

Comparing the College Experience for Students with and without Disabilities

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Students with intellectual disabilities (ID) are attending college in growing numbers (Grigal & Hart, 2010). They are experiencing many of the advantages of postsecondary education, including higher employment, better wages, and increased community engagement (Eisenman, Tanverdi, Perrington, & Geiman, 2009; Migliore, Butterworth, & Hart, 2009). There is also evidence that the inclusion of students with ID on college campuses offers broad benefits to the campus community, such as enhanced social development for peer mentors (May & Pittard, 2012).

However, less is known about the direct experiences of students with ID from their perspectives, and how these look similar to, or different from, the experiences of other college students.

A recent study by Plotner and May (under review) focuses on exploring the perspectives of students with ID about college, including their motivations for going to college and their perceptions of academic, social, and residential life. We also examined their perceptions of on- and off-campus support and their sense of belonging on campus, and compared the experiences of students with and without ID.

METHODS

Participants in our study included nearly 200 students (148 without disabilities, 21 with mild learning disabilities, and 28 with intellectual disabilities) enrolled at one of two four-year institutions of higher education in one southern state. Students with ID were enrolled in programs designed to support their success on campus, and these programs reflected the mixed/hybrid model of support. This means that students with ID enrolled in a combination of inclusive courses from the regular catalogue, and specialized courses designed for students with ID.

Students with ID received both accommodations and modifications as needed in their courses. All students had the option to live on campus, and were provided

additional academic and social support through person-centered planning, peer mentors, and their college's office of disability services.

Participants completed an online survey (with supports as needed) that included 66 questions drawn from the College Students with Disabilities Campus Climate Survey (CSDCC: Lombardi, Gerdes, & Murray, 2011), the Your First College Year Survey (YFCY: Higher Education Research Institute, 2010), and a demographic questionnaire. Questions assessed four broad components of the college experience: (1) motivations for going to college, (2) academic experiences, (3) social life, friendships, and activities, and (4) college life with a disability.

KEY FINDINGS

As shown in Figure 1 on the next page, for each of our four broad domains, there were a number of similarities in the experiences reported by students with and without disabilities, but also some interesting differences.

IMPLICATIONS

The survey responses provide encouraging data about the way that support systems can positively impact the college experience for students with disabilities, and also confirm some expected barriers for students with ID on college campuses. These findings represent a moment in time, and the programs and services in each of the colleges continue to evolve.

Students with ID who participated in this study had access to all typical college supports. They also received additional, individualized academic and social supports through person-centered planning sessions, peer mentors, program staff, and tutors.

With these supports, students with ID report strong academic success, rewarding and meaningful social lives, and great comfort and satisfaction in their choice of colleges.

FIGURE 1

Similarities among all students	Differences between students with ID and students without ID
<p>MOTIVATIONS FOR GOING TO COLLEGE</p> <p>All student groups were similarly motivated to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get a better job • Make more money • Learn about the world • Get an education • Learn about things that interest them • Listen to parents/teachers/counselors 	<p>MOTIVATIONS FOR GOING TO COLLEGE</p> <p>Students with ID were less motivated to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Train for a specific career • Prepare for graduate school <p>Students with ID were more motivated to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet new people • Live on their own • Be like their siblings
<p>ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES</p> <p>All student groups were similar with respect to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceived ability to keep up with readings for class • Perceived ability to perform as well as other students • Meeting with faculty • Feeling good about themselves and their ability 	<p>ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES</p> <p>Students with ID reported better experiences with</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support from faculty • Ease of developing effective study skills • Understanding what is expected of them • Adjusting to the academic demands of college
<p>SOCIAL LIFE, FRIENDSHIPS, ACTIVITIES</p> <p>All student groups were similar with respect to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reliance on family when facing challenges • Overall satisfaction with choice of college 	<p>SOCIAL LIFE, FRIENDSHIPS, ACTIVITIES</p> <p>Students with ID reported better experiences with</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ease of making friends • Developing strong and rewarding friendships • Feeling comfortable on campus • Knowing rights and responsibilities as a student <p>Students with ID were less likely to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Play intramural sports • Join a student club • Participate in Greek life • Interact with family and friends outside of campus
<p>COLLEGE LIFE WITH A DISABILITY</p> <p>Students with ID and MLD were similarly likely to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disclose their disabilities to instructors • Discuss their needs with faculty • Report satisfaction with Disability Services 	<p>COLLEGE LIFE WITH A DISABILITY</p> <p>Students with ID were more likely than those with MLD to report</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructors had knowledge of accommodations • Instructors were willing to go beyond the minimum accommodations • Using Disability Services

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

Please see this journal article: Plotner, Anthony J., and Cynthia May. "A Comparison of the College Experience for Students with and Without Disabilities." *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities*, 2017, DOI: 10.1177/1744629517719346.