some classes were directly related to students' employment goals and others focused on skills (e.g., budgeting).

All students worked at multiple unpaid internships during their program. PSE teachers set up or supported students to interview for internships that were most often aligned with their employment goals. Internships mentioned by participants included concert theater ticket sales and ushering, computer data entry, mail distribution, food preparation, service, and stocking. Five participants obtained competitive employment by the end of their PSE program. Ángel was employed at a café and a nonprofit independent movie theater off campus; Olivia was employed at the same movie theater; Kylie was employed at a church doing child care off campus; Juan was employed at a biology lab on campus; and Stefon was employed at a café near campus.

Students were supported by same-aged college peer mentors. There were 30 to 36 peer mentors each semester with the majority being White, female, and in special education. Students were supported by several peer mentors each day during various activities; however, when and where peer mentors supported students each week remained consistent. For example, one peer mentor consistently supported a student in their class and had scheduled time outside of class to study and complete assignments. In addition, each week the same peer mentor(s) consistently supported the same students during their internships. Peer mentors also supported students to create their schedule for the week, including planning social activities (e.g., inviting a friend).

Table 1. Participant Demographic Data.

Name	Age	Gender	Race	Ethnicity	Nature of disability	Semesters completed	Graduation year	Interview accessibility supports
Chloe[a]	20	F	White, Asian American	Not Latinx	ASD	4	2020	-
Olivia[a]	21	F	-	Latinx	OHI	4	2019	Simplified Language
Stefon	21	M	Black	-	ASD, ID, EBD, OHI	4	2020	Visuals, Written Supports, Simplified Language
Elijah	20	M	Black	Not Latinx	ASD	4	2020	Visuals, Written Supports, Simplified Language
Zoe	21	F	-	Latinx	ID	2.5	2021	Visuals, Written Supports, Simplified Language
Kylie	22	F	White	Not Latinx	ID, HI	4	2019	Parent Support, Visuals, Written Supports, Enlarged Text, Simplified Language
Grant	19	M	White	Not Latinx	ASD, SLI, ADD	2.5	2021	Visuals, Written Supports, Simplified Language
Ángel	22	M	Other: Mexican American	Latinx	ID, Deafness	4	2019	ASL Interpreter, Simplified Language
Juan	22	M	Other: Hispanic	Latinx	MULTI, ID, CP, Seizure Disorder	4	2020	Visuals, Written Supports, Simplified Language
Xiu	21	F	Other: White, Asian	Not Latinx	ID, HI, SLI	4	2020	Parent Support, Visuals, Written Supports, Simplified Language, Prepared Responses in Advance

Note. ASD = autism spectrum disorder; OHI = other health impairment; ID = intellectual disability; EBD = emotional/behavior disturbance; HI = hearing impairment; SLI = speech-language impairment; ADD = attention deficit disorder; MULTI = multiple disabilities; CP = cerebral palsy; ASL = American sign language.
[a]Students who did not have extensive support needs.

Data Collection

The Qualtrics questionnaire completed by seven parents and three students (Olivia, Stefon, and Zoe) served as the first form of data collection. The questionnaire consisted of 11 questions. Two questions were fill-in-the-blank, including their child's age and a description of their child's communication supports. Nine questions were multiple choice, including if they were their child's legal guardian (yes/no) and if they provided consent for their child to participate (yes/no) as well as their child's gender, race, ethnicity, disabilit(ies), and high school educational placement, supports/services, and eligibility for the alternate assessment.

The second form of data collection was semi-structured interviews with 10 participants with IDD via Zoom, a remote online platform because in-person meetings were not permitted due to COVID-19. The interview questions were in plain language and developed to elicit information associated with each research question. The interview was organized into three sections: employment, education, and social. Each section followed the same five-question structure for each section: (a) What was your goal when you were in PSE? (b) What did you do during PSE that helped you reach that goal? (c) What did teachers or peer mentors do

in PSE that helped you reach that goal? (d) Is there anything you wish you did in PSE to better prepare you to reach your goal? (e) Is there anything you wish teachers or peer mentors did in PSE to better prepare you to reach your goal? Finally, participants were asked how they think PSE prepared them to achieve their goals overall and how their future has changed because of attending PSE.

Students' goals were first identified during their person-centered planning (PCP) meeting before the start of the program. In collaboration with each student and their family, friends, and teachers, team members would identify the student's employment, education, and social goals, individualized supports, and adult services (e.g., paratransit). Each student also established their employment goal(s) with their vocational rehabilitation counselor. The PSE teachers and vocational rehabilitation counselors checked in with students each semester to discuss their goals, and experiences, changing internships, or requesting certain classes. The goals identified in the PCP and student feedback throughout the program guided which classes and internships the student participated in. Students' Individualized Education Programs (IEP) did not specify their self-directed goals, rather IEP goals were primarily focused on academic skills such as a writing goal related to emailing. During their interview, students relayed their self-directed goals, which may have aligned with their PCP (e.g., "going to college") or updated goals after starting PSE. If the student did not recall their goals, the first author, who conducted all the interviews, assisted based on her knowledge of the student's goals or experiences. For example, she may have said "I remember you did an internship with food, was that related to your work goal?"

Interviews embody an uneven power dynamic between the interviewer and interviewee. This dynamic is often magnified when participants have a disability, and when comprehension or expressive communication may limit or alter their responses (Emerson et al., 2004). The first author used communication techniques described by Sigstad and Garrels (2018) with participants who needed support in offering rich descriptions. These supports included wait time to allow the participant to process the question and answer, encouraging verbal and nonverbal prompts, rephrasing questions, and repeating and summarizing participants' responses. The first author sought feedback from participants to confirm her summarization of participants' responses. If a participant verified the author's summary with "yes" or "no," she asked the participant to elaborate on why they agreed or disagreed with the summary to gain a deeper understanding of the participant's perspective. The first author also observed participants' behavior intended to express communication. For example, a participant squeezed their shoulder when asked what they learned from job shadowing a masseuse and the first author responded "I noticed you squeezed your shoulder, did you learn about how to touch clients? Tell me more about that."

Interview accommodations (e.g., simplified language and visuals) were prepared for participants using the information collected from the parent questionnaire and the authors' prior knowledge of each participant (see Table 1). Two participants had parent support during the interview. Kylie's parent rephrased interview questions to increase her comprehension. Xiu's parent repeated Xiu's expressive communication when the first author was unable to understand her. Only parent-supported participant responses in which the participant agreed and expanded upon were included. Interviews ranged from 47 to 102 minutes, with an average of 70 minutes.

Positionality

The first author was a prior teacher in the PSE program. She did not directly teach any of the participants but knew all of them before being interviewed and had a general understanding of their goals. Her experience as a PSE teacher and knowledge of the participants situated her to individualize supports and comprehend verbal and nonverbal communication. The second author was the director of the PSE program; she knew all the participants and their goals. The third author was not affiliated with the PSE program and did not know any of the participants.

Data Analysis

All Zoom interviews were video and audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The first author compared each transcript with the recording to check for accuracy and removed identifiable information. All transcripts were uploaded into Dedoose (2021), a qualitative analysis software.

We used a general inductive approach for data analysis to identify core meaning relevant to the research questions (Thomas, 2006). The first and second authors used Saldaña's (2016) method for first- and second-cycle coding. An open-coding process was used for the first cycle of coding which resulted in a codebook with descriptive codes, definitions, and examples. The first author reviewed all 10 transcripts to develop the codebook (see Table 2 for the codebook). For each transcript excerpt, the first author identified the category that aligned with the interview questions and summarized the participant's response to create a descriptor (e.g., "Peer mentor modeled work task"). Categories included present and missing Experiences, Learning, and Supports. All descriptors were compiled into one document and grouped by similarities under each category to develop the codes. The first two authors then met to review and refine the codebook. For example, the authors collapsed "Natural" and "Individualized" support into one code. Once the codebook was near completion, the first two authors coded one complete transcript together to reach an agreement on codes to apply and finalize the codebook. During this stage, they added a Feelings category to account for some participant responses to the final two interview questions about goal achievement and participants' future lives. The three authors met to review the open-coding process, codebook, and one transcript coded by the first two authors. The third author confirmed the codes accurately represented the interview responses and aligned with the interview questions. For second-cycle coding, the first two authors independently coded two additional complete transcripts with an inter-rater agreement of 82.4%. The authors met after coding each of the transcripts to discuss disagreements and come to a consensus on the codes. The first author then coded the remaining seven transcripts.

All coded excerpts were downloaded from Dedoose by category (Experiences, Learning, Supports, Feelings) and codes (e.g., educator supports) for thematic analysis. The coded excerpts were examined using a process of searching for patterns and clustering (Miles et al., 2020). The first author extracted the main idea from each coded excerpt in a category and then grouped the main ideas by similarities to discover themes. The themes were then organized by employment, education, and social goals. The first two authors met to discuss and confirm the meaning of the themes that emerged (Miles et al., 2020). All three authors then met to review the analysis process and themes. The third author confirmed each theme was derived from similar main code ideas, was distinct, and addressed a research question. Themes with contributions from three or more participants were included in the study's findings. Tangential research findings that had contributions from one or two participants were not included in the findings (e.g., nonpresent social experiences). We did not preregister this research on an independent registry.

Trustworthiness

Investigator triangulation through a collaboration of the three authors occurred during the study planning stages (Patton, 1999). In addition, the third author reviewed and confirmed the codes, codebook, and themes that emerged. The first two authors met frequently during the code development phase and the initial data analysis phase while coding three of the 10 transcripts. Each author coded two transcripts independently and met to discuss discrepancies and reach an agreement on codes (Patton, 1999). The authors wrote analytic memos throughout the data analysis phase describing possible relationships among codes and emerging themes and reflecting on the process (Miles et al., 2020). The large sample size and amount of data analyzed increased confidence in the findings and that saturation was reached.

During interviews, the technique of summarizing participant responses using similar language was used for clarification and member-checking purposes (Sigstad & Garrels, 2018). In addition, the first author's knowledge of the participants and their communication style from her experiences with the students while they were in PSE and information collected from the Qualtrics questionnaire increased confidence that the data were accurately interpreted (Sigstad & Garrels, 2018). Interview transcripts were emailed to participants and guardians for member checking and invited revisions to reduce the potential for research bias that may have been introduced by the first author's relationship with the participants (Patton, 1999). Participants who were unable to read text could use strategies learned during the PSE program to access the transcripts, such as using text-to-speech or asking for support. One participant confirmed their transcript's accuracy and chose to revise three short excerpts. Finally, a bulleted simplified language summary of the author's

Table 2. Codes With Definitions.

Codes	Definitions	Example quotes
Experiences		
Work Experiences	Work experiences such as internships or volunteering	"That one internship where I just worked in the cold food area".
Desired Work Experiences	Work experiences that were desired, but did not occur	"I was supposed to start this internship at campus health. But, uh, unfortunately I didn't work out"
Coursework	Classes taken or class experiences in any context	"I took a Nutritious class healthy nutritious."
Social Experiences	Social events such as sporting events, or outcomes of social experiences such as friendships	"I only dated one guy in college"
Learning		
Work Skills	Learned or strengthened work-related skills, such as communicating with coworkers	"I also learned about being on time for work."
Educational Skills	Skills learned or strengthened, such as notetaking, from educational experiences	"I learned about money and budgeting (class)."
Social Skills	Learned or strengthened social-related skills, such as scheduling	"I mean the Lyft for that (transportation)."
Preferences	Explored or determined employment, education, or social preferences; could be described as personal experiences or exploration, or others providing information	"I felt like I belonged in the kitchen, more than an office staring at like different people and staring at the computer all day."
Supports		
Educator	Supports or services provided by adult educators	"(educator) taught me about how there are close friends, far friends, family members and strangers."
Natural/ Individualized	Natural supports such as peer mentors or coworkers, and individualized supports such as assistive technology	"Not just getting help from my peer mentor but getting help from a classmate."
Feelings		
Work	Feelings about work experience or work skills learned	"Good workout I mean lifting all those, lifting them heavy boxes"
Education	Feelings about coursework, educational experiences, or educational skills learned	"It (class) was really fun because I learned a lot and then um, there was so much more I learned about."
Social	Feelings about social experiences or social skills learned	"I really enjoyed spending my time with them (coworkers)"
Supports	Feelings about educator, natural, or individualized supports that were provided in any context	"I think getting support from teachers and peer mentors was pretty, was all I needed."

interpretations of the major findings was emailed to each participant and guardian for member checking and feedback (Patton, 1999). No participants provided confirmation or feedback on our interpretation of the findings.

Findings

Findings for the research question of *how participants perceive their PSE experiences and supports as contributing to their self-directed employment, education, and social goals* are organized by goal category:

Table 3. Students' Goals: Employment, Education, and Social.

Name	Employment goal	Original employment goal	Education goal	Social goal
Chloe	High school choir director/ teacher	-	Bachelor's degree in Music post-PSE	Close group of friends
Olivia	Chef	Counselor	Go to college	Boyfriend/good relationship
Stefon	Work in food industry	Grocery store bagger	Become independent Learn healthy food	Make friends
Elijah	Waiter	Masseuse	Learn Spanish, Psychology	Make friends
Zoe	Grocery store bagger	-	Attend community college post-PSE	-
Kylie	Retail or grocery stocker	Cashier	Go to college	Make many friends
Grant	Work at a music store	-	Degree in Music post-PSE	Maintain high school relationships
Ángel	Work at a grocery store	-	Go to college	Make friends
Juan	Work in the medical field	-	Attend the university	Make friends
Xiu	Audio and video equipment technician	Office work	Attend another PSE program	Make friends Improve communication

Note. PSE = postsecondary education.

employment, education, and social. Experiences and supports that foster goal progress are described under each category. Findings for the second research question *how participants perceive PSE affecting their goal achievement and future lives* are described below and highlight achievement in each goal category.

Employment Goal Progress

Half of the participants had employment goals related to the food industry and two participants were interested in the music industry. The other three participants' employment goals were in retail, technology, and the medical field. Half of the participants changed the employment goals that they identified in high school after their experience during PSE (Table 3). Internship experiences, work-related coursework, educator support for employment, and peer mentor internship support influenced progress toward goals. Participants expressed a desire to have more employment goal-related internship experiences.

Internship Experiences. All participants described internship experiences as contributing to the achievement of their employment goals. Participants described having internships that were both directly related and indirectly related to their employment goals. Internship experiences resulted in six participants learning their work preferences, such as what type of job they wanted and what working conditions they preferred (e.g., working with people). Olivia reflected on learning her work preferences from her internship:

> when I was in the kitchen in the bakery section, I felt like I belonged in the kitchen, more than an office staring at like different people and staring at the computer all day. I just didn't see myself in that category as I did in my last year of high school.

The majority of participants also described learning work skills during their internship that directly related to their employment goals. For example, Kylie identified learning skills related to her goal of working as a stocker at a grocery or clothing store:

> Interviewer: Thinking about your time at the market, during [PSE program], what did you learn to do at the market?
> Kylie: I clean your shelf.

Parent: And then what?
Kylie: Okay. I cut your box and put snacks on shelf.

Participants described learning general work skills such as being on time, signing in for shifts, and improving communication, organization, and self-advocacy skills. Reflecting upon her internship at a theater, Chloe said "I was working a lot more with my other coworkers and other customers, so I really had to strengthen up my people skills which I feel like I was able to do with that experience." Stefon described learning specific job skills and working independently. He described the importance of "being responsible of always staying dedicated to your work, and making sure that, to never quit . . . and always make sure to enjoy what you like working." The majority of participants also expressed valuing their PSE internship experiences.

Desired Goal-Related Internship Experiences. Six participants, however, expressed that they wanted more internship experience directly related to their employment goals. Three participants described internships that were set up but did not work out because the campus or community partner pulled out. For example, Elijah had an employment goal of being a waiter and said "I was gonna work at [restaurant name]. Yeah, unfortunately, the guy who runs that restaurant backed out." Juan had an employment goal of working in the medical field and had a similar experience: "I was supposed to start this internship at what's called campus health, but, uh, but, but unfortunately I didn't work out." Xiu had an employment goal of being a choir director/teacher and had a theater internship aligned with her employment goal; however, she desired additional experience: "I wish I could have gotten more teaching experience knowing what it's like to work with other students."

Work-Related Coursework. Half of the participants took college courses that were directly related to their employment goals. For example, Xiu who had an employment goal of being an audio and video equipment technician said she took courses that "help for my current goals, including equipment tech classes, music, basic computer skills for office app, and intro web design development." Olivia shared a similar thought when she said, "What helped me with, first with my goal to become like a counselor was like taking counseling classes, which I love those classes I took."

Educator Support for Employment. Support from PSE educators hastened progress toward participants' employment goals. Seven participants described educators individualizing internship opportunities and adjusting them as students' goals changed. Olivia said, "I remembered when I changed to becoming a chef, um, I was talking to [PSE educator], and then she helped me get my internship." Grant who had an employment goal to work in a music store shared a similar experience, said "[PSE educator] is very generous, I was able to use my email to change my interview from the kitchen to changing my job for the following, for the second year." Furthermore, three participants expressed that educators encouraged them to explore a variety of options for PSE internships and future employment. Stefon described exploring internship opportunities that were different from his high school employment goal of being a grocery store bagger, he said "my job coach at [PSE program], said that maybe if you should try like food industries . . . I tried the food industry and it was really fun, I love working at the food industry." Encouraging employment exploration may contribute to students gaining diverse experiences and learning their preferences.

Half of the participants also stated that learning about getting a job and/or developing job materials during "portfolio meetings" supported progress toward their employment goals. Chloe described weekly portfolio meetings with a peer mentor during her second year of the PSE program where she learned:

> how to write a cover letter and resume and stuff like that. And also, just think about how our disability affects us and what our strengths and weaknesses are, which I feel helped a lot because I because I had no idea how to write a cover letter a couple years ago.

Peer Mentor Support During Internship. Seven participants explained that receiving internship support from peer mentors encouraged progression toward their employment goals. Participants described how peer

mentors explained and modeled internship tasks. For example, Stefon said that peer mentors "showed me, this is how you're supposed to do this at work like setting up the tables and putting silverware away and cups." Participants also described how peer mentors faded support to increase their independence at work. For example, Juan said, "she (peer mentor) just like showed me how to do things on my own." He expanded on the importance of increasing independence at work by comparing the supports that he was provided in high school:

> Juan: I think [PSE program] did did did a lot better than, a lot better than high school did because, because, because you know I had like teachers and and peer mentors who were, you know who were there to help me.
> Interviewer: So you feel like the support that you received in [PSE program] from teachers and peer mentors really helped you reach your goals?
> Juan: Oh yes.
> Interviewer: Whereas in high school, maybe it wasn't the same level of support?
> Juan: Oh yeah. Yes, yes.

Education Goal Progress

Four participants had education goals of attending college, the PSE program, and four participants had goals of continuing in higher education after the PSE program. The other two participants had goals to learn specific topics (e.g., Spanish; Table 3). Participants expressed that coursework and peer mentor class support influenced progress toward their education goals.

Coursework. Three participants described taking college courses that were directly related to their education goals. For example, Elijah who had an education goal of learning Spanish reflected on the classes he took during his second year: "I took Spanish 101 during first semester (Fall) and Spanish 102 last, during the last semester (Spring)." Stefon shared that taking a nutrition course and a money management course advanced progress toward his education goals of learning about healthy food and learning to be more independent. Multiple students expressed that they greatly enjoyed the college courses they took. For example, Stefon said "I loved it [class]. It was really fun because I learned a lot and then um, there's, there was so much more I learned about."

In addition to class content, seven participants described learning class-related skills such as note-taking, presenting, communicating with classmates, and knowing they need supports influenced goal progress. Zoe had an education goal of attending community college after the PSE program. She recognized the challenges that she had with notetaking and comprehending lectures and expressed that she would need to find a tutor in community college. Zoe explained "community college is mostly like [PSE program], but it's, it's without no support. That's, that's going to be something new because I need support because of my disability."

Peer Mentor Support for Class. Peer mentor support during class and to complete coursework was described by eight participants as important to progress toward their education goals. Participants stated that peer mentors supported them with notetaking, completing homework, learning course content, and studying. Zoe described the support she received from a peer mentor for notetaking:

> I try to do notes, but I can't get like the details. Like in my money class on Wednesdays, she (professor) goes really into detail so it's hard for me to get everything written so I just don't, I just let the peer mentor because she gets every detail, I just can't.

Olivia viewed the peer mentors who supported her in classes as siblings who held her accountable to complete coursework, saying she valued "students near your age helping out. I felt like I was very supported." Olivia went on to describe how peer mentors prompted her to prioritize coursework, she said,

> I was really happy that like any peer mentor that I hung out with, they were like, "okay, (Olivia), before we have fun you have to get your laptop, we have to see if you have any homework or anything to do."

Social Goal Progress

Seven participants had social goals of making new friends. Other participants had goals of maintaining high school friendships and having a boyfriend. Zoe did not have a social goal (Table 3). Social activities and peer mentor social support influenced progress toward goals.

Social Activities. Six participants described doing social activities on and off campus, such as attending pep rallies and sporting events, participating in clubs, and going to museums. Olivia explained that social activities contributed to her college experience, saying "I was really happy at myself that I got to take classes at the university and basically be a college student, like going to sports and pep rallies on Fridays, and going to like the recreation center." Elijah said that he attended "all the home football games . . . I like to watch the game and be around other people."

Peer Mentor Social Support. Four participants described learning how to schedule activities from peer mentors. Stefon described what peer mentors often said while they supported him in filling out his weekly schedule: "would you like to contact your friends, or would you like to schedule to hang out in the game room, or would you like to meet with you peer mentors so you could spend time of going classes and doing fun stuff?" Juan described scheduling to meet up with a peer mentor "I went to a football game once and then, she (peer mentor) told me that that that I could text her."

Peer mentors also supported three students to learn social skills that contributed to their progress toward their social goals. Elijah said "peer mentors taught me that it's okay to hug people just not for a long period of time. Like for just three, like three seconds, like 1-2-3, and then let go." Chloe described peer mentors with whom she developed friendships, taught her social skills, and practiced them with her. Chloe said, "I've definitely asked my peer mentors questions about social interactions, like 'what should I say about this situation and how?'."

Effect on Goal Achievement and Future

Half of the students obtained competitive integrated employment during the PSE program. Ángel and Olivia maintained their employment at the movie theater after they graduated until the theater shut down due to COVID-19. At the time of the interview, both students were unemployed and actively job-seeking. Ángel reached out after his interview and said he had obtained a job at a grocery store, which was aligned with his employment goal. Kylie maintained her employment at a church doing child care at the time of the interview, which was not directly aligned with her employment goal of stocking goods. Stefon was employed at a café during the PSE program which was aligned with his employment goal; however, this was a temporary position. At the time of the interview, Stefon was unemployed and was invited to a second interview at a pizza restaurant. He expressed that it was difficult to get a job during COVID-19, but he was going to continue to apply. Juan, who was employed at a biology lab, did not maintain his employment postgraduation because it was a student-worker position. Juan also expressed that he was having a difficult time securing a job due to COVID-19.

The other half of the participants did not obtain competitive integrated employment during the PSE program. At the time of her interview, Chloe was employed as a host/greeter at a supportive employment program office which was not directly aligned with her employment goal; however, she was also attending college to be qualified for a high school choir director position. Elijah was unemployed at the time of his interview but has since reached out and said he got a job at a hospital cafeteria which is aligned with his employment goal. Xiu was not employed at the time of her interview; however, she had recently begun a second PSE program. Grant and Zoe were both in the PSE program at the time of the interview and had not yet obtained competitive integrated employment while in the program.

The six participants who had goals of attending college or learning specific skills in college expressed that they achieved their education goals during the PSE program. Xiu fulfilled her goal of continuing her education in a second PSE program for students with IDD. Chloe, who had a goal of getting a bachelor's degree in music, was taking college courses for credit in pursuit of her goal. Zoe and Grant also had goals of continuing their education in college after the PSE program but were still in the PSE program at the time of the interview.

All participants except for Zoe, who did not have a social goal, relayed that their social goals were fulfilled during the PSE program. Most often, participants developed friendships with peer mentors; however, friendships with other PSE students with IDD and coworkers without disabilities were also mentioned. Zoe built friendships with internship coworkers, saying "we worked and talked . . . And then, and I really enjoyed spending my time with them."

All participants relayed that their futures had changed because of attending PSE. Half of the participants expressed that their future lives changed because they continued to learn during PSE. Olivia compared learning in high school to PSE when she said,

> in high school, you don't really do much, just you know the basic things. But in college, you get to learn a little bit more of learning . . . Because high school could teach you so much, but college gives you more.

Participants also described the specific skills that they learned during PSE, such as self-advocacy and communication. Grant expressed that he learned his passion during PSE: "It sort of changed my perspective . . . [PSE program] really got me into what I want to do." Three participants also described that their future lives had changed because of the friends that they made during PSE. If she did not attend PSE, Chloe expressed "I wouldn't know all these peer mentors who I still consider my friends and talk to today." Juan described how it would feel if he did not attend PSE: "I would be kind of sad . . . if I did not go to [PSE program] and made new friends."

Discussion

This study aimed to understand the experiences and supports of 10 individuals with IDD and ESN in an inclusive individualized support PSE program perceived as contributing to their self-directed employment, education, and social goals. Furthermore, this study explored how students' perceived PSE had affected their goal achievement and future lives. Study findings contribute to Papay and Grigal's (2019) call to explore the impact of PSE on employment and PSE practices that support students in achieving their desired goals. Findings are both novel in PSE research and reaffirm previous PSE research. Novel findings include (a) the impact of COVID-19 on maintaining and obtaining competitive employment, (b) the prioritization of paid internships may have resulted in a lack of alignment with employment goals, and (c) the direct impact peer mentors had on employment goal achievement. Reaffirming findings include (a) the increase in competitive integrated employment (Ryan et al., 2019), (b) the adjustment of employment goals after having learning preferences from internship experiences (Mock & Love, 2012), and (c) the impact peer mentors had on education and social goal achievement (Wilt & Morningstar, 2020).

Whether participants achieved their employment goals is complex. Five of the seven participants who were no longer attending a PSE program had obtained competitive integrated employment post-PSE (71.4%). These results align with prior research findings that PSE graduates have much higher employment rates than the national average rates of employment for individuals with ID (34%; Ryan et al., 2019). However, only Ángel and Elijah obtained jobs that directly aligned with their employment goals and both participants reached out after their interview to inform us that they had obtained these positions. Interviews occurred in the fall of 2020, 7 to 9 months after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic. Furthermore, four participants expressed that their employment was directly affected by COVID-19. Ángel and Olivia lost their jobs because the theater closed and Stefon and Juan, who were actively seeking jobs, expressed challenges due to the pandemic.

Grigal et al. (2019) found that paid employment during PSE is a predictor of competitive employment after graduation. The authors expressed that students with IDD who were employed during PSE were 15 times more likely to graduate with paid employment. Our results parallel these findings but with some noticeable differences. Three of the five students who had paid employment during PSE maintained their employment post-graduation and the two that did not have temporary positions. Ángel, Olivia, and Kylie, who maintained their employment, did not have positions that aligned with their employment goals. Obtaining paid work experience during the final semesters of the PSE program was prioritized over maintaining goal-aligned nonpaid internships. Although not directly aligned with participants' employment goals, paid employment during PSE offered opportunities to gain job experience and skills before applying for goal-aligned jobs and increased the likelihood of post-PSE employment (Grigal et al., 2019).

Findings from this study also reveal that PSE-paid and nonpaid internship experiences led to participants learning work preferences, leading to changes in half of the participant's employment goals from high school (Table 3). Relatedly, participants expressed that continued learning during PSE positively affected their future lives. Previous research has documented similar findings in which students with ID express that PSE internships and coursework allow for career exploration and that continued learning is important for their self-directed employment and social goals (Mock & Love, 2012). Obtaining a variety of employment and education experiences, even if not directly related to their employment goal, allowed participants to discover their preferences and strengths and broaden their understanding of the employment opportunities available. However, participants desired more employment experiences directly aligned with their employment goals. Individuals with ID and ESN face barriers to securing competitive integrated employment, primarily because employers perceive that they lack work skills (Kocman et al., 2018). This stigma might also affect PSE educators' and students' ability to secure internship opportunities and paid employment during PSE.

All participants fulfilled their education goals of attending college and learning specific content or were working toward their goal of continuing their education post-PSE. The PSE program aligned coursework with participants' education goals and allowed for flexibility in the number of courses participants took. This allowed for students like Chloe, who had a goal of earning a degree in Music, to take steps toward fulfilling their education goal post-PSE. All nine participants who had social goals also achieved them. Most participants highlighted the importance of peer mentors in achieving their social goals, including developing friendships with peer mentors. Recent research documented that PSE students with ID built genuine friendships with peer mentors over time (Carter & McCabe, 2021). Furthermore, many participants highlighted that their futures had been positively affected by the friendships they developed during PSE.

Peer mentor support was the only theme that emerged across all goal areas. These findings are consistent with recent research documenting that PSE students with ID found peer support beneficial across educational and social realms (Wilt & Morningstar, 2020). Various peer mentor models exist in PSE programs, most of which have a large focus on providing academic/in-class and social support to students more than work/internship support (Carter & McCabe, 2021). Participants in this PSE program, however, emphasized the importance of peer support during internships to progress toward their employment goals. This study provides new insight into what peer mentors did to support participants to progress toward their employment goals and how participants perceived the evidence-based practices they used, such as modeling.

Limitations and Implications for Research

Limitations to this study must be acknowledged. First, all participants attended the same dual enrollment, nonresidential, inclusive individualized support PSE program; therefore, they may not represent students across PSE programs. Second, this study presented the perspectives of 10 participants. Further investigation is needed of more students with IDD and especially those with ESN across PSE programs that offer varying experiences (e.g., residential, 4 years), models (e.g., mixed/hybrid; Hart, 2006), and support structures to obtain a deeper understanding of what fosters goal progression. A large-scale examination would better inform PSE policy, program procedures, and practices, as well as explore if differences exist in student experiences across areas of diversity such as disability, race/ethnicity, gender, and location and program year.

Third, the impacts of COVID-19 and the interpretation of study findings must be contextualized given the unique situation many participants experienced. These experiences may not represent other students who attended PSE during or outside of COVID-19 closures. Longitudinal research exploring the impact of COVID-19 closures on PSE students' employment may offer important insights into student perceptions. Fourth, data collection entailed one, in-depth interview with each participant. Additional perspectives may have been obtained from participants if provided with multiple opportunities and modalities of data collection (e.g., focus groups and artifacts). We suggest researchers collect using a mixed-methods approach across time to better students' goal progress and outcomes. Triangulating data from parents, employers, PSE teachers, and peer mentors may result in a deeper understanding of students' goal progress.

Fifth, tangential research findings that had minor emphasis were not discussed. All three authors confirmed the study themes; however, future researchers should have an external auditor confirm that any excluded data are not essential. In addition, future researchers should ensure two researchers code all transcripts or that an external auditor confirms the codes on transcripts in which one researcher coded independently. Finally, only one participant provided feedback during the first phase of member checking. Future research should consider more accessible means of member checking beyond email, such as meeting one-on-one with participants.

Implications for Practice

Several implications exist for PSE programs from the study's findings. COVID-19 may still surface challenges for PSE students to maintain or obtain competitive employment. PSE programs and vocational rehabilitation counselors should support students in navigating challenging circumstances that arise due to COVID-19, such as job loss. Participants also wanted more internship experiences that were aligned with their employment goals. To ensure students' experiences align with their changing goals, students should act as causal agents by selecting experiences that align with their goals (Shogren et al., 2018). PSE staff and students should regularly discuss students' employment goals and if their experiences and supports align. However, students may need to prioritize obtaining paid employment that may not directly align with their goals to gain experience and increase the likelihood of goal-aligned competitive employment post-PSE. Finally, PSE programs should prioritize peer mentor support during internships to promote progress toward students' employment goals, including training mentors to implement evidence-based practices and fading support to increase student independence.

Many participants expressed they had few opportunities to learn new skills and personal preferences during high school compared with PSE. Taub et al. (2017) argued that students with ESN are rarely provided appropriate and accessible opportunities to learn during their K–12 education. Our findings paired with the finding that the national average of employment for individuals with ID is only 34% (Ryan et al., 2019) reflect low expectations and systemic barriers to employment that must be addressed during secondary education. When compared with high school students with other disabilities, students with ID are less likely to have PSE or competitive employment goals on their transition plans (Grigal et al., 2011). IEP teams must maintain high student expectations and incorporate a person-centered approach to guide transition planning. A person-centered approach prioritizes the development of individualized employment and academic goals that drive secondary and postsecondary experiences and supports, resulting in increased opportunities to learn skills aligned with students' goals. Intentional efforts to center the voices of individuals with disabilities regarding their livelihood must be made within K–12, postsecondary, employment, and residential settings.

Conclusion

Students' self-directed goals must drive their academic and employment experiences (Hart, 2006). By centering the voices of PSE students, we explored how they perceive their PSE experiences and supports contributed to their self-directed goals, goal achievement, and future lives. Novel and reaffirming findings suggest that PSE students have positive experiences and outcomes aligned with goals; however, adverse

effects of COVID-19 hindered students' ability to obtain and maintain competitive employment. The impact of COVID-19 on the employment of individuals with IDD, and especially those with ESN, is likely compounded by existing systemic barriers (Kocman et al., 2018). Findings suggest that similar barriers to competitive employment exist for paid PSE internship opportunities, decreasing the likelihood that paid internships will align with students' employment goals. We urge researchers and practitioners to solicit the perspectives of PSE students to inform policy and practice, including the impact of systemic barriers on goal achievement and suggestions for addressing these barriers.

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