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The Impact of Service-learning: Perspectives of Natural Supports of Students with Intellectual Disability on a College Campus

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This qualitative study shares experiences of 337 undergraduate students majoring in special education or related fields completing requirements in a designated service-learning course learning about intellectual disability (ID) and other exceptionalities at a rural university in the southeastern United States. In this course, each student had opportunities to work with 8-12 young adults with ID engaging in a variety of shared college experiences (e.g., meals, active leisure, homework, working out, campus activities). Our study focused on understanding the shared views, perspectives, attitudes, and career aspirations based on this service-learning opportunity. First, we explored the connection between the changes in perspective or attitude. Second, we investigated student desire to further pursue careers in special education or a related field after this service-learning experience. Lastly, we examined the relationship between service-learning and overall benefits of inclusion or changes in attitude. Future research, implications for practice, and limitations are also discussed.

Keywords: *service-learning, special education, teacher education, intellectual disability, awareness, natural supports, inclusion*

El Impacto del Aprendizaje-Servicio: Perspectivas de Apoyos Naturales a los Estudiantes con Discapacidades Intelectuales en un Campus Universitario

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El presente estudio cualitativo muestra las experiencias de 337 estudiantes subgraduados en educación especial o áreas afines en un curso de aprendizaje-servicio enfocado en las discapacidades intelectuales (la abreviatura en inglés es ID) y requerido para completar su especialidad en una universidad rural en el sureste de los Estados Unidos. En el mencionado curso, los estudiantes tienen la oportunidad de trabajar con grupos de entre ocho y doce adultos con discapacidades intelectuales especiales (ID) y participar y compartir diferentes experiencias universitarias (comidas, ocio activo, tareas, ejercicio, actividades en el campus). Nuestro estudio se enfoca en el análisis de las perspectivas, actitudes y aspiraciones profesionales compartidas que se derivan de esta oportunidad de aprendizaje-servicio. Primero, exploramos la conexión entre los cambios de actitud o perspectiva. En segundo lugar, investigamos la motivación del estudiante a la hora de elegir una carrera profesional en educación especial o áreas afines después de esta experiencia. Por último, examinamos la relación entre el aprendizaje-servicio y los beneficios de la inclusión y los cambios de actitud. Se examinan, asimismo, futuras investigaciones, implicaciones prácticas y limitaciones del estudio.

Palabras clave: *aprendizaje-servicio, educación especial, formación del profesorado, discapacidad intelectual, concienciación, apoyos naturales, inclusión*

Editors' Note: Translation by **Maria Fernandez Cifuentes**
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When we think of diversity, equity, and inclusive excellence beyond being terms used regularly in education, it is important to examine this to a greater level to build upon the relationships we have and the true differences between being *in* the community and being *a part* of a community (Carter et al., 2013). When a focused service-learning opportunity is offered within natural environments, this can result in greater exposure and awareness, and a deeper understanding of the overall community. In particular, there are continuing needs for fully inclusive learning opportunities that maximize student outcomes through inclusion in on-campus residence halls. Across the United States, there are several inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs for students with intellectual disability (ID) that provide opportunities for these young adults to live and learn with their college-aged peers. An ID as defined by American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (2022), involves significant limitations in intellectual functioning (IQ of 70 or below) and adaptive behavior that occurs before age 22. When students with intellectual disability (ID) are living on campus and have full access to campus activities, this provides an opportunity for more social activity and skill development (Grigal et al., 2015), which can lead to more successful employment (Grigal et al., 2019; Test et al., 2009). It is also important to better understand the impact of service-learning for students without disabilities enrolled in the college that support students with ID within the inclusive learning communities.

Data from Think College (2021) identifies 314 college programs in the U.S. and Canada for students with ID. This represents a significant increase in programs over the last 30 years (Grigal et al., 2014; Papay & Griffin, 2013), but this still presents a small scale proportionate to the 4,360 two-year and four-year colleges and universities in the U.S. (U.S. DOE, 2019). Further understanding of these initiatives is needed to examine the impact of student interactions with natural supports as programs continue to develop. Only 121 (38%) of these programs offer residential options, which reduce the need and opportunity for natural supports. Exploring the perspectives of the natural supports currently working in inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs will further inform leaders with priorities and inclusive practices of the programs.

Definition of Natural Supports

Natural supports, sometimes referred to as “peer mentors” or “academic coaches” simply means another college student without a disability that offers direction or assistance when needed. Natural supports serve as part friend (relied on and trusted), part teacher (explaining or showing something), and part caregiver (ensuring safety and social appropriateness) as needed. Natural supports can serve in a variety of ways whether individuals are paid or unpaid. In most IPSE programs, undergraduate students are recruited to serve as natural supports to facilitate participation in many aspects of college life as needed (Kelley & Westling, 2019; Westling & Fox, 2009).

Natural supports can attend and support students in college classes, help with tutoring and homework, attend campus events, workout or have meals together, serve as a job support, or even provide personal care with morning or evening routines. Natural supports also play a key role in mentoring and teaching personal development goals to students with ID as well as giving input or support during person-centered planning (PCP) initiatives. Finally, natural supports are instrumental to providing guidance and data for individualized current and future goals (Kelley & Westling, 2019).

Service-Learning as a Natural Support

Researchers have found value in service-learning opportunities for college students overall (Caspersz & Olaru, 2015) or in an array of fields in education and teacher preparation programs (Richard et al., 2017; Roberts et al., 2019) and have learned the best ways to design service-learning activities (Walker & Walker, 2018). Most studies focus on the idea of implementing service-learning as part of a field of study in higher education (Casebott & Hodge, 2010; Gilson et al., 2020; Griffin et al., 2012; Izzo & Shuman, 2013; May, 2012; Rao, 2004).

For example, Westling et al. (2013) is one of few studies that aimed to determine the perspectives of undergraduate students who had students with ID living on the college campus. In this study, a survey with

undergraduate students assessed the overall attitudes of having students with ID living and learning on a college campus. Out of the 572 completed survey responses, major findings indicated a large majority of students felt living and learning with college students with ID was beneficial and related to more positive attitudes towards inclusion overall. Out of the 236 written comments from the survey, 89% of the comments were supportive or conditionally supportive, 17% of the comments were considered neutral, and only 2% of the comments were unsupportive. These comments generally validated the numerical survey data.

In a related study, Prohn et al (2019) examined perspectives on social experiences of college students with ID through three peer focus groups (n=15) and surveys. Four foundational elements (campus environment, support, skills for developing and maintaining relationships, social self-determination) were used to determine if college students with ID were socially included or excluded. Results indicated social inclusion is more successful when there is a true function of belonging and increased feelings of self-determination and opportunities for social control among students with ID and natural supports in shared experiences.

Additionally, Izzo and Shuman (2013) also used surveys, journals, and focus groups to determine the overall impact of the experiences of mentors (also called natural supports) on a college campus as they worked alongside students with ID. Overall, themes indicated positive experiences for mentors (natural supports) working with the students with ID and new outlooks on individuals with ID from the direct experiences, realizing they could accomplish the same things anyone else could, and finding balance between dignity of risk and self-determination of students with ID. The mentors were able to clarify their personal career goals throughout this process, showing some of them new career possibilities for their degree.

Finally, May (2012) used the Miville-Guzman Universality-Diversity Scale (M-GUDS) to compare how attitudes varied among students who were in an inclusive class with one of the IPSE program students, versus those not having IPSE program students in class. For students in the inclusive class, there was an increase of attitudes towards diversity and openness. Students stated that they gained new knowledge of what individuals with ID are capable of and that they should be included with everyone else. They also shared that they benefited from having the IPSE program student in their class because the instructor was implementing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) concepts such as cooperative learning groups, peer tutors, and creating clear expectations for group work that helped everyone in the classroom, disability or not (CAST, 2018). The students who were not in the inclusive class did not exhibit the same attitude changes or extra benefits from the course.

More recently, research conducted by Harrison et al. (2019), examined how attitudes of a new IPSE at a large public university changed after having direct experience working with the students with ID in the program. When comparing the attitudes of program volunteers versus non-volunteers, they found that the program volunteers had an increased positive attitude towards comfort level of being with individuals with ID, increased knowledge of ID, and a lowered feeling of sadness and pity for these individuals over time. Similar to some survey responses in Westling et al. (2013), this study also showed that non-volunteers did not see negative effects to having the IPSE program on campus and students included in college life, but by not being more involved they did not show positive attitude growth such that volunteers exhibited.

Although these studies shed light on the impact on peers and the value of service-learning, there are a limited number of studies that focus on service-learning relating to engagement with students with ID living on a college campus. Given the dearth of literature on the experience of natural supports of such a program, this study aimed to examine the perspectives of natural supports working with individuals with ID in an IPSE residential program that has utilized hundreds of natural supports (paid and unpaid) serving each semester for 14 years.

College Program Characteristics

The University Participant (UP) Program, an IPSE program at Western Carolina University (WCU), provides a firsthand model of inclusive and uniquely diverse experiences to the WCU community. Since 2007, it has blazed trails to meet dire needs for community members and school systems within our regional,

state, national, and international areas. UP students, employers, faculty, families, and WCU students work together on a daily basis to support and share in meaningful inclusive living and learning experiences. WCU is able to provide a model for effective collaboration to increase expectations and opportunities for individuals with ID that many considered impossible.

In any given semester, 200+ natural supports (WCU students) share college experiences with UP students. More specifically, in any given week, UP students work on average with at least 20 of their WCU student supports in a variety of shared college experiences. Paid natural supports help UP students with structured times such as on the job training, academics, and some more personalized goals, while unpaid natural supports help supplement as needed with less demanding activities such as social events, active leisure or workouts, and mealtimes.

Natural supports attending colleges that have IPSE programs can be recruited from several college courses in special education or related fields. In this service-learning experience, many natural supports serving in capacities described above had varying levels of experience or overall awareness of disability, and limited direct experience before taking courses designated as service-learning courses. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the individual views and attitudinal changes of natural supports during direct service-learning experiences completed via the introductory special education course, in an effort to extend the research examining attitudes and perceptions of students supporting others with ID on college campuses. More specifically, the research questions examined were:

- 1) What are individual and shared views of natural supports of college students with ID?
- 2) What are the perspectives and attitudes towards disability and towards inclusion?
- 3) What career decisions or conclusions were shared after this service-learning experience and direct exposure?

Study Design

A qualitative study was designed to describe the experiences of 337 university students across eleven semesters of implementing natural supports (from Fall 2013 to Fall 2019; see Table 1) and to answer the three key research questions.

Table 1
Reflections by Year and Semester

Year	Semester	Number of Reflections
2013	Fall	28
2014	Spring	19
	Fall	17
2015	Spring	8
	Fall	25
2016	Fall	25
2017	Fall	48
2018	Spring	29
	Fall	52
2019	Spring	29
	Fall	57
Total Responses Coded		337

Some natural supports were recruited from an undergraduate special education course, SPED 240 (The Exceptional Child), which has been declared as a designated service-learning course by the university's Center for Community Engagement and Service-Learning. It was designated as a service-learning course to allow pre-service professionals the experience of working with individuals with disabilities before entering the field. While some students entering this course have experience working with these individuals, many come in having little to no experience at all, leading them often to make assumptions about individuals with disabilities or disabilities in general (Bumble et al., 2019; Gilson et al., 2020). Gaining this experience allows students to expand their mindset and attitudes towards individuals with disabilities and start to embark in their future career paths.

Document analysis of self-reflections of natural supports produced a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspectives of natural supports over time. Thus, as a research method, document analysis with a phenomenological lens was particularly applicable to the current qualitative study because it allowed rich descriptions of a single phenomenon and program (Mills et al., 2006; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994) and the ability to examine a wealth of documents collected each semester in which participants could individually express perceived impacts of the overall service-learning experience.

Researchers

Dr. Tammy Barron has no role in the UP Program other than working as a faculty member within the inclusive education department. When qualitative research is conducted, it is important to have detachment as meaning is interpreted from participant responses. Dr. Barron was able to have an unbiased lens as they worked through analyzing hundreds of stories and perspectives. Dr. Kelly Kelley currently serves as a professor in inclusive/special education and director/coordinator of the WCU UP Program. She was a co-founder of the UP Program in 2007. Since 2010, she has served as the UP Program coordinator and consultant. In 2015, she had a shared role with another project director who retired in 2019 along with her coordinating duties. While she has been heavily involved in supporting the students, families, and natural supports with resources, scheduling and training, she has also been teaching the introductory special education course and provided training to the natural supports every semester of this collected research. In year 2021, she stepped into more of a director rather than coordinator role focused more on the scholarship, research, and overall fiscal/personnel management of the program along with her additional duties as a full-time faculty member. This researcher continues to teach the introductory course and also helps the new coordinator with training. When determining *a priori* categories, Dr. Barron felt their detached perspective was complemented by insights of Dr. Kelley and Mrs. Mathis as they understood the experiences of the natural supports.

Mrs. Alexandra Mathis started working with the UP Program five years ago in the SPED 240 course as an Inclusive Education major. She quickly realized working with college students who have ID was a passion of hers as she continued to volunteer after the course had completed. During her undergraduate program, she quickly took on more advanced roles of being a natural support, including becoming a paid natural support, a PCP partner, a scheduler, and a room/suitemate to the students. After graduation, Mrs. Mathis enrolled in graduate school, becoming a graduate assistant for the UP Program, she completed her master's degree. Now, this researcher serves as the new program coordinator for the UP Program, helping coordinate the day-to-day operations of the program and working with paid and unpaid natural supports.

Data Gathering Procedures

For the current study, students taking the introductory course in special education were required to do a minimum of 10 hours of natural support with UP students in any given semester. Once the students complete at that minimum, they are required to write a two-page reflection summarizing their participation in the UP program. This assignment invites students to connect UP experiences back to SPED 240 course content and, using the guiding questions below, to further express how they thought this experience may have influenced their future professional aspirations and preparation.

- 1) Describe your community service experience.
- 2) On a scale from 1-10 (10 being the highest), how would you rate this service experience? Why? What did you like best and what would you do differently?
- 3) What new professional information did you learn from this service experience? In what ways did this new information change your opinions of a professional issue or change your desire to be involved with this agency or service experience in the future?
- 4) Describe at least one moment or specific experience as part of your service-learning that truly had an impact on you as a person and/or future profession.
- 5) Now that you have been involved in the community, will you participate in other forms of volunteer service work in your future? Why or why not?

By answering these five questions, students were not only able to share reflections about the experience as a whole, but also to give constructive feedback to faculty, to provide candid self-assessment, and to make connections to their future careers. This reflection process highlights the impacts of IPSE for all parties involved and illustrates how attitudes of students towards disabilities change as participants are involved with service-learning initiatives.

Participants and Confidentiality

The majority of participating students were in their sophomore year of study and most had established a major field of study. Students enrolled in this course and engaged in service-learning expressed they were majoring in special/inclusive education, communication sciences and disorders (speech), recreational therapy, psychology, and/or elementary education. All participants in this study were anonymous, no names were written down in the data set and coding process, and a number was given to each reflection rather than any identifier including names. Instead, each participant was assigned a pseudonym so that data were de-identified and researchers could ensure their anonymity. Reflections were collected as a complete set over time so that all identities were protected in analysis, and so that nothing was recorded by the researchers that would indicate year or semester completed. Identities of participants were protected so that a given reflection could not be traced to a specific student or class after being de-identified.

Coding and Analysis

Before coding and analysis were conducted, researchers applied to the Institutional Review Board for human subjects research at the university in order to further analyze and code student reflections. IRB approval was obtained to continue the coding and analysis of the student reflections of their service learning experiences. Narratives provided data about the complexity of the experiences (Shuman, 2005), explored accounts of events, and illustrated particular interactions between natural supports and students at the university to portray the positive or negative value participants placed on their experiences. The events and perspectives described were coded while noting the place or order they were shared by the participant related to the prompt given.

Coding procedures and data analysis provided categories of information that formed the basis and emergence of themes. After initial analysis of each document, bracketing was used to mitigate preconceptions that would interfere with the research process in an effort to develop a non-judgmental approach to data analysis (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). NVivo, a data analysis management software, was used and coding was completed by hand.

Through a constant comparative coding analysis, the original categories were defined in context using NVivo to identify common phrases and concepts across documents and current literature regarding similar programs. A coding log was maintained to document any changes to or revisions of the coding themes and categories. Throughout the inductive phenomenological data analysis coding classifications were discussed between all researchers. Eight themes emerged that were categorized into four subthemes to derive the resulting essences of the phenomenon of perceptions of impact of the service-learning experience related to work in the UP program.

Trustworthiness was established through facilitation of comparison of coding of documents by at least two of the three researchers with at least 95% accuracy across all checks. The second and third researchers conducted an additional read of a portion of the documents in order to determine interrater reliability. Brantlinger and colleagues (2005) recommend the interrater reliability score between the researcher and the second reader be at least 85% or higher. Our team achieved an interrater reliability score of 95%.

Results

Effect of Program on HIP Scores

Based on this course, service-learning experiences, and individual reflections, students in this designated service-learning course provided a greater firsthand awareness of individuals with disabilities, reaffirmed many students' commitment to their future professional careers, and provided direct experiences applying strategies learned in the course with individuals with ID. Our results are organized in Table 2 showing the number of responses coded in each category and the progression of the themes which emerged through qualitative analysis.

Table 2
Results by Categories

Themes	Categories	Number of Coded Responses	Percentage
General Impressions	Mutual benefits Benefits to self; Benefits to UP student	243	72%
	Negative or Neutral experiences- or did not reflect on UP experience	12	4%
Attitudes and approach towards disability	Change or affirmation of philosophy of Inclusion	128	38%
	Application of strategies to support independence and foster self-determination	268	79%
Career Advancement	Pre-professional decision making or affirmation of career choice.	293	87%

A large majority of students (79%) shared that they benefited from the work of building self-determination skills with UP students, and that the strategies used directly influenced UP students' skills of independence and increased their confidence. Many shared how this experience has changed how they expect to interact with people with disabilities in the future based on this experience and the strategies learned. Some natural supports also shared how they felt about the concept of inclusion for people with disabilities in our society. Some expressed the added benefit of becoming more independent personally based on the independence they supported among UP program participants.

The majority of natural supports (87%) addressed the impact on their career path and future work with people with disabilities in the future. Similarly, a large number of natural supports (79%) reflected at length about the strategies they learned to foster independence and self-determination in others while working with the students in the UP Program. The attitude natural supports took and their approaches towards the concept of disability changed from applying the strategies learned. Connections and examples within and across themes illustrated the perspective of the natural supports.

Theme 1: Perspectives of Interactions with Students with ID

The experience led most natural supports to express how much they enjoyed working with students in the UP Program. The overall affection and passion they felt about the value of the UP Program was clear. As one student exclaimed,

The experience with the UP Program is amazing, and I recommend it for all students to do it for a semester. This service experience is like no other. Working with the UP students on a scale from 1-10, I would rate it a 10. It's a fantastic program!

Other natural supports shared the same concept of the positive perspective of the program but also of the specific service-learning experience when they said, "The UP Program did a lot for me this semester...it filled my heart UP." The value of the service-learning experience was clearly positive as the majority of natural supports repeated similar feelings about their work with the UP Program. Natural supports consistently shared that they feel they gained positive personal attributes and how they increased knowledge and professional skills as well.

Increased Knowledge and Skills Gained

Although generally positive about the opportunities afforded to students with ID, there were a few natural supports who felt they needed additional training to do the job well and did not feel comfortable in the role without such preparation. They acknowledged they had very limited knowledge and were nervous initially with this service-learning experience, as this was an introductory course and these students' first experiences working directly with individuals with disabilities. However, the majority maintained the work was valuable to overcome this initial anxiety to gain more skills prior to working in the field.

The large majority of natural supports shared positivity about the UP Program and the students they served. Natural supports reflected on the positive impact with increased knowledge and skills of how to work with individuals with ID in school and community settings while others related their experience to an increase in their own independence and confidence gained.

Consistently natural supports shared that they learned that it is important to set high and realistic expectations for the students they work with while in the program and for many, this was a new approach to working with and interacting with people with disability. As one natural support expressed,

I learned how to help someone by helping them realize what they should do without saying do this or do that. When they ask for help, instead of doing it for them I would help them do it and then have them do it on their own.

The impact of the experience led many to feel an increase in their ability to understand other people who might also have different life experiences.

Mutual Benefits of Working as a Natural Support

Some natural supports shared specifically how working as a natural support benefitted themselves as much or more than it benefitted the student with ID. As one natural support reflected clearly,

I know that the process of the UP Program is for the supports to have an impact on the students; however, I have come to know that they seem to have more of an impact on the supports, or at least that is how it was for me.

Some natural supports shared a similar view regarding the impact the UP Program had on them as a student and provided more specific of the impact they felt the program had in our society. The natural supports who felt positively about their experience shared they would also encourage others to participate based on the positive outcome as a student and a person in our society. One example is from a natural support that expressed how working with the students with ID had a profound impact on their personal growth when they said,

Working with the UP Program has really affected me as a student and as a person. It has made me a better person and helped me grow and be more understanding. The service-learning is amazing, and I would recommend students to participate.

While some found personal growth as they learned more about their own abilities and responsibilities, other natural supports shared that they gained an increase in their own self-confidence as a result of working in the Program.

Many times, with my personality, I let people walk all over me and take advantage of me, which are not good things to let happen; UP definitely helped me with developing these skills and putting them into practice.

Natural supports expressed a clear perception of shared mutual personal benefit. The majority shared that it was a positive experience that resulted in growth in understanding of how to work with people with ID and personal growth related to their own independence and confidence after building relationships with students in the UP Program.

Theme 2: Increased Awareness and Understanding of Inclusion

Natural supports reflected on their personal views of inclusion and how they feel society should support the idea of inclusiveness of individuals with ID. The natural supports repeatedly discussed their own awareness, understanding, and their expectations of what people with disabilities can do after developing rapport with the student they served.

Change in Perspectives of Inclusion

Many discussed how their relationship with a student with ID led to a shift in their way of thinking. For example, one natural support shared how a specific relationship with a student in the Program impacted their point of view related to expectations in our society towards people with disabilities, saying, "...once I started talking to [M], it opened my eyes even more that people with disabilities are not to be underestimated. They can accomplish just as much or even more than someone like me."

Increased Desire for Advocacy

Many natural supports expressed an eagerness to help build similar programs. While natural supports shared their desire to see more inclusive programs on college and university campuses as a result of the service-learning experience, some advocated for inclusive practices within their community and in their future work. They felt the impact of the program has the potential of reaching beyond the college campus and could help broaden opportunities for students with ID more globally. One natural support stated,

We need more programs like this, there's only 264 of the thousands of universities and colleges in America. Society believes after students with disabilities just finish high school, that is it. And it shouldn't be.

In fact, the majority of the natural supports commented on the way they work with students with ID empowered them to make change in their communities and in the world. One natural support wrapped up their reflection in a powerful statement showing a passion for the work related to inclusive practices when

they expressed, “My generation has the power to make a change and include everyone, diversity should be celebrated and supported!”

Theme 3: Awareness of Career Decisions Adjusted or Affirmed

The overwhelming majority of natural supports felt the service-learning opportunity gave them insight on future career goals and decisions. A few natural supports realized that they did not want to seek out a career in the field of special education, rather they were content in continuing in their field while also gaining an appreciation of the work. As one natural support stated, “I realize that this is not the field that is for me, but I think it is a wonderful program that should continue to be offered.”

In most cases, natural supports shared that the experiences affirmed their desire to go into an education related field. One natural support exclaimed, “The UP Program is an amazing thing and I cannot wait to see it spread all over the country and give more people this opportunity.” Another participant expressed their desire to work hard in the field they had already chosen to build inclusive practices, “I am truly excited to begin my journey in learning to be the best teacher I can be and make the world a better place than what it is right now.”

Other natural supports expressed that they suddenly knew the direction they wanted to go in their career. This impact was an immediate motivation to include working with students with disability in their future endeavors as one natural support shared, “After my first UP shift, I decided to go and change my major from elementary education to inclusive education.”

While some natural supports made drastic changes in their career paths, other natural supports slightly shifted their focus within their major to indicate a role that would allow them more access to students with disabilities. As one natural support put it,

While I have always wanted to help others in my future career, as I have chosen to become either a school psychologist or school counselor, being involved in the UP Program has allowed me to see that I really want to continue my involvement with individuals with disabilities.

Clearly, the natural supports made connections to the work they took part in with the student with ID and shared how the experience impacted their future career goals.

Discussion

Natural supports assigned more positive values than negative to their service-learning experiences. Attitudes and perspectives were enhanced and overall acceptance increased for individuals with ID. This is similar to findings from Westling et al. (2013) and Prohn et al. (2019) studies also measuring attitudes and perspectives. There was great influence on career choice and expanded community involvement/opportunities for young adults with ID. This echoes findings from Harrison et al. (2019) and Izzo and Shuman (2013). It is important to note that a significant majority of the natural supports were around the same age sharing in their college experiences. This service-learning experience provided long lasting learning experiences shared together that they can take into their future professions.

The service-learning hours and reflective opportunities allow for professional growth opportunities way beyond the factual textbook knowledge. Service-learning can offer greater awareness and acceptance for individuals with disabilities. While some administrators have viewed increased risks and liability in having individuals with ID living and learning on college campuses within inclusive communities, research indicates these college experiences could lead to more inclusive communities and business owners open to accepting more individuals with disabilities. There are implications for practice when the benefits to natural supports can be understood. Such a positive impact encourages more universities to become involved in inclusive college movements (Griffin et al., 2012; May, 2012).

Limitations

We recognize some limitations with our study. First, students were enrolled in courses related to their major and had a weighted course assignment to write the reflections about their UP service-learning experiences. This weighted assignment and having the dual role of instructor and researcher could have influenced the student's reflections even though the reflections were analyzed after grades were assigned. Second, a majority of reflections were from participants identifying as females since this is typically a helping field that employs more females and many were already interested in disability related areas. Third, all students were from one university and one IPSE program supporting students with ID despite the course also covering other exceptionalities. Finally, the timeframe of collection for the reflective narratives were a strength and weakness. The evolution with training and growth of the program over time may have influenced the experiences of students in different ways or possibly weakened the shared experiences.

Future Research

Researchers agree there are benefits to all stakeholders involved in inclusive college experiences (Alqazlan et al., 2019; Griffin et al., 2010; 2012; Izzo and Shuman, 2013; May, 2012; Papay et al., 2013; Prohn et al., 2019; Westling et al, 2013). Research should continue to determine more specific benefits and further explore the depth of understanding of how service-learning experiences impacts natural supports interacting together on a regular basis with students with ID in a variety of environments using additional specific assessment measures such those used in May (2012).

A very limited number of researchers have begun to consider the experiences of families as their student joins an inclusive environment on a college campus (Griffin et al., 2012) and the perspectives of faculty and staff who interact with these students as they go about their day-to-day lives (Almutairi et al., 2020; Burgin et al., 2017). This is an area of research that we consider important for future research.

The current research study builds from the conclusions found by Westling et al. (2013) and Prohn et al. (2019) in that it extends the understanding of perspectives of a specific and valuable stakeholder; the natural supports. Additional research could explore more of the reciprocal perspectives and benefits (students with and without disabilities doing parallel reflections together) and the attitudes of faculty, employers, and paid supports, and staff in similar ways that go beyond these reflective measures. Although there is evidence that mutual benefits exist from this study, there are still many more avenues of qualitative research to be explored. Most importantly, focus groups and interviews more primarily with individuals with ID, faculty, employers, and also paid and unpaid natural supports are warranted beyond the reflections evaluated in this study. Further insights could continue to be collected through focus groups, interviews, surveys, and document review as a means to triangulate the data and increase the rigor of the research to further understand the value of service-learning experiences.

Implications for Practice

Service-learning can offer greater awareness and acceptance for individuals with disabilities. It is important that the initial training be comprehensive, provide ongoing coaching or connections, and allow for more in-depth and reflective practices with some initial fears of the unknown that might be experienced for everyone involved (Izzo & Shuman, 2013; Prohn et al., 2019). These findings provide insight of more than just what supports are needed and goes deeper. Findings inform educational leaders on how natural supports are likely to feel and what benefits and challenges they see when helping contribute to the important work of the organization. Understanding the perspectives of natural supports that work directly with a population of students who are rarely served on college campuses is valuable to uncover. Educational leaders need to continue to explore how program initiatives can further illustrate the direct impact made on student learning and determine additional ways to expand these service-learning and field experience opportunities. Through this initial examination of reflective experiences, the study findings as well as previous studies highlight the overall benefits of inclusive practices, setting high expectations, providing greater possibilities, and

developing future leaders who have had firsthand experiences working directly in their fields of study before they emerge into their lifelong careers.

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