# A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF INDIVIDUALS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES AND THEIR PARTICIPATION IN POSTSECONDARY JOB TRAINING PROGRAMS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

by

Jami Vickers Granberry

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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## Abstract

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of individuals with intellectual disabilities in an inclusive postsecondary education program. The theories that guided this study are Oliver's theory on the social model of disability and Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism. This study used a transcendental research design and employed the use of purposeful sampling to select participants who have all experienced the same phenomenon. There were 10 participants who have all had the same experience of attending an inclusive postsecondary education program. The setting took place at P.C.C. in the C.A. program. The central research question asked, what are the lived experiences of individuals with intellectual disabilities enrolled in inclusive postsecondary career and technical training programs located on a college campus? Data collection types included interviews, journal prompts, and focus groups. A system of coding along with epoché, horizontalization of data, and structural descriptions were used for data analysis to determine major themes from the data collected. The trustworthiness, results, and findings of the study are also discussed. Findings included five themes and two sub-themes. The five themes were education and career aspirations, concept of inclusion, inclusivity and social engagement, campus engagement and support networks, and sense of belonging. The two sub-themes were career and professional development and real-world application and practice. The dissertation then moves into an overall discussion of the interpretation of the findings, the implications of the study, limitations, delimitations, and recommendations for future research. The dissertation ends with a conclusion that summarizes the full study.


*Keywords*: inclusion, higher education, intellectual disabilities, postsecondary education, job training

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## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to God; I am not sure I would have made it through without Him!

To my husband, Matt: You have made me want to be the best version of myself since meeting you. You have loved me through every stage, and I am very grateful.

To my family, who always encouraged me and pushed me to do my very best in everything. You all are the best cheerleaders!

To my children, Jaxson, Boone, Ada Jo, and Jameson: May you always reach for the stars and know you can do anything you put your mind to!

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I could not have reached this goal without the help of many people in my life. I would like to take this opportunity to thank them for their support.

First, I would like to thank God, because without him I would have nothing.

Second, my sincere thanks to my dissertation committee. The value of their guidance cannot be overstated. Dr. Susan Stanley and Dr. Kathy Kaefer provided much wisdom that helped me chart my course.

Next, I'd like to thank my husband, Matt. I couldn't have done this without you.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the emotional support provided by my family and friends. We made it to the top of the mountain! I look forward to celebrating with all of you.

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## List of Abbreviations

Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA)

Higher Education Act (HEA)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Intellectual Disabilities (IDs)

Postsecondary Education (PSE)

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR)

Central Research Question (CRQ)

Sub Question One (SQ1)

Sub Question Two (SQ2)

Sub Question Three (SQ3)

# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

## Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the lived experiences of individuals with intellectual disabilities (IDs) in an inclusive postsecondary education (PSE) program. Chapter One provides a background for the topics of special education and PSE programs in North Carolina. Included in the background section is an overview of the historical context, theoretical context, and social context for this study. The problem statement examines the scope of recent literature on this topic. The purpose of this study is stated followed by the significance of the current study. The research questions are introduced, and terms that are important to this study are defined. The chapter concludes with a chapter summary.

## Background

The background section discusses the history of this problem and how it has evolved. The discussion begins with the education of people with disabilities before 1961 and moves to the present day. This section also includes how this problem affects the social aspects of our society and educational systems. This problem not only affects the population with disabilities but also the peers, employers, colleges, and universities who work with individuals with IDs. The theoretical context focuses on the problem and how the problem has been studied previously. The theoretical context also describes how previous research and theories can be used as a framework to extend the research to help further understand the problem at hand.

### Historical Context

The historical overview covers the background of special education in the United States, as well as any inclusive PSE programs that may already be available to individuals with IDs. Before 1961, the United States did not publicly educate any students with disabilities. In 1970,

only one in five students with disabilities were educated in the United States (Individuals with Disabilities Act, 2022). Before federal regulations were passed, the future for children with disabilities was very bleak. Many were institutionalized because no one, including their families, knew what to do to help them. In 1975, President Ford signed into law the Education for All Handicapped Children Act which is also referred to as EHA. This act guarantees that all children with disabilities throughout the nation are given a free and appropriate public education that offers support to families of children with disabilities. In 1990, the EHA was reauthorized and transformed into the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, which is referred to as IDEA (Individuals With Disabilities Act, 2022). IDEA covers students from infancy into adulthood, which is age 21 for the purposes of the law. Over the years, IDEA has been reauthorized and new or revised regulations have been added. Although changes have been made, the act has kept the same purpose, which is to further advance support and education for children with disabilities. In 2015, the IDEA was reauthorized and amended into the Every Student Succeeds Act (IDEA, 2022).

After the age of 21 years, individuals with IDs are left with few federally funded options to continue their education. One program that is available and funded through federal monies is Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services. In 1935, the Social Security Act established the federal-state VR program as a permanent program (Department of Public Health & Human Services of Montana, 2022). In the beginning, this act did not include individuals with IDs. After name changes and amendments, in 1965, an amendment to the VR Act was made to include individuals with disabilities and other medical conditions. This change overloaded the system and made it difficult for participants to receive the help they needed. In 1973, the VR Act was amended to include only individuals with significant disabilities (Wyoming Work Force, 2015).

Currently, this program sets out to help individuals with disabilities gain employment, keep employment, and gain independence. Certain qualifications must be met in order to determine eligibility, such as income limits and rehabilitation needs of the individuals (Department of Public Health & Human Services of Montana, 2022). Due to these qualifications, many individuals and families do not qualify for VR services, which leaves them with few options once completing high school.

Another option that is available to individuals with IDs are federally funded PSE programs. Out of 5,916 colleges and universities in the United States, only 332 offer programs for people with IDs (Johnson, 2024). There are now 27 PSE programs in North Carolina that cater to individuals with IDs (North Carolina Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2022). This research study is based on these programs. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms have been used for the setting and program information. The program that this research study will be using is located at P.C.C. and is called C.A. In this program, individuals with IDs gain employment skills or become more proficient in math and reading so they can move to other educational programs or employment. There is no age limit for the program, and it is free to all participants. The C.A. program is paving the way and moving in the right direction to make a difference in the lives and education of individuals with IDs.

**Social Context**

In 2017, over 40% of businesses could not find talent to meet their workforce needs, but there were 4,301 VR job-ready candidates with disabilities seeking employment (North Carolina Council for Developmental Disabilities, 2022). Since the Covid-19 pandemic, job openings have doubled and tripled, yet individuals with IDs have remained jobless. There seems to be a disconnect between programs that train individuals with disabilities and businesses that need

employees. Per the North Carolina Council for Developmental Disabilities (2022), one in three employers reported people with disabilities stay in jobs longer, are rated equally or more productive than coworkers, and achieve equal or better job performance ratings. These statistics show just how much this topic affects society at large. There is an entire group of people who are being overlooked who could help the businesses that are desperate for employees. The research describes the lived experiences of individuals with IDs who have participated in inclusive PSE programs and the experiences of neurotypical peers and faculty who attend and work in inclusive PSE programs.

The need for more research also stretches into the educational world. After high school, individuals with IDs may not know about the PSE programs that are available to them. Due to this, many of the spots available at postsecondary institutions are not filled. The Higher Education Act of 2008 (HEA) made access to programs easier, but the act did not force institutions to create programs or market those programs to this population with disabilities. As of March 2019, there were only 265 nondegree programs for individuals with IDs on universities and college campuses across the country (National Parent Center on Transition and Employment, 2022). Since 2019, the number has increased to 332 programs for people with disabilities (Johnson, 2024). Although progress has been made, much more remains to be done in PSE programs to combat the problems discussed in this study.

The social context issues that affect the employment market and educational world directly relate to the theoretical framework of the social model of disability (Oliver, 1986). Society and social situations have been set up in a way that creates barriers for people with disabilities. These barriers make it difficult for individuals with disabilities to attend PSE programs, gain employment, and retain employment (Bellacicco & Pavone, 2020). Furthering

this research will not only benefit the population with disabilities but also employers, peers, colleges, and universities who seek to be more inclusive in all aspects (Brewer & Movahedazarhouligh, 2021). This research can also benefit colleges and universities in the creation of programs that provide job training to individuals with IDs in hopes of better employment outcomes for this population (Ryan et al., 2019). With more training and better employment outcomes, this population will be able to fill the many job vacancies that employers have, thus making society more inclusive.

**Theoretical Context**

Over the last 50 years, the education of individuals with disabilities has been a topic of discussion. From the literature that has been reviewed, it seems like there has been an abundance of progress for children and adolescents who have been diagnosed with disabilities, but college-age individuals with IDs have not had as much access or support through the years. Lack of PSE programs, as well as access to these programs, have been blamed on the low employment rates among this population (Barnard-Brak et al., 2023). Society needs to make changes to combat and aid in solutions to solve these problems for people with disabilities. Most of the current literature covers PSE program enrollment (Gilson et al., 2020; Rumi et al., 2021) and employment statistics (Moore & Schelling, 2015; Park & Park, 2021). Other literature discusses the experiences and effects that individuals with disabilities have on their peers and faculty who work alongside them in the PSE programs (Grigal et al., 2021; Hemphill & Kulik, 2016; Ryan et al., 2019). The literature also includes the experiences and perspectives of individuals with IDs who are employed. This study aims to identify the experiences of individuals with IDs who are enrolled in an inclusive postsecondary job training program. As a result, this study should reveal how the experiences of individuals with IDs relate to inclusivity on college campuses.

The theoretical framework for this study is centered around Oliver's (1986) social model of disability and Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism. The social model of disability explains that the way society and the environment are set up is a problem for people with disabilities, not the disability diagnosis itself (Oliver, 2013). The social model of disability was developed by disabled people in response to the medical model of disability. Shifting the focus from a medical standpoint to a personal standpoint helped society better understand how marginalized people with disabilities are. Social constructivism is a guiding theory because it explains how social interaction shapes how individuals learn. Vygotsky created social constructivism in response to other theorists who believed that learning could be separated from social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). These two theories are important to the study because the social model explains why individuals with IDs are underrepresented in PSE programs and social constructivism explains how social interactions with neurotypical peers and faculty can shape the perspectives and experiences of the individuals with IDs. The results from this study expand Oliver's social model of disability and how peers and faculty on an inclusive college campus can either help or hinder inclusivity. Social constructivism is used to describe how the interactions with peers and faculty shape how individuals with IDs learn and grow in an inclusive PSE program.

## Problem Statement

The problem is individuals with IDs are underrepresented in inclusive PSE programs. In his study, Brady (2021) stated, "There is a distinct need for a research agenda that drives research, practice, and policy for college students with intellectual and developmental disabilities" (p. 203). Career and technical education has always been an option for students with IDs in the middle and high school realms of education, but what about at the PSE level? "Every

Student Succeeds Act … of 2015 emphasizes the importance of all students, including those with disabilities, becoming college and career ready through high expectations and access to a high-quality education" (Monahan et al., 2020, p.131-132). As the world changes and grows, it becomes more overwhelmingly apparent that this group of individuals has been left behind when it comes to PSE programs. The lack of PSE programs leaves the population with disabilities unemployed, underemployed, and undereducated.

"Since the enactment of the Higher Education Act in 2008, the enrollment in post-secondary programs for individuals with intellectual disabilities has increased by 500%" (Baker et al., 2018, p.13). Although enrollment has increased, the creation of these programs has not. Currently, 332 PSE programs across the United States serve students with IDs (Johnson, 2024, though there are 5,916 total degree-granting colleges located in the United States for neurotypical students (NCES, 2022). The statistics mentioned show the need for more research on career and technical training programs for individuals with disabilities, as well as the creation of these programs across the United States. To conduct an inclusive study of the previous research, it is important to include the perspectives and experiences of the peers and the faculty who interact with this population through inclusive educational settings.

## Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the lived experiences of individuals with IDs who are enrolled in the C.A. program on an inclusive college campus located at P.C.C. At this stage in the research, the lived experiences will be generally defined as but not limited to day-to-day activities, learning activities, field trips, or on-campus activities the individuals participated in while enrolled in the program on the inclusive college campus. The theories guiding this study are the social model of disability (Oliver, 1986) along

with social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978). This study will take place at P.C.C. in a rural area of North Carolina. The program in which the students are enrolled is called C.A. Participants in this study will be college-aged students between the ages of 18 and 30 who have a documented developmental disability. The IDs could be related to but are not limited to autism, Williams syndrome, Down syndrome, or traumatic brain injury. The formal diagnosis for each individual with IDs was provided by an educational institution. For this study, the C.A. program at P.C.C. is where individuals learn job training, math, and reading skills. PSE programs are defined as programs located on college or university campuses that serve students with IDs through job and life skills training (P.C.C., 2022).

## Significance of the Study

The participants in this study described their experiences while enrolled in an inclusive PSE program. They also described how they feel about the relationships they have with neurotypical peers and faculty on the inclusive college campus. This study is significant because the findings inform colleges, universities, and employers of ways to promote PSE programs and employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities. A better understanding of PSE program participation will exist. Furthermore, the findings can help in the creation of more postsecondary employment training programs for people with disabilities across the United States. This study also describes how the relationships formed on inclusive campuses among neurotypical peers and faculty and students with disabilities can either help or hinder the inclusivity efforts.

### Theoretical Significance

The theories guiding this study are the social model of disability (Oliver, 1986) and social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978). The social model of disability theory describes that society is

set up in a way that creates barriers for people with disabilities. How society and the environment are arranged, not the disability diagnosis itself, is a hindrance to individuals with disabilities (Goering, 2015). The social model of disability was developed by disabled people in response to the medical model of disability. Shifting the focus from a medical standpoint to a personal standpoint helps society better understand how marginalized people with disabilities are. Social constructivism focuses on an individual's learning through the social interactions of a group (Vygotsky, 1978). This study examined how the interactions of neurotypical peers and faculty can affect individuals with IDs while attending a PSE program. Vygotsky created social constructivism in response to other theorists who believed that learning could be separated from social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). Examining the experiences of individuals with IDs who are enrolled in PSE programs could provide significant updates and expand upon the existing theories (Collins et al., 2018) by describing how PSE programs have changed and adapted to better accommodate individuals with IDs. In essence, the programs would change societal norms in PSE to serve this underrepresented population. Additionally, the results of the study can generate a better understanding of the experiences that contribute to easier access to PSE programs and more inclusion for individuals with IDs. The results can also provide significant information on how to better equip neurotypical peers and faculty working or attending an inclusive PSE program.

**Empirical Significance**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the lived experiences of individuals with IDs in an inclusive PSE program. During the research process, literature was found on PSE programs in the United States (Gilson et al., 2020; Kim & Kutscher, 2020; Lee et al., 2021; Rumi et al., 2021) and employment statistics of individuals with

disabilities (Moore & Schelling, 2015; Park & Park, 2021; Sannicandro et al., 2018; U.S. Department of Labor, 2020). Literature was also found on the effects that PSE has on the individuals, peers, and faculty who work in the inclusive programs (Carter et al., 2019; Nota et al., 2010; Ryan et al., 2019; Watts et al., 2023). Literature on employment perspectives from individuals with disabilities was also examined (Bonaccio et al., 2019; Gilson et al., 2022; Hemphill & Kulik, 2016; Wehman et al., 2018). Through the examination of the literature, gaps were present in the experiences between postsecondary job training programs and how that relates to inclusion on college campuses for people with disabilities. The themes and phenomenological descriptions from this study have empirical significance because they add new information to the literature and support the existing literature.

### Practical Significance

Individuals with IDs have lower rates of postsecondary enrollment (Pound et al., 2023) as well as lower rates of employment compared to their neurotypical peers (U.S. Department of Labor, 2020). The results of this study can improve access and the creation of PSE programs with this population. This study can also improve unemployment rates among individuals with IDs. Additionally, strategies and interventions can be developed using the results from this study to encourage colleges, universities, and workplaces to become more inclusive for all populations. This study can also provide information on how to make changes on their campuses to create more inclusion in universities and colleges that present themselves as being inclusive.

## Research Questions

Career and technical education have always been an option for students with IDs in the middle and high school realms of education but what about at the postsecondary level? Becoming college- and career-ready through high expectations and access to a high-quality

education is what the revisions and amendments set out to do in the Every Student Succeeds Act to benefit individuals with IDs (Monahan et al., 2020). The following research questions seek to describe the experiences of individuals with IDs and how they relate to their inclusion on college campuses. This study also sought to describe the feelings individuals with IDs have when describing their relationships with peers and neurotypical faculty members.

**Central Research Question**

What are the lived experiences of individuals with intellectual disabilities enrolled in inclusive postsecondary career and technical training programs located on a college campus?

**Sub-Question One**

What are the experiences of individuals with intellectual disabilities and their participation in postsecondary programs?

**Sub-Question Two**

How do individuals with intellectual disabilities feel about their relationships with neuro typical peers on the inclusive college campus?

**Sub-Question Three**

How do individuals with intellectual disabilities feel about their relationships with faculty members on the inclusive college campus?

## Definitions

1. *Employment:* For people with disabilities, employment means greater economic self-sufficiency, an opportunity to use their skills, and more active participation in community life (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2021).
2. *Inclusion:* Inclusion happens when every child is given the right to quality education. It means real learning opportunities for groups who have traditionally been excluded.

Inclusion values the unique contributions students of all backgrounds bring to the classroom and allow diverse groups to grow side-by-side, to benefit all (Unicef, 2023).

3. *Inclusive Postsecondary Education Program:* Programs also offer varying degrees of participation in regular college classes with students without disabilities. The programs may be fully inclusive, meaning that academics, social events, and independent living support take place with students without disabilities. Other programs offer a less inclusive program, where students spend more time in classes and activities with other students with IDs (National Parent Center on Transition and Employment, 2022).
4. *Intellectual Disabilities:* A condition characterized by significant limitations in both intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior that originates before the age of 22 years (American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 2022).
5. *Peers who are neuro typical:* A student without an emotional, intellectual, or physical disabling condition that requires assistance to access the educational environment (O'Connor, 2019).

## Summary

The problem is individuals with IDs are underrepresented in inclusive PSE programs. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the lived experiences of individuals with IDs in an inclusive PSE program. Chapter One, which serves as an introduction to the study, includes a summary of related literature, theories, and research questions. The results of this study describe the experiences of individuals with IDs enrolled in PSE programs and their experiences with inclusion. Exploring this phenomenon helps to fill in the gaps in the literature regarding these programs and inclusion for this population. Chapter Two will dive deeper into the related literature and the gaps that exist on this topic.

# CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

## Overview

A systematic review of the literature has been conducted to explore the lack of career and technical training programs in PSE settings created for individuals with IDs, barriers that limit participation for individuals with IDs in inclusive PSE programs, statistics of employment rates for people with IDs, how the programs affect students with IDs, how these inclusive programs affect neurotypical peers and faculty, and how people with IDs feel about employment. The first section discusses the theory relevant to job training programs, employment, independence, and specialized learning described in Mike Oliver's (1986) social model of disability in addition to Lev Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism and how that relates to this study and individuals with IDs. In the next section, a synthesis of recent literature is presented pertaining to the topics listed above. Lastly, the gaps in the literature are discussed, which include the experiences of individuals with IDs who are currently enrolled in inclusive postsecondary job training programs. Gaps were also found when discussing the experiences of individuals with disabilities and inclusion. Another important gap that was identified was the perspectives and experiences of peers and faculty who are enrolled or work in these programs. The gaps in the literature present a viable need for more research to be completed on the experiences of individuals with disabilities and their participation in inclusive postsecondary job training.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical frameworks that guide this study are the social model of disability from Oliver which was constructed in 1986 and Vygotsky's (1978) learning theory called social constructivism. The social model of disability originated in the late 20$^{th}$ century due to the civil rights movement. In the 60s and 70s, many people with disabilities were excluded from society.

This theory was developed in reaction to the medical model of disability that emphasizes an individual's deficit by diagnostic labels and treats their impairments as deficits (Manago et al., 2017). The social model of disability theory explains that society is organized in a way that is disabling instead of an individual's impairments or medical diagnosis (Oliver, 2013). Another way that it has been described is that "while impairment may impose personal restrictions, disability is created by hostile cultural, social, and environmental barriers" (Oliver & Barnes, 2010, p. 548). This theory aims to break down the barriers in society to make it more inclusive for all people, not just those who are neurotypical. Through the construction of positive indemnities for disabled people the social model is instrumental in political and legal agendas for inclusion and accessibility (Oliver, 2013). Although many advances have been made due to the social model of disability theory, there are still many barriers in education that have had little to no change over the years. This theory makes a direct connection between individuals with disabilities and their ability to attend inclusive PSE programs.

From the origination of the social model theory in 1986, many other researchers have built upon and used the social model of disability in their research to further advocate for individuals with disabilities across the world. The social model of disability is a framework for understanding how the diagnosis of a disability affects individuals. Oliver's theory suggested that people's conditions are not what make them disabled. Instead, society's conditions, such as exclusion, ignorance, and lack of access, disable them (University of Minnesota Duluth, 2017). Manago et al. (2017) described how the social model of disability is intertwined with the medical model and has been used by parents of children with special needs to end stigmatism and to advocate for their children. These parents use this intertwined approach because they believe it is easier to adapt a person than is it to alter social structure (Landsman, 2005; Matthews, 2009).

Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism describes how social interactions affect the way that individuals learn when in a group. Social constructivism suggests that all knowledge is developed because of social interaction and language use, meaning learning is a shared experience rather than an individual one (Lynch, 2016). Vygotsky believed that the lifelong process of development is dependent on social interaction and that social learning leads to cognitive development (Akpan et al., 2020). In theory, this means that all learning tasks can be performed by learners under adult guidance or peer collaboration. The goal of using social constructivism in this study is to rely as much as possible on the participants' view of the situations and experiences and how those relate to social interaction. These experiences are not simply imprinted on the participants but are formed through the interactions of others (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Social constructivism pairs well with the social model of disability because it focuses on the specific contexts in which people live and work to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants. This theory will be used to describe how neurotypical peers and faculty affect the learning of individuals with IDs in the inclusive setting. This specific study looks at the social interactions from the point of view of participants with IDs and connects those with the social model of disability and social constructivism to describe how including or leaving out this population can affect their learning.

The policy of inclusion reflects the need to change society and social institutions (Shutaleva et al., 2023). This study, and the research question's goal, is to further the research on the social model of disability and social constructivism along with how it can affect individuals with disabilities and their participation in postsecondary job training programs. This study uses the social model of disability to inform readers about how society and the environment can hinder individuals with disabilities from participating in PSE programs. Although society may

not do this purposefully, often the way society is set up leads to the exclusion of differently-abled people. The social model of disability works to break down these barriers, giving people with disabilities more opportunities in society. Using the social model of disability and social constructivism helped with data analysis by providing a framework for the themes that may emerge. Due to the social model of disability theory being rooted in societal differences, using it during data analysis helped expand on the barriers that exist in society due to individuals' disabilities. The social model of disability focuses on how society can change to better accommodate individuals with disabilities, so it is important to connect the social model of disability to the findings as well. Including the social model of disability theory and social constructivism leads to the bettering of PSE programs that already exist and aids in the creation of new programs across the United States. Based on these findings, this research study aims to combine the social model of disability, social constructivism, and real-world experiences to create a lasting change in PSE programs for people with IDs.

## Related Literature

The related literature offers a contextual background for this study, just as the theory of the social model of disability (Oliver, 1986) provides a theoretical framework for the study. A review of the literature uncovered many different perspectives and experiences of PSE programs for individuals with IDs. The following sections provide literature on PSE programs for people with IDs. The literature also covers employment outcomes in addition to statistics for the population of students with IDs. The related literature addresses the barriers that individuals with IDs face to participate in inclusive PSE programs. Literature was found on PSE program effects and perspectives from the individuals with IDs as well as their neurotypical peers and faculty. Lastly, the literature focuses on employment perspectives from individuals with IDs.

**PSE Programs for Individuals With IDs**

Students with IDs have not always been able to attend colleges in the United States. Until the 70s, individuals with IDs did not have the legal right to attend public primary or secondary schools in the United States (Grigal et al., 2012). The HEA of 2008 made access to PSE programs easier for individuals with IDs by offering more financial assistance and easier access to PSE programs for individuals with IDs (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Although the act did not require that colleges provide programs for these specific students, many institutions created nondegree certificate opportunities for people with IDs. At the time of this study, 332 postsecondary education programs across the United States serve students with IDs (Johnson, 2024) and 5,916 total degree-granting colleges located in the United States for neurotypical students (NCES, 2022). Twenty-seven of those programs that cater to individuals with IDs are in North Carolina (North Carolina Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2022). The statistics presented above show that only 0.05% of all colleges and universities in the United States provide PSE for students with a variety of disabilities. Overall, these programs have a positive impact on employment and adult outcomes and give a sense of independence for the students with disabilities (Gilson et al., 2020). Many PSE programs for individuals with IDs focus on three main areas: academics, independent living, and employment (Rumi et al., 2021).

In the 2019-2020 school year, 72% of individuals with disabilities graduated from high school with a diploma, 10% received an alternative certificate, and 16% dropped out (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). The study at hand focuses on the population of individuals with IDs who graduated with a certificate or dropped out. Nearly one in five undergraduate college students reported having an identified disability in the 2015-2016 school year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). That means one-fifth of college enrollment comes from

individuals with disabilities. It is also important to note that only 37% of students reported their disabilities to their colleges and only 15% of those students who disclosed their disabilities received accommodations from the school or program in which they were enrolled (National Center for Education Statistics at Institute of Education Sciences, 2022). A 2023 report on disability statistics, which used census data, showed that only 20% of 25–34-year-olds with a disability hold a bachelor's degree (Houtenville et al., 2023). With 10% of enrollments coming from college students with disabilities, their outcomes are far inferior compared to their neurotypical peers (National Council on Disability, 2003). Despite how common disabilities are among college students, society and higher educational institutions fail to provide truly inclusive spaces for all people to participate equally.

In a peer-reviewed study by Campanile et al. (2022), the researchers used an A-F letter scale to grade 50 top-funded undergraduate programs on accessibility, accommodations, and reputation for inclusion. Just six percent of these institutions received an A, whereas 60% received a D (Campanile et al., 2022). Due to the inconsistencies of inclusion in PSE programs, individuals with IDs tend to have lower levels of higher education attainment than those without disabilities. From 2003-2005, only 34% of people with IDs were enrolled in a public university, and 11% of people with IDs were enrolled in a community college 2 years after high school (North Carolina Department of Commerce, Labor, and Economic Analysis Division, 2009). Newman (2005) found that students with IDs are 4.5 times less likely to attend four-year college programs compared to students without disabilities. The Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990 mandates that all postsecondary institutions "are required by law to provide any reasonable accommodation that maybe necessary for those people with an identified disability to have equal access to the educational opportunities and services available to peers who are neurotypical, if

requested" (PL 101-336; PL 105-17, p. 327). Grigal et al. (2011) found that 11% of students with IDs in the United States attended PSE programs compared to 58% of students with other types of disabilities.

The college and career readiness movement in the United States has put great emphasis on providing opportunities for all students to enter PSE programs that prepare them for a career (Rossetti et al., 2016). It has become increasingly apparent that all individuals can benefit from at least some PSE or training (Carnevale et al., 2011). Both federal and state policies, together with funding, have been put in place to support students with and without disabilities to participate in PSE (Zhang et al., 2018). The rationale for offering PSE to the population with IDs includes (a) giving the students a sense of esteem and belonging when they have an opportunity to attend college like their same-age peers, (b) increasing these students' employment outcomes, and (c) providing a positive impact on typical college students and faculty (Hart et al., 2010). Although positive outcomes have been shown, students with IDs are underserved in all higher education settings, partly because few programs exist and families often are not provided with adequate information and guidance (Griffin et al., 2010). PSE programs across the United States for individuals with IDs are widely different in their purpose and goal, the way they admit students, the courses they offer, and the approaches they take to including these students on college campuses (Zhang et al., 2018).

Programs that are inclusive and prepare students with intellectual and developmental disabilities for a career are even more difficult to find, as most students in these programs attend classes that are linked to their level of academic abilities due to the belief that these students may not pursue a career, unlike neurotypical college students (Papay & Bambara, 2011). Despite the globalization of PSE, which has taken place over the last 25 years or so, the exclusion of people

with IDs from this sector persists as demonstrated through barriers to access, low participation, and low completion rates, compared to those without disabilities (Special issue: Inclusive PSE and Persons With Disabilities, 2023). As of 2021, nearly 95% of students with IDs attended school with their peers without disabilities (NCES, 2021). As a result, students whose schooling has been entirely in inclusive settings now increasingly seek PSE in equally inclusive settings; attending college with their peers is the natural educational progression for them (Papay et al., 2018). With fewer than six percent of the more than 5,700 two- and four-year colleges offering programs for individuals with IDs (Carothers et al., 2021), it is apparent that there is a need for more research, revision, and creation of inclusive PSE programs.

**Barriers to Participation in Inclusive PSE Programs for Individuals With IDs**

Although the educational world has made many advancements toward including individuals with IDs, barriers still exist when it comes to access and participation in inclusive PSE programs. In the last 3 decades, inclusive disability legislation has led to an increasing number of students with disabilities entering higher education (Biggeri et al., 2020). However, barriers to the full participation of students with IDs remain. The following related literature discusses the barriers that exist for individuals with IDs and their participation in PSE programs. Although higher education remains essential in increasing employment and life chances, students with IDs face several challenges that are significantly different and greater than those of students without disabilities when entering higher education (Newman et al., 2011). The narratives of students with IDs illustrate that they must work considerably harder than their neurotypical peers to overcome a range of physical, attitudinal, social, and cultural barriers (Hopkins, 2011). Although policies exist to help accommodate students, the students may encounter attitudinal barriers in accessing them (Flaherty & Roussy, 2014). For example, people with IDs often

encounter significant social exclusion, negative attitudes, discrimination, and stigma, which are substantial barriers to youth entering and completing PSE (Duncanson et al., 2017).

Other barriers have been identified when exploring and discussing individuals with IDs attending inclusive PSE programs. First, the lack of adequate preparation in secondary schools and differences in academic achievement between students with and without disabilities are among the most important constraints to a successful transition to higher education (Chatzitheochari & Platt, 2019). Interpersonal-level barriers include difficulties in building a social network and interaction with teaching staff and peers. Faculty members play a crucial role in creating a supportive environment for students with IDs and affect their progress (Malinovskiy et al., 2023). Positive peer relationships and inclusiveness during general education play an important role in shaping the willingness and ability to attain higher education for people with IDs (Carter et al., 2013). Organizational-level barriers identified as infrastructural limitations of the physical space and accommodations also plague individuals with IDs when accessing PSE programs (Malinovskiy et al., 2023). Another area of challenge includes navigating the hidden curriculum, including meeting prerequisites for PSE and employment, using support systems and community transportation, and carrying out adulthood expectations (Berg et al., 2017). Inappropriate accommodations, along with the inability of student support services to assist persons with IDs, can considerably impede progress on the educational trajectory (Garrison-Wade, 2012). The next few paragraphs provide a more in-depth look at the barriers previously mentioned.

The lack of adequate preparation in secondary schools has been identified as a barrier to participation for individuals with IDs in higher education programs. Requirements in federal education policy guarantee the provision of services to assist students with IDs in preparing for

their transition from high school to the post-high school world (Cavendish et al., 2020). The extent to which and in what way secondary schools work to prepare students and develop their skills is likely of great importance for the students' adult life (Tideman et al., 2023). Policies have been developed that highlight an increased focus on ensuring all students, including students with IDs, are prepared to engage in college activities, career responsibilities, and adult life (Mishkind, 2014). Yet, not all students, and especially not students who receive special education services, are exiting school sufficiently college- and career-ready (Lombardi et al., 2022). Only about three percent of high school graduates with IDs complete a rigorous college preparatory curriculum (Nord et al., 2011). Students with IDs are often excluded from college preparatory coursework, even when compared to students without disabilities with similar academic aptitude (Shifrer et al., 2013). Consequently, students with IDs often exit high school underprepared for postsecondary life (Ressa, 2022). Transitioning to higher education is a challenging period for many students, punctuated by fundamental changes (Kovač, 2015).

The transition to college can prove especially challenging for students with IDs who are more likely to experience a lack of preparation for college in high school (e.g., appropriate social skills, coursework; Francis et al., 2018), compared to their peers without disabilities (Francis et al., 2020). Even with careful planning, college transition can be challenging for students with IDs because it involves leaving preschool-12$^{th}$ grade structures of entitlements to special education services and entering the postsecondary structure of service eligibility (Agran et al., 2020). The Preschool-12$^{th}$ grade and college structural differences can leave unprepared students vulnerable to academic, social, emotional, and personal stress (Lawson et al., 2016). Students with IDs must face a significant number of challenges and changes when transitioning to college, including building a new social network, dealing with heightened academic demands, developing

autonomous learning, or coping with unfamiliar administrative tasks (Perry et al., 2001). Given the fact that higher education has traditionally been an arena for academics who are considered strong and self-sufficient, students with IDs often must work beyond their capacity to prove themselves as competent learners in the face of ableist expectations (Olsen et al., 2020). Successful transition from compulsory education to lifelong learning opportunities requires strategies that support parents to encourage the aspirations of their children and ensure that students with IDs have access to a broad range of choices in education, training, and employment (Scanlon & Doyle, 2021).

Through their interactions with peers across the school day, students develop new skills, encounter new perspectives, access needed supports, find camaraderie, develop social capital, learn prevailing norms, and elevate their future aspirations (Biggs & Carter, 2017). Although there are many benefits, interpersonal-level relationship barriers exist between peers, faculty, and individuals with IDs who participate in inclusive PSE programs. Despite increased access, students with IDs in higher education face barriers and report greater dissatisfaction than peers without disabilities (Mullins & Preyde, 2013). Students' social adjustment to the university and feelings of social isolation contribute to their institutional commitment and perceived competency, which are important for college persistence (Tinto, 2012). Underrepresented groups on college campuses report feeling left out of social activities, as well as missing out on forming social relationships to support success in the classroom, including maintaining networks after degree completion (Jack, 2016). Students with IDs have also reported they have experienced faculty resistance, stereotypes, and discrimination (Wilson et al., 2000). Faculty perceptions of students with IDs were the most frequently cited barrier in the Ehlinger and Ropers (2020) study. Participants described negative experiences when they discussed accommodations with their

instructors, including feeling judged and feeling like their instructor believed they were not capable of success. These experiences have likely impacted student success with only 34% of U.S. students with IDs completing their bachelor's degree (Newman et al., 2011).

A barrier of great importance that has been identified at the organizational level is a hidden curriculum of PSE programs, which creates barriers to adaptive behaviors (Berg et al., 2017). The academic supports and services that institutions provide do not address the challenges with adaptive behavior and social participation skills needed for PSE students with IDs. Contributing to the challenge of PSE success for students with IDs is limited exposure to and opportunities for acquisition of the hidden curriculum, the often unspoken and unacknowledged content and skills that support academic and adult-performance (About Education, 2016). This hidden curriculum is often unexplored by students with disabilities yet is an important consideration under Part C of the IDEA (Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, Pub. L. 108-446) which includes "instruction, related services, community experiences, the development of employment, and other post-school adult living objectives, and when appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills, and functional vocational evaluation" (pp. 4-5). Navigating adult-based systems involves several areas of the PSE hidden curriculum. Students must learn about the new campus environment and its expectations. A combination of low-performance expectations, overreliance on adult support, a marked reduction in occupational therapy services (Mankey, 2012), and limited variety in classroom student population may have fostered dependency that persisted into PSE (Garrison-Wade, 2012), inadvertently leading to these students being underprepared for navigating the adult-based PSE and employment systems.

**Employment Statistics for Individuals With IDs**

Higher education is regarded as one of the most important means to promote work participation for people with IDs (Molden et al., 2009). Individuals with IDs are twice as likely to live in poverty than individuals without disabilities (National Council on Disability, 2017), which is mostly due to the lack of participation and completion of PSE programs (U.S. Department of Labor, 2020). The employment rate of people with IDs is 17.1% compared to the employment rate of 66.3% for people without disabilities. The unemployment rate was 7.3% for individuals with IDs and 3.5% for people without disabilities. These statistics show a large difference between employment for people with disabilities and those without with relatively no concern on how to change these numbers across the United States. Individuals with IDs are three to four times less likely to be employed than their neurotypical peers, and most of the employment that they participate in is in sheltered work or segregated settings (Park & Park, 2021). With only 0.05% of colleges and universities in the United States providing PSE programs for individuals with IDs, the employment and unemployment rates are not surprising. This next section will go into further detail on employment and unemployment for individuals with IDs.

Only five studies have examined the correlation between PSE and employment outcomes since 2004 (Moore & Schelling, 2015). Over the last 20 years, this topic has gained more interest, and more research has been completed. In a study conducted by Sannicandro et al. (2018), the researchers stated that PSE is associated with increased weekly earnings, decreased reliance on supplemental security income benefits, and increased employment. To combat the unemployment rates of people with IDs, some states have enacted policies to get this population of people into the workforce. Currently, the states with the highest rate of PSE participation for

individuals with IDs are Iowa, West Virginia, Minnesota, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania (Grigal et al., 2014). Sannicandro et al. (2018) took a closer look into the correlation between PSE and employment rates of people with IDs across the 50 states. Their study found that individuals who participated in PSE had a much higher rate of employment than those who did not participate in PSE. The study conducted by Sannicandro et al. is important to the current research because it gives a foundation on which to build a strong argument for further studies on PSE and job outcomes. The studies listed above have shown a positive correlation between PSE participation and employment outcomes among individuals with IDs.

In 2022, the unemployment rates of individuals with IDs were still very high compared to the neurotypical population. Eleven-point-six percent of individuals with IDs who have no high school diploma are unemployed. Seven-point-three percent of individuals with IDs who have a high school diploma, but no college, are unemployed. Six-point-eight percent of individuals with IDs who have some college or an associate degree are unemployed. Four-point-seven percent of individuals with IDs who have a bachelor's degree or higher are unemployed (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Although the unemployment rate goes down with the more education an individual with an ID has, the rates are still high for this population. For neurotypical individuals with a four-year degree, the employment rate is 89.9%, whereas the employment rate for individuals with IDs who are college graduates of certificate programs is 50.6% (U.S. Department of Labor Statistics, 2016). In 2021, almost six million people with at least one reported disability were employed in the labor market (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). In total, there are approximately 3.32 billion people in the labor market in the entire world (Clark, 2022). That means that 0.001% of the entire labor market across the world is made up of people

with IDs. These astonishing numbers show the importance of postsecondary job training programs and their ability to increase employment among people with IDs.

Job retention is another important factor that needs to be analyzed when discussing employment and unemployment among individuals with IDs. In 1986, one study found that 67% of people with IDs quit their jobs within the first 6 months (Kim et al., 2017). In 2007, a study reported that out of 60 individuals with IDs, 26 were employed in the initial study but only 13 were employed at the 9-month check-in (Hensel et al., 2007). Park & Park found a higher rate of employment among high school graduates and those with PSE experiences (2021). International statistics confirm that people with IDs with tertiary education have higher rates of employment than those with less education (Bellacicco & Pavone, 2020). There was a lower rate of employment among individuals with only middle or elementary school education (Park & Park, 2021). These studies have proven that education plays a large role in gaining and retaining employment among individuals with IDs. The studies have also shown that some form of participation in PSE contributes to greater employment rates among people with IDs.

**Effects and Perspectives of Students With IDs in PSE Programs**

The opportunity to participate in PSE programs can empower people to develop academic competencies and knowledge, improve their prospects in the job market, hone their social skills, and broaden their views of the world (Baum et al., 2010). Given greater access and research documenting the positive outcomes of PSE programs, it is likely that PSE programs are an increasingly desirable goal for many students with IDs when they are preparing to transition out of high school (Francis et al., 2020). Inclusive PSE programming has shown effectiveness, with 59% of students being engaged in paid employment 1 year after graduation (Grigal et al., 2021). The first three sections of this chapter have focused heavily on the statistics about PSE programs

and employment rates of people with IDs, as well as the barriers this population faces. This next section of the literature review explains how participating in PSE programs affects individuals with IDs, as well as discusses their perspectives while participating in these programs.

Important factors, such as employment and independent living, have been found to increase the quality of life for individuals with IDs (Nota et al., 2010). Rumi et al.'s (2021) study is the perfect example of the success that can happen in these PSE programs for this population. Rumi et al.'s study was linked to an increase in ability and independent living skills through weekly workshops, residential living spaces where students live on campus, and job shadowing. Motivation was another positive construct, which led to students staying on track, having more initiative, putting forth more effort, and having better relationships with peers on campus. Behavior was categorized positively, with improvements in employment and academic achievement, independent living, communication, socialization, and overall development (Rumi et al., 2021). Another study conducted by Lee et al. (2021) looked at four specific areas to measure the growth of students in adaptive behavior, self-determination, executive functioning, and social skills to bridge the gaps in other studies that have discussed the benefits of PSE programs. The research from Lee et al. detected growth in adaptive behavior, executive functioning, and social skills throughout participation in the program. Ryan et al. (2019) studied the effects that a particular PSE program had on students with IDs and their ability to obtain employment and living independence. Remarkable progress for the individuals was made, with 96% of students having at least one paid employment position after graduation and 4% of students moving on to another PSE program.

Regardless of learning differences, students with learning disabilities have postschool goals like the goals of students without disabilities: to attend college, obtain competitive

employment, and live independently (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). An important large-scale longitudinal study that discusses students' growth in college was recorded by Kim and Kutscher in 2020. An element that was noted within this study is that although students enter college with a variety of disabilities, backgrounds, and characteristics, their college experiences can influence their growth in academics and confidence (Kim & Kutscher, 2020). Students who show higher levels of engagement tend to see a greater benefit from their college. People with IDs value the opportunity to learn (Rillotta et al., 2020), have increased self-esteem and opportunities (Blumberg et al., 2008), feel more confident and independent (Wilson et al., 2012), widen their social networks (Plotner & May, 2019), and have better employment opportunities (Butler et al., 2016) when participating or completing PSE programs.

Some university students with IDs argue that going to the university should be strongly encouraged for people with IDs, as it is a way to improve their quality of life and expand their occupational prospects (Moriña, 2017). Students with IDs value higher education as a positive experience because it provides them with a normalized context that they wish to continue (Weldon & Riddell, 2007). The university experience is seen as an opportunity that strengthens them personally in the face of difficulties derived from their disability (Moriña, 2017). These experiences at the university level represent opportunities for empowerment and social and occupational inclusion (Papay & Griffin, 2013). An opportunity to participate in higher education is a powerful tool for these students to reinvent themselves and revalidate an identity that may have been impaired in other educational stages (Prowse, 2009). Through these experiences, it can be stated that many university students with disabilities are resilient people, as they have had to face adverse situations and overcome barriers (Zakour & Gillespie, 2013).

These experiences can increase their opportunities to get and keep a job to obtain higher revenues and achieve an independent life (Moriña, 2017).

PSE programs afford opportunities for students to develop the skills needed to gain employment, build their social networks, improve communication skills, increase their sense of independence and self-determination, and participate meaningfully in the community (Francis et al., 2018). Young people with an ID often have limited social circles for various reasons including the lack of opportunity to interact with others, protective family members, negative self-perceptions, and the perceptions of others (Wilson et al., 2016). McCarty et al. (2019) found that most young adults with IDs began PSE programs with a social circle that was limited to mainly family members. However, as the students progressed in the program, their networks grew sometimes to include, and more often, replace previous connections with new connections established in and through the program (Spencer et al., 2021). The ability to socialize is essential to students in any PSE program, and the program provides them with a sense of belonging (Kern et al., 2018), acceptance, and companionship (Shanay et al., 2013). Supporting student participation and interaction within the courses is a fundamental aspect of inclusion in college (Griffin et al., 2016). Reinforcing their participation supports students in a course, and student participation allows the students to interact with their peers and foster social relationships outside of the course.

Before research and the world became more focused on the topic of postsecondary training for students with IDs, poor employment and independent outcomes were reported for this population. It has been argued that the philosophy of inclusive PSE is based on the failure of segregated education to deliver positive outcomes for people with IDs (O'Connor et al., 2012). Inclusive education aims to promote equality among children, youth, and adults, according to the

right to belong (Falvey & Givner, 2005). Students with IDs who attended PSE programs experienced increases in their levels of self-determination and self-esteem (Ju et al., 2017) and more confidence (Stefánsdóttir & Björnsdóttir, 2016). They also made more friends, especially with peers without disabilities (Cranston-Gingras et al., 2015). As such, it is not enough that students with IDs have access to education, they also must have appropriate support to ensure their inclusion (Gibson, 2015). Inclusive PSE delivers positive social, personal, and academic outcomes (Rillotta et al., 2014). PSE programs that are inclusive aim to overcome marginalization and create educational opportunities that are the norm for individuals with IDs (Uditsky & Hughson, 2012).

**Effects and Perspectives of Neurotypical Peers in Inclusive PSE Programs**

Literature that examines the impact of peers on students' postsecondary success dates back several decades (Newcomb, 1962; Panos & Astin, 1968; Sanford, 1956). Many alternative approaches have been used to ensure success for individuals with IDs in PSE programs. Peer mentors who are often used as peer-mediated support systems in PSE programs are among the more widely used of these alternative approaches (Guist & Valle-Riestra, 2017). This brings the research to another important perspective that comes from the peers who attend inclusive PSE programs. It is important to acknowledge their experiences and feelings when researching this topic. The diverse group of students represented in the Carter et al. (2019) study shows that no matter the field of study, participating in an inclusive program has the potential to influence professional work and pathways after graduation for neurotypical peer mentors. Kowalsky and Fresko (2002) found that tutors who were preservice teachers perceived working with individuals with IDs as meaningful for their professional development. Chickering and Reisser (1993) noted "a student's most important teacher is often another student" (p. 392). Prohn et al. (2019) found

that peer supports on campus believe that the universities have made some improvements "but think they've made improvements with like the staff, like the chancellor, the people over the departments for work, the professors, I feel like we've made more improvements with those individuals than, like, with the students" (p. 116).

In 2021, a study focused on peers' attitudes toward inclusion and found students generally had neutral attitudes toward peers with IDs (Dell´Anna et al., 2021). Attitudes were more positive toward students with physical disabilities than IDs. Students with knowledge about disabilities showed better attitudes toward inclusion. Attending an inclusive university could have a positive impact on peers (Georgiadi et al., 2012), but having a separate setting for individuals with IDs could negatively influence neurotypical peers (Blackman, 2016). Dare et al.'s (2017) study found that peers relate inclusion and exclusion both to individual factors, such as achievement and behavior, and contextual factors, such as support and friendship. neurotypical peers think that actions at school and class level could favor a sense of belonging and promote reciprocal friendships with peers with IDs (Shogren et al., 2015). Peer-mediated interventions have been used to increase communication skills, social skills, academic skills, and employment skills for different populations of students with IDs (Kaya et al., 2015). In a study conducted by Peregrina-Kretz et al. (2018), it was found that peers serve as connectors, coaches, co-constructors, and copycats in inclusive PSE programs. Another important perspective from the peer support stated, "I am more myself with the post-secondary students because I don't have to pretend to be someone I'm not. They're not going to judge who I am" (Prohn et al., 2019, p. 117).

Maximizing the interaction between pupils with and without special needs is generally considered an important aspect of inclusion (Koster et al., 2009). For individuals with IDs, peer

mentoring can address individualized goals and learning needs (Schwartz & Kramer, 2018) as well as promote empowerment and self-determination by providing an opportunity for connection with positive role models (Bellamy et al., 2017). Peer mentoring programs provide an opportunity for individuals with and without IDs to learn, socialize, and work together in supportive and inclusive environments (Athamanah et al., 2020). Peer mentoring involves either formal or informal supportive relationships between two individuals with the aim of improving social interactions in academic and community environments (Griffin et al., 2016). Learning, working, and socializing with young adults with IDs on an integrated campus have resulted in many positive effects for college students without disabilities (Athamanah et al., 2020). These positive benefits include increased disability awareness, improved attitudes toward and comfort level of interacting with individuals with IDs (Harrison et al., 2019), self-determination and advocacy skills (Griffin et al., 2016), and enhanced empathy, interpersonal skills, and self-awareness (Gibbons et al., 2015). Positive interactions between young adults with and without disabilities also model inclusive behaviors for others in the community, potentially reducing societal stigma and discrimination against disabled populations (Izzo & Shuman, 2013).

Neurotypical peers have expressed concerns about inclusive PSE programs. Katz et al. (2012) found that neurotypical peers refer to the possibility that the behavior and difficulties of peers with IDs could affect their learning and achievement. Neurotypical peers also have expressed that they would feel awkward going outside of school with a classmate with IDs due to their lack of independence (Brown et al., 2011). Stylianidou and Mavrou (2021) discovered that neurotypical peers may view individuals with disabilities as “we” versus “they,” meaning the people with disabilities are unable to do the things that their neurotypical peers can do. The frequent use of the word “cannot” indicates that peers think being disabled also means a person

is incompetent. “Using this language illustrates that disabled students are ‘visible’ only through a specific segregating, marginalized lens, that of the ‘special unit kids’ and not in the context of daily life at school” (Stylianidou and Mavrou, 2021, p.13). Another important perspective comes from the peer supports of a PSE program where they worried that their practices as peer supports sometimes seemed deceptive and that their social assistance could realistically impede students’ social development (Prohn et al., 2019).

**Effects and Perspectives of Faculty Employed by Inclusive PSE Programs**

Since the enactment of the HEA in 2008, many programs and studies have been conducted on people with IDs and their success (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Although this is a crucial focus, it means that the experiences and feelings of the faculty, who are also in the inclusive environment, can be overlooked. There have been studies that explore the perceptions of librarians (Dow et al., 2021), occupational therapists (Berg et al., 2017), and stakeholders (Brewer & Movahedazarhouligh, 2021) on their experiences with working with individuals with IDs in PSE programs. These studies do not focus solely on the faculty who work full-time with this population in the PSE programs. This section will cover related literature about the experiences of faculty and staff who work within these programs.

In addition to peers, faculty members are important in creating inclusive spaces and increasing academic and social opportunities on campus. Prior research demonstrates that the values, philosophies, and attitudes of faculty members impact the overall climate of the university (Rao, 2004) with faculty members’ perceptions either facilitating or deterring overall success (de A Moreira et al., 2000). Furthermore, simply having a seat in a college classroom is not equivalent to inclusion (Uditsky & Hughson, 2012), rather, it is manifested through attitudes of connection, belonging, acceptance, and value throughout the community, which is a social

justice perspective, offering dignity and equality in the higher education community to all members (Hall, 2010). When appropriate, individuals with IDs should be given the opportunity to be included in all aspects of the college experience. Although they may not be enrolled in degree-seeking courses, individuals with IDs can be partnered with their neurotypical peers in those courses for internships or practicums under trained inclusive faculty members. Postsecondary faculty understand the importance of inclusive education for the successful socialization of people with special educational needs, especially those with disabilities. Another study showed that staff members in PSE programs supported inclusive education, not only as a program but as a mindset, which shows the faculty were committed to breaking down the barriers, thus allowing all students with disabilities access to higher education (Brewer & Movahedazarhouligh, 2021).

In addition to peers, faculty members are integral stakeholders in creating inclusive spaces and increasing social and academic opportunities on campus (Gilson et al., 2020). Peers shape the social experiences, but instructors determine the culture of the learning environment (Cress, 2008). Prior research has demonstrated the impact of the values, philosophies, and attitudes of faculty members on the overall climate of the university (Rao, 2004), with faculty members' perceptions either facilitating or deterring overall student success (de A Moreira et al., 2000). One of the greatest challenges in inclusive education, apart from providing faculty with skills, knowledge, and understanding, is to ensure the development of positive attitudes toward students with IDs and their inclusion in regular classrooms (Forlin, 2010). Prior research demonstrates clear relationships between faculty attitudes and prior training and experience (De Boer et al., 2011). Faculty with more years of experience have been shown to be in favor of greater accessibility and university resources for students with IDs (Valle-Flórez et al., 2021).

The attitudes of faculty members are a key element for achieving real inclusivity in the teaching-learning process (Alhaznawi & Alanazi, 2021). Characteristics of inclusive faculty include the willingness to provide necessary tools to facilitate the learning of their students, the use of diverse methodologies, and a variety of channels to transmit the contents of the subject (Carballo et al., 2021).

Watts et al. (2023) focused a study primarily on six professors in an inclusive PSE program. The professors had a very positive outlook on the program and the students. Using a collaborative technique with the inclusive programming staff, the professors saw even more growth from the students. Professors even noted that the program had a positive influence on their professional development as instructors. Although there are many positive perspectives and outcomes from faculty, there are still many barriers related to faculty in an inclusive PSE program. Many faculty are tied to a tenure system where research and scholarship are rewarded more than teaching skills (Deshler et al., 1996). Lack of training opportunities, academic accommodations, postsecondary disability laws, and the over needs of students with IDs are also barriers for faculty members (Lombardi et al., 2013). Silver et al. (1998) noted barriers, such as possible resistance to instructional methods imposed on faculty and the tendency for some faculty to serve as gatekeepers to screen out those whom they feel do not belong in higher education. Limited staff resources to provide training to faculty and staff on classroom accessibility issues, cost concerns about purchasing needed technology, and more pressing institutional priorities were also noted as barriers among faculty members (Raue & Lewis, 2011).

Although inclusive university communities have been spreading throughout the country, not all university community members have been open to inclusion (Joseph et al., 2019). Faculty have agreed that students with IDs should have access and be included in campus activities with

neurotypical peers. One hundred fifty-two faculty members were interviewed, and 45% of faculty believed that typically developing students in the course would feel uncomfortable taking the course and having students with IDs enrolled or would disturb routine educational activities (Gibbons et al., 2015). In another study, the researchers found that instructors were stressed about including students in the curriculum, adapting content, upholding classroom integrity, fostering social interactions between typical students and students with disabilities, and lacking training (Engelbrecht et al., 2003). If faculty members do not have the prior knowledge and skills needed to develop effective lessons for all learners, then determining how to meet the students' needs can become burdensome (Joseph et al., 2019).

The low competence and commitment of faculty members have often been attributed to a lack of training in inclusive education, which has disempowered them from taking further action (Moriña, 2017). Faculty members have been seen as a source of stigma, whether due to a lack of understanding or mistrust of a student's need for accommodations (Blacklock et al., 2003). It is often the case that they do not feel competent to teach students with IDs in their classroom, or they are not committed enough to support students and implement reasonable accommodations in practice (Lombardi et al., 2015). Faculty often express that they are criticized for not adjusting the content, the teaching strategies, and the classroom environment (Morgan & Houghton, 2011). Coriale et al. (2012) reported that students with IDs identified that the attitudes of faculty members toward them are the most significant barrier in their education and careers. Some researchers have mentioned that university faculty members may endorse positive attitudes toward inclusive instruction, but they may choose not to implement it due to specific reasons, such as personal perceptions toward disability, limited disability legal knowledge, limited resources, and availability of disability education (Lombardi et al., 2015). However, considering

that postsecondary faculty members are the main mechanism for implementing inclusive instruction, their attitudes toward and actions associated with inclusive education will ultimately influence learning environments for students with and without disabilities (Hsu et al., 2020).

**Employment Effects and Perspectives of Individuals With IDs**

The preferred outcome in the United States for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, which has been well established in research and policy, is competitive integrated employment (Wehman et al., 2018). It is important to note that a positive correlation has been identified between competitive employment and quality of life, autonomy, and well-being among people with IDs (Jahoda et al., 2008). Gilson et al. (2022) explained that work is a means for social connection, self-determination, and power in addition to survival for people with IDs. Social connection through inclusive work environments helps to make individuals feel like they belong somewhere, builds relationships with coworkers, establishes relationships within the community, and gives the individual with IDs supports within the workplace. Growth in self-determination through inclusive employment means the individuals with IDs are motivated to work, retain employment, and learn new skills. Inclusive work environments also lead to more independence and daily living skills for individuals with IDs.

Meaningful employment may provide economic opportunity (Taylor et al., 2021), better quality of life (Iwanaga et al., 2021), and perhaps even better health outcomes (Robertson et al., 2019). These benefits of employment are not limited to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities; research examining the global population (with and without disabilities) has found substantial links between employment and happiness, quality-of-life, and other nonmonetary benefits (De Neve & Ward, 2017). For individuals with IDs who are employed, an association with improved health and income has been noted (Reichard et al.,

2019). Employment for the population with IDs also provides purchasing power, social status, social interaction, linkage to community activity, and the opportunity to build a greater sense of self-worth because the person is making a societal contribution (Hole et al., 2015). There is an increasing focus on inclusive employment opportunities that have been shown to improve health, emotional well-being, and work productivity (Readhead & Owen, 2020). Integrated and competitive employment can promote higher independence, along with financial benefits, agency, and enhanced self-worth (Almalky, 2020).

Another important perspective on employment and unemployment among individuals with IDs is whether they do or do not want to work and what types of jobs they would like to have (Hennessey & Goreczny, 2022). Despite the benefits that people with IDs gain from employment, only about 12% of individuals with developmental or IDs work in an integrated community setting (Bush & Tassé, 2017). Fifty-seven-point-one percent of individuals with IDs who graduate high school are unemployed or work in a sheltered setting rather than an inclusive setting within the community (Hennessey & Goreczny, 2022). Thirty-three percent of nonworking individuals with IDs who have received job coaching and experience express that they would like to work (Beyer et al., 2016). The most common answer for not wanting employment is the fact that individuals with IDs who are not employed enjoy the daytime activity that they already do (Hennessey & Goreczny, 2022). It was also found that the most common reason for wanting to work was money. All these factors and statistics come together to show that education and the motivation to work play a large role in the employment and retention of individuals with IDs.

Although progress has been made toward the objective of increased employment of people with IDs, the 17.2% employment rate stands in large contrast to the 65% rate of their

neurotypical peers (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Many academic literature sources and publications show that employer attitudes have been significant impediments to increasing positive employment outcomes for people with IDs (Bendick & Nunes, 2012). Although people with IDs make up a large percentage of the labor pool, managers and human resources personnel find it hard to attract qualified applicants with disabilities (Domzal et al., 2008). Many times, there are barriers in the application process that make it hard for people with IDs to apply. When unemployed individuals with IDs have low self-expectations about their ability to find a job, they may give up altogether on the idea of employment (Skills and Employability Department, 2007). One perspective from a participant in a study who wanted to gain employment expressed that they wanted "to prove to people that they are wrong about me. I face bullying and some say that because I have special needs, I need to stay home rather than work. I want to prove them wrong" (Al-Hendawi et al., 2022, p. 8).

Winsor et al. (2017) argued that individuals with IDs continue to face significant hurdles in acquiring employment, as manifested by the high unemployment rates compared with people without disabilities or with a different type of disability. When these individuals acquire employment opportunities, they are segregated into entry-level positions, especially in the service sector, that are commonly characterized by poor wages and few hours (Mank et al., 2000). When people with IDs do work, they are more likely to earn less and work fewer hours (Almalky, 2020). The National Core Indicators survey of individuals with IDs found that 19% of people with IDs were in paid jobs in the community (Hiersteiner et al., 2018). They worked, on average, 15.6 hours a week and received a wage of $7.19 per hour (Almalky, 2020). Individuals with IDs have been employed at a rate far lower than their peers without disabilities in the 5 years after completing high school (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). In the context of access to

decent work, people with IDs usually face disadvantages related to their lower levels of education and lack of training, as well as attitudinal and physical barriers to employers and workplaces (Abidi & Sharma, 2014). In an election campaign in the United Kingdom, a party candidate was heckled for suggesting that people with IDs do not understand money and should be able to earn less than the national minimum wage (Busby, 2019). The candidate also suggested that the focus of work for individuals with IDs should be happiness and not monetary gain.

Disability is associated not only with higher rates of unemployment and low work intensity but also with greater risk of poverty, severe material deprivation, and social exclusion (Pinilla-Roncancio & Alkire, 2017). The risk of poverty and social exclusion are concepts directly and interactively related to disability (She & Livermore, 2009), but disablement and impoverishment are produced through the continuous and widespread failure of people to achieve social participation, access to resources, and appropriate support (Yeo, 2001). Social stigma; stereotypes; negative attitudes; inflexible employers; the lack of proper education, training, substantial postsecondary transition programs, and appropriate job opportunities; and views on the intellectual capacity of individuals with IDs can act as employment barriers leading to the unemployment of individuals with IDs (Darcy et al., 2016). Historically, many people with IDs were employed in production-line sheltered employment work that is often criticized for its segregation of employees with IDs from other members of society and for remuneration rates that are well below the minimum wage (Parmenter, 2011). When people with IDs do pursue employment, many still find a shortage of appropriate employment opportunities through which they can pursue competitive paid work (Butcher & Wilton, 2008). Individuals with IDs also face a lack of personal support and limited transportation options, and they are anxious and

uninformed about welfare benefit regulations (Heslop et al., 2002). Poor levels of independence (Carter et al., 2012), few experiences with jobs (Baer et al., 2003), and poor social skills (Carter et al., 2012) make it difficult for individuals with IDs to become employed.

## Summary

Unemployment for adults with IDs has been a problem for many years. This problem, in large part, is due to insufficient PSE programs targeted at teaching career and technical education to increase the likelihood of employment. Research has been gathered on the theory of the social model of disability (Oliver, 1986) and its relationship to the research topic. Related literature associated with the topic has also been examined to convey the importance of this research topic. The literature discussed the PSE programs that already exist and the employment statistics of the population of individuals with IDs. Other research examined the perspectives of the individuals with IDs and the perspectives and experiences of their neurotypical peers enrolled in inclusive PSE programs. The perspectives and experiences of the faculty within the PSE programs were also discussed. To round out the related literature, the employment perspectives, and experiences of the individuals with IDs were discussed. There are gaps in the literature that show a need for more research on the experiences of individuals with IDs enrolled in inclusive PSE programs. It is important for research to address the critical need for more inclusive PSE programs to further the advancement of people with IDs. The theoretical framework and the related literature have demonstrated that further research on this specific topic is needed to advance research on the social model of disability and the inclusion of people with IDs on college campuses.

# CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

## Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the lived experiences of individuals with IDs in an inclusive PSE program. This study took place at a local community college in the Transitional and Career Studies department. The program in which the students were enrolled is called C.A. (a pseudonym). Chapter Three of the dissertation presents the research design and explains why this type of research was chosen. The procedures for the research study are followed by a restatement of the research questions and sub-questions. Research positionality, interpretative framework, philosophical assumptions, and the researcher's role have been stated. The procedure section includes the permissions, recruitment plan, and data collection plan. The data analysis for the study has been explained. The trustworthiness section contains information on credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and ethical considerations. Chapter Three ends with a summary of the contents of the chapter.

## Research Design

"When we study something phenomenologically, we are not trying to get inside other people's minds. Rather, we are trying to contemplate the various ways things manifest and appear in and through our being in the world" (Vagle, 2018, p. 23). The design that was chosen for this qualitative dissertation is a phenomenological study. This type of approach was chosen because it seeks to understand and describe the universal essence of a phenomenon among a group of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This relates to the dissertation topic because it allows the researcher to have a group of participants who have all experienced the same phenomenon, which, in this case, is participation in an inclusive postsecondary job training program for individuals with disabilities. It also allows the researcher to gather data on the

phenomenon and then use those data to discover themes among the different individuals who participated. This design was chosen over a case study approach because it allows for more participants and a more in-depth view of the problem that is being addressed. This research design also allows the study of the everyday experiences of the participants while the researcher's preconceived notions are suspended about the phenomenon.

After deciding on the phenomenological research design, the type of phenomenological research design was chosen. The two types of phenomenological research include hermeneutic and transcendental. The definition of hermeneutic phenomenology is it is an approach that describes and interprets the fundamental structures of the lived experience and recognizes the pedagogical value of the experience (Fuster, 2019). The definition of transcendental phenomenology is it is a design that seeks to understand human experience, in addition to being grounded in the concept and conditioned upon setting aside any preconceived notions that one may have about a phenomenon thus allowing the true meaning of the phenomena to emerge naturally (Staiti, 2014). Researching these two types of phenomenological research helped the researcher decide to use the transcendental phenomenological design. The transcendental study design helped to describe the lived experiences of the participants and to develop themes that helped to answer the research and sub-questions. This type of study also helped the researcher understand how these experiences are grounded in the social model of disability and social constructivism. Using transcendental phenomenological research design allowed for the research on the social model of disability to be furthered to help this population with access to PSE programs. In the end, when choosing a qualitative research method, a transcendental phenomenological study was the right choice for this dissertation.

## Research Questions

Revisions and amendments to the Every Student Succeeds Act sets out to help individuals with ID in becoming college- and career-ready through high expectations and access to high-quality education (Monahan et al., 2020). The following research questions were used to describe the experiences of individuals with IDs and explain how they relate to their inclusion on college campuses. This study also sought to describe the feelings individuals with IDs have when they describe their relationships with neurotypical peers and faculty members.'

### Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of individuals with IDs enrolled in inclusive postsecondary career and technical training programs located on a college campus?

### Sub-Question One

What are the experiences of individuals with IDs and their participation in postsecondary programs?

### Sub-Question Two

How do individuals with IDs feel about their relationships with non-disabled peers on the inclusive college campus?

### Sub-Question Three

How do individuals with disabilities feel about their relationships with faculty members on the inclusive college campus?

## Setting and Participants

The next section of the dissertation covers the setting and participants. The description of the setting allows the reader to paint a mental picture of where the study took place. The participants section describes the types of individuals the researcher used as participants.

Purposeful sampling was used to select participants. The study focused on the lived experiences of 10 individuals who have been diagnosed with an ID and are enrolled in the C.A. program at P.C.C.

**Setting**

While this study was being conducted, there were 27 PSE programs in North Carolina alone, with the oldest program beginning in 2008, that cater to individuals with developmental disabilities. (North Carolina Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2022). In a small rural area in Eastern North Carolina, there is a community college making a difference in the lives of individuals with disabilities. At this college, there is a PSE program that teaches individuals with disabilities job training skills and remedial math and reading. The program is called C.A. (a pseudonym to provide the participants anonymity). This program was part of the Transitional Studies department within the college. C.A. had three instructors and was led by the director of the Transitional Studies department. The Transitional Studies department was included in the Continuing Education and Workforce Development department and was led by deans at P.C.C. (a pseudonym for the school). Many individuals with IDs received a future-ready core occupational course of study diploma instead of a standard course of study diploma. Due to receiving this type of diploma, the participants were enrolled in the C.A. program at P.C.C., allowing students with IDs to continue their educational journey in a higher education setting. When students complete this program, they can either gain employment or move on to the high school equivalency program at the college. The C.A. program is taught by retired public school teachers with advanced degrees and faculty members from the community college. Students spend their time learning math and reading skills and receiving hands-on job training. Being located on a college campus allows the students an opportunity to see first-hand the careers they

could obtain through their studies.

**Participants**

Participants in this study were college-aged students between the ages of 18 and 50 years who have a documented ID and were enrolled in the C.A. program at P.C.C. The IDs that these participants were diagnosed with included autism, Williams syndrome, Down syndrome, or traumatic brain injury. The individuals' formal diagnoses came from an educational institution. Participants were actively enrolled in the C.A. program at the community college. There were no specific requirements as far as ethnicity or gender. The study was inclusive and as diverse as possible with the enrolled students at the college. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants. This allowed the researcher to use their expertise to choose specific participants who could help meet the goals of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). With participant, parental, or guardian permission, the study followed 10 individuals with IDs on their journey through the C.A. program.

## Researcher Positionality

All research is admittedly analyzed through an unintentionally biased lens because there is absolutely no way for a human researcher to be 100% unbiased when looking at the findings of the data they have collected. Due to this, a researcher's positionality must be discussed. As the researcher, I acknowledge my standpoint as a neurotypical educated woman who has worked in the special education field for over 6 years. I also acknowledge that at one point in time, I was an instructor in the C.A. program, but I do not have any connection to this program or college at this time other than the connections I have made through this research study. I also acknowledge that my educational background may prove to provide unintentional bias based on the knowledge I have gained throughout the years. I also acknowledge that my positionality may have influenced

this project to some extent.

**Interpretive Framework**

Social constructivism's interpretative framework seeks to understand the world in which individuals live and work (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This framework is concerned with the nature and construction of knowledge through social interactions (Pritchard & Woollard, 2010). Another way of thinking about social constructivism is that people's ideas coincide with their experiences, which helps researchers build their socio-cultural awareness about the world (Schaffer, 2006). This framework was chosen because it goes hand-in-hand with the research questions that are being studied. Social constructivism allows the researcher to gain knowledge about the phenomenon, as well as the participants who have experienced it. This framework gives a window into the real-life experiences of the participants, allowing the researcher to gather data and make connections, which leads to the research questions being answered. Social constructivism also allows for a wide range of views and ideas instead of a narrow view of the topics being researched; the wider range benefits the researcher because the participants all have different disabilities and experiences. This framework allows the researcher to see in real time the results related to participants enrolled in the program. Social constructivism also allows the researcher to recognize how their background shapes their interpretations and why it is important to position themselves in a way that recognizes their own personal, cultural, and historical experiences and how those things relate to the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Philosophical Assumptions**

There are four types of philosophical assumptions: ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodology (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each one of these assumptions seeks to answer a different question of the observed phenomenon through different perspectives.

Ontological assumptions seek to explain the nature of reality. Epistemological assumptions seek to determine what counts as knowledge and how knowledge claims are justified. They also seek to explain the relationship between the researcher and what is being researched. Axiological assumptions want to explain the role of values play in the research. This assumption allowed the researcher to acknowledge that research is value-laden and that biases are present. Methodology explains the process used for the research. The three types of philosophical assumptions discussed in the next section of this research study are ontological, epistemological, and axiological.

### *Ontological Assumption*

Creswell and Poth (2018) described ontological as a philosophical assumption about the nature of reality. It asks the question, when is something real? "In qualitative research, something is real when it is constructed in the minds of the actors involved. This means that the reality does not exist apart from the minds of the actors" (Creswell and Poth, 2018, p. 325). This philosophy makes a lot of sense. My ontological assumption is that reality is different for everyone, which means everyone's ontological assumptions are different. This allowed for the research that is conducted to be viewed by many different people in many ways. It is impossible to read a research study and know exactly what that person's reality is. This philosophical assumption allows researchers to have their viewpoints on what is reality and what is not. It also gives researchers a type of freedom when using this to develop their themes while conducting research, allowing the researchers' studies to be more personalized.

### *Epistemological Assumption*

The next type of philosophical assumption is epistemological. Epistemology is described by Creswell and Poth (2018) "as qualitative research that tries to get as close to the participants

as possible" (p. 21). The knowledge gained by these studies allows for subjective evidence to be put together based on individual views. The longer a researcher can research the participants and environment, the more knowledge they can gain. My epistemological assumption is that the longer a subject can be researched, and a relationship can be established, then the more data that can be collected and the more reliable data becomes. People who read this study are going to be much more trusting of the results if the researcher has spent one to two semesters studying the participants instead of 3 weeks. This type of assumption also allows the researchers to give their interpretations in conjunction with participants' views.

### *Axiological Assumption*

The last philosophical assumption is the axiological assumption. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), "This is the process of research, as well as the language of research" (p. 20). This process allows researchers to describe in detail the context of their study in addition to continually revising the questions they have from experience in the field. The axiological assumption also allows researchers to share their values with the participants. My axiological assumption is that this can be used to share why the research is important to the researcher and why the study needs to be conducted. It allows participants a window into a researcher's why. Allowing participants to know why the research is being conducted can help researchers build relationships with them, which, in turn, can lead to more reliable data.

## Researcher's Role

In qualitative research studies, the researcher is the human instrument that collects the data (Pezalla et al., 2012). This means that biases can be present because human beings tend to err on the side of subjective instead of objective. In qualitative research, researchers try to bracket their personal biases to get the most accurate, reliable, and replicable data. The research

questions and settings were chosen due to the interests and passions of the researcher. The researcher has worked in a similar program at another community college but is no longer employed there and has no personal or authoritative connections to any participants. The researcher also has extensive knowledge and education of individuals with disabilities. Due to the nature of the research design, the researcher was the one who conducted the focus groups, individual interviews, and the writing of journal prompts. The data collection methods were recorded, and the researcher transcribed the voice recordings accurately. The roles of the researcher in this study included data collection and data analysis to answer the research questions with the least number of personal biases possible.

## Procedures

The procedures section of the dissertation gives a step-by-step explanation of how the study proceeded. This section provides enough details in hopes that the study can be replicated in the future. This section includes site permissions and information on the institutional review board (IRB) approval and describes how participants were recruited. It explains in detail the data collection procedures, the method of data analysis by each data source, and how triangulation was achieved. This section begins with how permissions were granted for this study.

### Permissions

Procedurally, the study began when the required IRB approval was granted (see Appendix A). Written site permission forms were sent to the college administrators and directors of the program before IRB approval to confirm whether they do or do not have their own IRB approval process (see Appendix B). Once the study received IRB approval, participant recruitment information was sent to the program director for approval (see Appendix C). Once

approval was granted from the director, recruitment meetings were performed, and participant and guardian participation permission forms were signed (see Appendix D).

**Recruitment Plan**

After obtaining approval from the IRB of Liberty University, I began recruiting 10 participants. In phenomenology, the number of participants ranges from one (Padilla, 2003) to 325 (Polkinghorne, 1989). Dukes (1984) indicated studying three to 10 participants, but Edwards (2006) studied 33. Using 10 participants should help to saturate the findings and allow enough information to be gathered (Creswell & Poth, 2018). First, I asked for permission from the college and program director to recruit students. After receiving approval from the college and director, I posted a flyer in each classroom in which the students were taught. I also went to each classroom and gave a 10- to 15-minute overview of the study and explained what the expectations were for the participants. I also held information sessions for the parents and guardians of the students to inform them about the study and what was expected of their students. I then received written permission from the participants and guardians before moving forward with the study. I believe this was necessary because the population I was working with is considered a vulnerable population. Emphasis was put on the fact that participation was voluntary, and participants could withdraw from the study at any time. To be recruited for this study, participants had to be enrolled in the C.A. program. The participants had to be between the ages of 18-50 years. The individuals had to be diagnosed with an ID from an educational institution. Participants also had to have completed the occupational course of study in high school and had not received a traditional diploma.

## Data Collection Plan

Three types of data collection were used in this study: interviews, focus groups, and journal prompts. Interviews are the most common form of data collection for this type of research and were the primary source of data for this dissertation. Interviews allow researchers to have conversations with participants about their experiences with the phenomenon in a one-on-one setting. Interviews allow the participants to narrate their own experiences. The other two types of data collection used in transcendental research that were employed in the current study include the use of journal prompts and focus groups. Focus group interviews can help participants feel more comfortable and help them to be more open when answering questions about their experiences. As a complement to the interviews, journal prompts allowed the participants to write out their experiences, which may be an easier way to communicate for some individuals with disabilities. The journal prompts included accommodations for individuals who needed them. Interviews were conducted first, then journal prompts, and lastly focus groups were completed.

### Individual Interview Data Collection Approach

Interviews allowed the researcher to have conversations with participants about their experience with the phenomenon in a one-on-one setting. Interviews allowed the participants to narrate their own experiences. An important part of the interviews included fieldnotes that allowed feedback on the interview process and helped the researcher adjust and critique herself for the next interview. When conducting interviews, it was important to have digital audio-recorders readily available to produce clear recordings, which aided in more accurate transcriptions. Interview guides were prepared to provide information to the IRB for ethical approval. Interviews were conducted first. They were conducted one-on-one with each

participant at a predetermined date and time. Each interview was recorded and then transcribed for data collection purposes.

***Individual Interview Questions:***

1. Please tell me your name and more about yourself. CRQ
2. Please describe your academic journey so far. SQ1
3. Why did you choose to complete more education after completing high school? SQ1
4. Describe how you heard about the C.A. that you are enrolled in. CRQ
5. Describe some of your experiences since you have been participating in the C.A. program. SQ1
6. Describe your relationship with the teachers who are involved with the C.A. that you are enrolled in. SQ3
7. Describe the relationship with teachers who are not involved on a day-to-day basis with the C.A. that you are enrolled in. SQ3
8. Describe in detail what has been the most challenging part of the C.A. program. SQ1
9. Describe your relationship with students outside of the C.A. who you interact with on the college campus. SQ2
10. Describe how students outside of the C.A. make you feel included on campus. SQ2
11. Describe how teachers make you feel included on campus. SQ3
12. Describe your experiences as an individual enrolled in the C.A. on a college campus. CRQ

Questions 1, 2, and 3 are introductory questions that allowed the participants to warm-up. Questions 4, 5, 8, and 12 are related to the participants' experiences while enrolled in the program. Questions 6, 7, and 9 discuss how the individuals feel when describing their

relationships with neurotypical peers and faculty members. Questions 10 and 11 discuss how neurotypical peers and faculty make individuals with disabilities feel included on campus.

### *Data Analysis Plan*

Data analysis of individual interviews began with transcribing the interviews. Data analysis then moved to the beginning phase of interpretation. This was when the researcher read the transcription from start to finish and began developing a list of significant statements, a process called horizontalization of data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Then the initial coding process began. A list of rudimentary themes and patterns was started. Then the analysis moved to sample early coding, which is the process that reflects the philosophical tenets of the methodology. The next step was to write interpretative summaries, which summarized the story and the interviews' points. Meditating on the data came next and was the process of building meaning and understanding of the material, which led to an interpretation of the data. Epoch was used to bracket the researcher's own experiences in addition to looking at the data from a fresh perspective (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Bubbling up is one of the last steps when a researcher meditates on the data and allows themes to *bubble up* and reveal what was concealed. The whole process of data analysis was a continuous circle or spiral where themes emerged, and the researcher returned to the data to re-read it (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Lastly, the researcher produced an output of the interpretation of the data and presented the themes that were found during the individual interviews.

## Journal Prompt Data Collection Approach

Journal prompts data collection (see Appendix E) was when the participants were given a prompt and were expected to write a response to the question or statement that was provided. Journal prompts allowed the participants the opportunity to draft, edit, and submit their responses

to the researcher. Journal prompts were used to complement the individual interviews and helped to enrich the perspectives of the participants in the study. Considering that the participants were diagnosed with disabilities, this type of data collection gave them the opportunity to express their experiences in a way other than just vocally. It also gave the participants time to think and respond without the pressure they may have felt when they were one-on-one in the interview situation. Four journal prompts were given over the course of the research study. Participants were given 2 weeks to reply to each prompt. Each prompt took only 10 to 15 minutes to complete. Due to their disabilities, the participants could use a support person to help with the reading of prompts, as well as conveying their responses through writing or typing.

***Data Analysis Approach***

Data analysis of journal prompts began with the researcher familiarizing herself with the data. This allowed the researcher to become aware of any limitations or gaps in the data. Identifying the limitations or gaps allowed for changes in future data collection attempts. The next step was writing memos of the initial reactions to the collected data. Creswell and Poth (2018) described memos as being helpful in capturing experiences or statements that can be analytically important in answering the research questions. Structural descriptions were created to answer the how of the experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Coding was the next step in thematic analysis. The researcher went through the journal prompts, assigning thematic codes. The researcher then moved the codes into categories. To create categories, the researcher had to recognize the differences, similarities, and relationships in the data. Using the categories, themes that are responsive to the similarities and differences observed were developed. Lastly, the researcher produced an output of the interpretation of the data and presented the themes that were found during the journal prompt data analysis.

## Focus Group Data Collection Approach

Focus groups allowed the researcher an opportunity to interact with multiple participants at the same time, which can make participants feel more comfortable or relatable when discussing their experience with the phenomenon. These meetings were the last step in the data collection process. Gathering the participants in groups allowed them to interact with one another and gave them the opportunity to share their experiences. Focus groups were beneficial when the interaction among interviewers was likely to yield the best information due to limited time and individuals who were hesitant during one-on-one interviews (Krueger & Casey, 2015). For the focus groups, 5-10 individuals were gathered to conduct the group interviews. Focus group meetings were recorded to ensure accurate data collection and transcription. Focus groups helped the researcher confirm or expand on the themes that were present in the collection of initial data. These groups were also used to validate and refine the data that had already been collected (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### *Focus Group Questions*

1. Discuss why you wanted to join the C.A. training program. CRQ
2. Describe any feelings you have concerning the classroom or space in which the C.A. takes place. SQ1
3. How would you describe what being included means? SQ1
4. Describe how you feel about being on a college campus with students and teachers outside of the C.A. program. SQ2, SQ3
5. Describe any student or faculty member who has gone above and beyond to make you feel included on campus. SQ2, SQ3

6. Describe any programs or clubs on campus that make you feel more included. CRQ, SQ1
7. Describe how you feel when you are in your classroom on campus with other students who are enrolled in the C.A. program. CRQ
8. What could be done on campus to make you feel more included? SQ1

Question 1 is an introductory question that allows the participants to warm-up. Questions 2, 3, 6, and 8 discuss inclusion and the environment of the PSE program. Questions 4 and 5 discuss the relationships that individuals with disabilities may have formed on campus. Question 7 discusses how the students feel when they are in their learning environment with peers who also have disabilities.

***Data Analysis Plan***

The first step in data analysis of focus group interviews was to review and transcribe the interviews. This helped the researcher to categorize data and pull-out important quotes. Textural and structural descriptions were created to describe how the context or setting influenced the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Then the major themes were identified. These were the major ideas that emerged during the focus group interviews. Next, the data were organized and categorized. This means the responses were organized by questions and could then be categorized under each type of theme that was found. This information was organized in an Excel document, which made data analysis easier. By now, the data had been studied inside and out, and interpretation and summaries were completed. These two steps helped the researcher to determine the main ideas, important quotes, most common responses, and other important information for data analysis. A formal report was written for the findings to be fully presented.

To present the data output in a group fashion, the findings used terms like most, very few, and the majority to discuss and evaluate the themes that were found in the group setting.

## Data Synthesis

After all the forms of data collection were transcribed and an early coding system had been developed, the next step was to synthesize the data that had been collected. To synthesize data, all forms of data were collected and put into an Excel spreadsheet, which helped categorize the data by type, theme, and any important quotes from the data. This allowed the researcher to have a bird's eye view of the emerging categories that have been found. The Excel spreadsheet also made it easier for the researcher to read and re-read data to revise any information. Once all the information had been organized in the Excel spreadsheet, the most common themes between the three types of data collection were used to illustrate the findings from the study. These themes were organized from most important to least important in the form of paragraphs. This helped the researcher to tell the story of the phenomenon from multiple points of view and how the themes emerged during the research process. This also allowed the data to be organized in a way that made it easier for the readers to understand why the themes were chosen and how they related to the study's research questions.

## Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) responded to positivists about a lack of reliability, rigor, and objectivity when creating terms that paralleled those of quantitative research. They specifically constructed the terms for qualitative research, which are credibility, transferability, dependably, and conformability. These terms were developed to support the trustworthiness of a study and the study's ability to be replicated. These terms are synonyms of quantitative terms, such as internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity. The terms in qualitative research have

different meanings and implications for the quality and rigor of the study. Using the information laid out by Lincoln and Guba, the following sections will describe the measures taken to make sure this study is rigorous.

## Credibility

Credibility refers to the extent to which the study's findings accurately describe reality, at least according to the perceptions of participants, as a proximation of the truth of the phenomenon in question (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I achieved creditability in three ways: (a) persistent observation, (b) triangulation, and (c) member checking.

### *Persistent Observation*

> If the purpose of prolonged engagement is to render the inquirer open to the multiple influences—the mutual shapers and contextual factors—that impinge upon the phenomenon being studied, the purpose of persistent observation is to identify those characteristics and elements in the situation that are most relevant to the problem or issue being pursued and focusing on them in detail. If prolonged engagement provides scope, persistent observation provides depth. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 304)

This type of observation is important because it allows the researcher the opportunity to be persistent and explore the details of the phenomena on a deep enough level to decide what are the most important and relevant aspects of the study. Persistent observation in this study helped confirm credibility because it allowed the researcher to focus more in-depth on the experiences that students have had within the postsecondary job training programs and to pull out the most important aspects of their experiences.

### *Triangulation*

In this study, I undertook triangulation of data collection methods, sources, and internal validity to explore the experiences shared by individuals with disabilities enrolled in postsecondary job training programs. Data collection methods triangulation was accomplished through using focus groups, individual interviews, and journal prompts. Source triangulation was achieved by using the individual's perspectives on the phenomenon of their experiences during their time enrolled in the postsecondary job training programs. Internal validity triangulation was accomplished by comparing diverse data sets to find inconsistencies or differences that could cause weakness in the validity. If or when a weakness was discovered, it allowed for the study to be strengthened.

### *Member Checking*

Having worked in a postsecondary job training program for individuals with disabilities gave me an insider's connection with my participants. This insider's perspective, which Rossman and Rallis (2016) refer to as *emic perspective* can be an advantage for researchers and allowed me to reflect on the meaning of the participants' words during the interviews. This immediate member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was important; during the interviews, I confirmed some concepts by asking questions from various perspectives to ensure I captured the essence of the experiences. For further member checking, I provided willing participants with a copy of their transcripts and a list of what I believed were the main points of their experiences to check for accuracy.

## Transferability

Transferability is showing that the findings may have applicability in other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which is largely achieved by using thick descriptions when describing

research findings (Geertz, 1973/2008). The descriptions I used to describe the experiences of individuals with IDs at one public community college painted a picture of the experiences and success that these individuals have had when participating in postsecondary job training and remediation at the college level. The participants' testimonies were so aligned that it suggested that the experiences these students had had were successful and could be replicated in other college settings, whether at the community college or university level. This study may offer the first step in an understanding of the effects of postsecondary job training for individuals with disabilities.

**Dependability**

Dependability is showing that the findings are consistent and could be repeated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Descriptions that were provided from my procedures are detailed enough that this study can be replicated. Methods for this study were developed to keep the procedures straightforward and supported by the literature. Although detailed, the procedures were kept simple enough to make replication easier and more successful for future researchers. My committee members and I have reviewed the procedures and decided they demonstrated mastery of the method as it was designed.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability is a degree of neutrality or the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Three techniques were used to accomplish the confirmability of this study. First, an audit trail was created, which showcased the procedures, raw and analyzed data, and the final findings allowing for tracking if needed. Second, the various types of triangulations were used to ensure confirmability within the study. The third technique included being reflexive within the study.

Reflexivity is an attitude of attending systematically to the context of knowledge construction, especially to the effect of the researcher, at every step of the research process (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). To employ reflexivity, a journal of sorts was created with short summaries of thoughts I had during the study. Using this strategy helped to bracket my bias and allowed me to be more reflexive.

## Ethical Considerations

Considerations have been discussed to ensure that all participants were treated ethically. The measures that were taken include obtaining informed consent from the participants or their guardians, as well as informing individuals that their participation was completely voluntary and that they may withdraw from the study at any time (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were also informed about the confidentiality of the study and that pseudonyms would be used for their names plus the site that is being used (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To ensure confidentiality, all paper documents were stored in locked filling cabinets. All electronic files were saved under password-protected files on a password-protected computer. Any data that will not benefit future researchers will be destroyed after 3 years. Data determined to be beneficial for future research will not be destroyed. Risks versus benefits have also been discussed with every participant in addition to any possible risks that they may encounter and what factors have been mitigated to ensure the safety of all participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## Summary

Chapter Three includes the methods and procedures that were employed to complete this study. This chapter gave detailed information on the permissions and recruitment process. Chapter Three then moved into the data collection plan. Each method of data collection was explained with a plan of how each method was analyzed. A data synthesis section was also

included to explain how findings were synthesized. Chapter Three also covered the trustworthiness of this study by explaining the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Ethical considerations were also explained in detail. The section concludes with a summary of what was included in Chapter Three. Chapter Four explains the findings of this study in detail.

# CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

## Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of individuals with IDs in an inclusive PSE program. Through this study, the researcher set out to understand and describe the experiences and perspectives of individuals with IDs who were enrolled in an inclusive PSE program. The contents of Chapter Four include participant information; the findings from the interviews, journal prompts, and focus groups; outlier data; and research question responses. The findings are organized according to themes that emerged through the transcriptions of interviews and focus groups and the review of the journal prompts written by the participants. Chapter Four concludes with responses to the research question and sub-questions.

## Participants

The participants for this study were between the ages of 18 and 50 years, had an identified ID, and were enrolled in the C.A. program. A presentation was given to the students in the program and consent forms were sent home with each student. After 2 weeks, six participants had brought their consent forms back. I returned to the program to conduct interviews and was able to get four more consent forms signed by speaking with parents, guardians, and social workers. I was able to meet with the participants through one-on-one interviews and focus groups. To collect data on the journal prompts, emails were sent to the students, and they replied with their experiences in written form. Table 1 summarizes the information of the 10 student participants who volunteered for the research study.

**Table 1**

*Student Participants Enrolled in C.A.*

| Participant Pseudonym | Age | Disability |
|---|---|---|
| K.K. | 20 | intellectual disability |
| J.H. | 23 | Down syndrome |
| C.K. | 22 | Autism |
| T.S. | 46 | intellectual disability |
| M.L. | 20 | Down syndrome |
| R.M. | 21 | Autism |
| H.F. | 19 | Autism |
| B.B. | 24 | intellectual disability |
| T.P. | 20 | Autism |
| S.L. | 21 | intellectual disability |

*Note*. C.A. = pseudonym for the program that the students are enrolled in. A pseudonym is used to maintain confidentiality.

**K.K.**

K.K. was a 20-year-old African American female enrolled in the C.A. program at P.C.C. She has an unspecified ID. She has been enrolled in the program since August 2023. She came to the program after she was unsuccessful in the criminal justice program at P.C.C. She has been in the foster care system all her life. She enjoys reading, talking, and texting with her friends on the phone. She was recently employed at a fast-food restaurant but had some issues with social

interactions with neurotypical peers, and K.K. quit the job. She has identified friends within the C.A. program and likes her instructors.

**J.H.**

J.H. was a 23-year-old African American male with Down syndrome who was enrolled in the C.A. program at P.C.C. This was his first year in the C.A. program. J.H. enjoys football, sports, ECU (a local college), and being a light to others around him. He enjoys volunteering and going to church with his family. J.H. has many friends within the C.A. program and is very social. He enjoys talking and interacting with others. He enjoys working with the instructors and has learned new skills in math and reading since joining the C.A. program.

**C.K.**

C.K. was a 22- year-old Caucasian male with autism. He enjoys video games and movies and learning about how to direct and produce movies. He is also very interested in horror films. C.K. works at two local businesses, a coffee shop and a bakery. He is a greeter at the coffee shop, and he helps dip treats at the bakery. C.K. is very particular about his routines and, when his routines change, he becomes upset or angry. He has one to two friends in the C.A. program but prefers to work alone. He enjoys having his headphones on and "minding his own business."

**T.S.**

T.S. was a 46-year-old African American female with an unspecified ID. She was under the supervision of a social worker. She has been enrolled in the C.A. program since July 2023. She joined the C.A. program in hopes of working in a daycare with babies in the future. Within the classroom, T.S. stays to herself and has one to two friends she speaks with. She is very caring and protective of her friends within the program. She reported having a good relationship with the instructors.

**M.L.**

M.L. was a 20-year-old Caucasian female with Down syndrome. This was M.L.'s first year in the C.A. program. She is very friendly and loves to talk. At times, it can be difficult to understand M.L., and she must repeat herself. She enjoys talking about her older brother and her boyfriend. She enjoys playing video games when she is not in class. M.L. enjoys working on math problems in class but dislikes reading. M.L. reported having a good relationship with her instructors and that they help her immensely.

**R.M.**

R.M. was a 21-year-old Caucasian male who has autism and other unspecified IDs. He is very friendly, loves to smile, and compliments everyone he encounters. He really enjoys reading and memorizing the daily weather reports and often writes emails to his instructors about them. R.M. is very religious and wants everyone to see his light shine. He enjoys participating in IXL and Blooket within the classroom. IXL is an online platform with practice questions on math and reading. Blooket is a review game that instructors can set up to help students review math and reading skills. R.M. described his instructors as caring and helpful.

**H.F.**

H.F. was a 19-year-old Caucasian female with autism and other unspecified IDs who has been enrolled in the C.A. since July 2023. H.F. enjoys working on the computer with her headphones on and keeping to herself. She gets nervous and has a hard time expressing her feelings when she feels overwhelmed or upset. While the researcher was observing in the classroom, there was no interaction between H.F. and other students within the program. She enjoys creating artwork on the computer and participating in Blooket activities. When asked about her instructors, she said they were good.

**B.B.**

B.B. was a 24-year-old African American female with an unspecified ID. She enrolled in the C.A. program after relocating from a similar program in New Jersey. B.B. was currently employed at an assisted living facility as a nutrition assistant where she helps take food to and from the elderly people who live at the facility. B.B. is very kind and enjoys caring for people. She hopes the C.A. program will help her advance in her career in nutrition. B.B. is active and enjoys exercising. She spends her breaks during class walking around campus. B.B. has a few friends in the C.A. program and some other friends who are not enrolled in the C.A. program but who are on campus at P.C.C. She reported having a good relationship with her instructors in the C.A. program.

**T.P.**

T.P. was a 20-year-old Caucasian male with autism and was in his first year in the C.A. program at P.C.C. He enjoys playing video games and being on the computer. T.P. volunteers at a local coffee shop a few days a week. While participating in the program, he has helped make wreaths that the program sells, and participating in IXL and Blooket. T.P.'s favorite subject in class is math. He finds reading and writing to be more challenging. T.P. has one to two friends within the program. He reported that the instructors in the C.A. program are very helpful.

**S.L.**

S.L. was a 21-year-old Caucasian male with an unspecified ID. He has been enrolled in the C.A. program since July 2023. He is very friendly and speaks to everyone when entering the classroom. S.L. has many friends within the program. His favorite part of the program was making wreaths and selling them at a local craft show on the campus of P.C.C. S.L. enjoys learning through IXL and Blooket during class. He reports having a great relationship with his

instructors and that they help him learn tremendously. S.L. hopes that the C.A. program can teach him the skills needed to find a job at the completion of the program.

## Results

The results section of this chapter delineates the identified themes and sub-themes from the interviews, journal prompts, and focus groups. The five most recorded themes from the data were educational and career aspirations, concept of inclusion, inclusivity and social engagement, campus engagement and support networks, and sense of belonging. Two sub-themes were identified under the educational and career aspiration theme: career and professional development and real-world application and practice. Any outlier information is also located within this section. Answers to the central research question and the sub-questions are also provided with data collected from the interviews, journal prompts, and focus groups. This section ends with a summary of the findings and results before transitioning to Chapter Five, the conclusion.

### Educational and Career Aspirations

After conducting one-on-one interviews and focus groups, it is clear that all participants in the C.A. program had educational and career aspirations. The word job or work was used 27 times during one-on-one interviews and 16 times during focus group interviews. The word job or work was mentioned five times during journal prompts. During interviews and focus groups, all participants mentioned wanting to obtain a job like a movie director (C.K.) or move on to another school such as the local university (J.H.) after leaving the C.A. program. It is very apparent that they do not let their diagnoses of an ID hold them back or stop them from planning for their futures. J.H. decided to come to the C.A. “because it is a nice place and I want to graduate, and make something out of myself.” Some participants also shared what they would

like to do as a career while participating in the C.A. program or after completion of the program. During the interview, C.K. said his dream job is to be a "movie maker, producer, director, and voice actor, and train engineer." Many of the participants in the C.A. program also volunteered in the community to gain career and professional development. This information led to the development of the sub-themes of career and professional development and real-world application and practice.

### *Career and Professional Development*

While participating in the C.A. program, participants had the opportunity to learn about careers and the skills needed to be successful in these positions. During the interviews, many of the participants discussed how they took a field trip to a convention center to attend a local job fair. K.K. discussed the jobs they learned about while on the field trip, which included "the BLET program, the police program, and engineering." While the researcher was observing a class in the C.A. program, the instructors made a game where students answered a life and career skill question and then got to take their turn in a game of Jenga. This activity not only reviewed what the students had learned but it taught them how to work together so the tower did not fall. The C.A. program also worked collaboratively with a local university where other college students come to teach the students about wellness, time management, and other life and career skills. T.P. shared that the other college students "took them to a grocery store to do a scavenger hunt for food for Thanksgiving."

### *Real-World Application and Practice*

The participants in the C.A. program had opportunities in the community to use the life and career skills they had learned during the program in real-world application and practice. Six out of ten participants have or have had paid employment or volunteer opportunities during their

time in the C.A. program. These participants are K.K., B.B., C.K., T.P., H.F., and S.L. B.B. shared, “I work at an assisted living in the nutrition department. I deliver food, go by diets, and make sure their food is right.” Another participant, C.K., volunteers at a coffee company and works at a local bakery. C.K. says, “I make cake pops, buckeyes, dipped pretzels, and Ned’s favorites.” Although paid employment is the goal, volunteering allows the participants to practice their skills in a real-world environment. H.F. volunteers at a local nonprofit clothing store. “I organize clothes by colors and clean windows,” shared H.F. The C.A. program also made wreaths to sell at holiday events. “I did help my instructors sell wreaths at the holiday show. I even took pictures with them to remember the wreaths I made,” recounted S.L.

**Concept of Inclusion**

Focus group questions concentrated on the concept of being included in the C.A. program and on the college campus. All participants felt like they were included within their classroom and with their instructors in the C.A. program. All participants were asked what it means to be included before moving to other focus group questions. M.L. responded with the word “group” when asked about what being included means. “Included means to do everything that everybody is doing and to be involved in activities and situations,” was the reply given by R.M. There were mixed feelings about whether they felt included on the college campus as a whole. When asked what it means to be included, there were also varying responses. When out on campus, K.K. says, “It’s kind of weird but it’s okay.” H.F. shared, “ I feel comfortable” when asked about how they feel while on campus and not in their C.A. classroom.

**Inclusivity and Social Engagement**

Throughout the entire study while the researcher was conducting interviews, journal prompts, and focus groups, there was a reoccurring focus on being included and what that means.

Throughout the focus group interview the words everyone, everybody, involved, and included were mentioned 35 times when discussing inclusion among participants. When asked about being included or feeling included, the participants used words such as "included," "in a group," or "with everyone" 20 times during one-on-one interviews. The participants felt included when they were around people, participating in games, or engaging with others on campus. T.P. feels included "When I get into games with everyone." S.L. feels included "When everyone's around." Seven participants were in their first year of the C.A. program and three were in their second year of the program. All 10 participants reported that they had been invited to one campus-wide activity since joining the C.A. program. When asked about being invited to join programs or clubs on campus, S.L. shared, "On email, yes, but I didn't want to." R.M. said when talking about people on campus, "Well, I'm a bright light so when someone sees me they say 'hey R' and it's good to see you today. I don't know their names, but they know me." Some participants shared how they thought they could be included more on the college campus to improve social engagement. B.B. felt like they could be included more and asked, "Tell us more about clubs that are happening on campus." M.L. would like to be invited to "pep rallies" to feel more included on campus.

**Campus Engagement and Support Networks**

Participants were given a 30-minute break each day when they could leave the classroom and walk on campus or stay in the room. This provided varying levels of engagement for participants and the broader campus community. Some had had positive interactions, some had had negative interactions, and some had had no interactions with students or teachers on campus. "I was sexually harassed," K.K. shared about the negative experience she had while being on campus. "Well, my friend, he told me he's in welding and maybe I should join that, but I don't

think I would like welding," B.B. recounts about a positive experience on campus. When talking about being on campus and inclusion, T.S. reported a time when she went to the book store: "I went over there to the book store and a lady gave me two doughnuts from Krispy Kreme." The other students—H.F., T.P, and C.K. —reported no interactions with other students or teachers on campus. They tended to spend their break time in the classroom eating or playing on the computers.

**Sense of Belonging**

All participants had positive comments about the C.A. program and its environment. They all reported a sense of being comfortable and happy in the classroom. This shows that the C.A. program provided a supportive and inclusive environment that helped its participants feel a sense of belonging while enrolled. M.L. felt "happy" while in the classroom. As a closing statement, J.H. said, "Yes, I love it here. I love being here. I love doing work here, supporting all the people here." All 10 participants reported having at least one friend within the C.A. program, but they all had varying ideas about interactions while in class. When asked about friends in the classroom, T.S. shared, "Yeah, I talk to bunch of them, but I usually stay to myself. That's the best way to be, to be to yourself, and you don't got nothing to worry about." R.M. reported, "TJ, he's not here today, but he's my best friend. We've been friends since third grade. I like everybody." It was also reported that all participants had good relationships with their instructors, which helped them feel included and to belong. "Oh, yes I get along with them. Especially Mrs. B.; I love Mrs. B. like a grandma. She, I got three words, funny, nice, and caring," shared J.H. When asked about the teachers, S.L. replied, "They make me comfortable. They make me right at home."

## Outlier Data and Findings

As with any research study, some unexpected findings and themes did not align with the specific research questions that were chosen. Two of the main findings or themes that did not align included the participants sharing where there were potential areas for improvement when it comes to the C.A. program and a desire for more inclusion on the college campus.

### Potential Areas of Improvement

Although most of the discussion about the C.A. program and the inclusive college campus was positive and everyone was satisfied with their experiences overall, there were still areas that were mentioned that could be improved. The focus groups provided most of the data for this outlier theme. Most of the participants agreed that they could be more included while on campus through clubs or activities. R.M. would like to create or join a Bible club and S.L. would like to join an anime club. During the focus group discussions, it became apparent that there was a bridge needed between the C.A. program and the college campus. One participant gave input on how the C.A. program could improve. B.B. stated, “They could provide homework for us and work on computer skills and more hands-on activities.”

### Desire for More Inclusion

It became apparent through the interviews and focus groups that there was a minuscule number of interactions between the C.A. participants and their neurotypical peers and the faculty members on the college campus. Most participants replied “no” when asked if they knew any other instructors or had any friends outside the C.A. Though there were little to no interactions with other members of the college community, that did not deter the participants from wanting to be included more. B.B. suggested, “Partnerships with other students or mentors would help them feel more included.” For more inclusion, other participants discussed having safer sidewalks,

more clubs, and more activities that they could participate in.

## Research Question Responses

This section offers concise answers to the following central research question: What are the lived experiences of individuals with IDs enrolled in an inclusive postsecondary career and technical training program located on a college campus? This section also answers the following sub-questions: (a) What are the experiences of individuals with IDs and their participation in postsecondary programs? (b) How do individuals with IDs feel about their relationships with nondisabled peers on the inclusive college campus? (c) How do individuals with IDs feel about their relationships with faculty members on the inclusive college campus? These questions were answered using one-on-one interviews, journal prompts, and focus groups.

### Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of individuals with IDs enrolled in an inclusive postsecondary career and technical training programs located on a college campus? Through interviews, journal prompts, and focus groups, this question was answered in many ways by the participants. The participants discussed what they had learned, field trips they had gone on, friends they had made, and what they had done on campus. “They teach us about cooking. We went to the garden and stuff, plant our plants, and harvest it, take out the old plants, and replant them again for next year, and crafting and stuff,” the participants said when sharing what they had learned in the C.A. program. Participants also discussed how their relationships with neurotypical peers made them feel while on the inclusive college campus. B.B., T.S., T.P., and K.K. reported having negative and positive experiences with their neurotypical peers on the inclusive college campus. Lastly, the participants shared how their relationships with faculty members who are involved daily with the C.A. program and who are not involved with the

program made then feel while on the inclusive college campus. When asked about their C.A. program instructor, K.K. shared, “It’s good. I like my teachers. I don’t have no problem. They help us with our papers and teach us social skills, math, and reading.” Only one C.A. participant had interactions or relationships with faculty members not associated with the C.A. program. K.K. reported having a positive relationship with faculty members who were in the criminal justice program.

**Sub-Question One**

What are the experiences of individuals with IDs and their participation in PSE programs? Participants discussed what they had learned, what they had done on campus, friends they had, and field trips that they had gone on since being in the C.A. program. S.L. summed up his experience in the C.A. program as “a fun place to learn new stuff.” In one interview, R.M. shared, “They teach us life skill things. They give us word searches. We go on IXL. We do a lot of math skills and money skills. We did like job interview skills, like what to say, what to wear and not to wear and all that. They teach us a lot of things. I really appreciate it a lot.” M.L. said, “I love college,” when asked about her experiences in the C.A. program. Many participants discussed the field trips the classes had taken, which included a trip to a job fair and a trip with other local college students to Food Lion for a Thanksgiving scavenger hunt. The C.A. program also gave the participants a chance to make new friends through this experience. When asked about their friends in the program, J.H. replied, “Oh, yes. T., K., B., Mrs. B, Mrs., and T. are all my friends.” Some participants even developed friends outside of the C.A. program. B.B. recalled a time when her friend invited her to try something new on campus: “He’s in welding and that maybe I should join that, but I don’t think I would like welding.” The participants also discussed being involved in a spring fling pep rally, going to the library, visiting the bookstore,

and planting a garden on campus.

**Sub-Question Two**

How do individuals with IDs feel about their relationships with nondisabled peers on the inclusive college campus? There were mixed reviews about relationships with neurotypical peers on the inclusive college campus. Many participants had little to no interactions with neurotypical peers on campus. When asked if they knew or interacted with anyone not in the C.A. program, S.L., H.F., J.H., M.L., and C.K. all said, "No." R.M. replied, "When someone sees me, they say, 'Hey, R.' and 'It's good to see you,'" but he does not know the people's names who speak to him on campus. Four of the 10 participants had positive and negative interactions with neurotypical peers. K.K. had a negative experience on campus when she was sexually harassed. B.B. was invited to try a new program or career by her friend on campus. T.S. was given doughnuts from a student who worked in the bookstore. T.P. recalled a time when he attended the spring fling, and his neurotypical peer helped him make a "calm down" bottle. There is a group of local college neurotypical students who come to campus to work with the participants in the C.A. program but are not enrolled at P.C.C. S.L. shared about students from the wellness program: "They teach us about things like time management and self-esteem." B.B. discussed how the student volunteers worked with them in "small groups and teach them about money, budgeting, independency, learning how to socialize and interact with other people." Participants enrolled in this wellness program reported positive interactions with those neurotypical peers who volunteer. "I feel so excited, like I really want to grow up and attend the college they go to and play basketball," replied J.H. when asked about how the student volunteers made him feel.

**Sub-Question Three**

How do individuals with IDs feel about their relationships with faculty members on the inclusive college campus? All participants had positive feelings toward their instructors who they work with daily. J.H. shared that when he is included by the instructors in the C.A. program he feels "happy and cared for." C.K. replied, "I feel happy," when asked about how he feels about the instructors in the C.A. program. Nine out of 10 participants reported having had little to no interactions with faculty members not associated with the C.A. program. S.L., C.K., H.F., J.H., T.S., T.P., M.L., B.B., and R.M. all replied "No" when asked if they had a relationship or interactions with faculty members who were not their instructors in the C.A. program. K.K. was the only participant who had had interactions with faculty members who were not her daily instructors. K.K. shared that she was participating in the criminal justice program before being moved to the C.A. program. She said, "Two of them were my criminal justice teachers and one my advisor. They told me to be good and do what I am supposed to," when asked how the other faculty members on campus had helped her.

## Summary

Through one-on-one interviews, journal prompts, and focus groups, five main themes and two sub-themes emerged. These themes included educational and career aspirations, concept of inclusion, inclusivity and social engagement, campus engagement and support networks, and sense of belonging. The sub-themes included career and professional development and real-world application and practice. The data collected in this study have shown that the lived experiences of the individuals with IDs on an inclusive college campus were positive. The experiences included what they had been learning, field trips they had gone on, things they had done on campus, and the friends they had made through the C.A. program. The participants also

discussed having good relationships with the instructors who they work with daily in the C.A. program. The majority of the participants had little to no interactions with their neurotypical peers or the faculty members on campus who were not involved with the C.A. program.

# CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

## Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the lived experiences of individuals with IDs in an inclusive PSE program. Chapter Five consists of five discussion subsections: (a) interpretation of findings, (b) implications for policy and practice, (c) theoretical and methodological implications, (d) limitations and delimitations, and (e) recommendations for future research. This section ends with a summary of the whole study and includes implications for further research as the conclusion of the dissertation.

## Discussion

The purpose of this section is to discuss the study's findings considering the developed themes. The discussion section has five major subsections including (a) Summary and Interpretation of Findings; (b) Implications for Policy or Practice; (c) Theoretical and Empirical Implications; (d) Limitations and Delimitations; and (e) Recommendations for Future Research.

### Summary of Thematic Findings

Through the use of one-on-one interviews, journal prompts, and focus groups, five main themes were determined with two sub-themes being identified. The five themes included educational and career aspirations, concept of inclusion, inclusivity and social engagement, campus engagement and support networks, and a sense of belonging. the two sub-themes were identified as career and professional development and real-world application and practice.

### Interpretation of Findings

Using the five main themes of educational and career aspirations, concept of inclusion, inclusivity and social engagement, campus engagement and support networks, and a sense of belonging and the sub-themes of career and professional development and real-world application

and practice, the findings will be interpreted. The interpretations will help make connections between the phenomenon, the participants, the setting, the literature, and the theories related to this study.

### *Promoting Educational and Career Aspirations*

With only one negative experience being reported from the study participants, it is clear that all participants have had many positive experiences while participating in the C.A. program. One apparent theme was that, despite their IDs, the participants all had educational and career aspirations. People with IDs value the opportunity to learn (Rillotta et al., 2020), have increased self-esteem and opportunities (Blumberg et al., 2008), feel more confident and independent (Wilson et al., 2012), widen their social networks (Plotner & May, 2019), and have better employment opportunities (Butler et al., 2016) when participating or completing PSE programs. This information suggests there is a need for continued support and resources that give individuals with IDs the opportunity to pursue their educational and career goals. The C.A. program incorporates a mix of reading, math, social skills, and job training to help participants achieve their educational and career goals. Although some of their goals may seem far-fetched, many of the participants have jobs or volunteer regularly at places in the community. Further development of new C.A. programs and adding enhancements to the current C.A. program such as job-specific training and assistance with job placement can help reach more individuals with IDs.

### *Enhancing Career and Professional Development*

Sannicandro et al. (2018) found that individuals who participated in PSE had a much higher rate of employment than those who did not participate. With that being said, there is a clear focus on career and professional development within the C.A. program. Using field trips

and collaboration with local universities, the C.A. program showcases its effectiveness in practical experiences. This implies that an important part of inclusive programs is incorporating real-world application and practice that includes trips to job fairs and opportunities to learn how to act, speak, and dress for an interview. The real-world application and practice prepare individuals with IDs for employment opportunities. Inclusive PSE programming such as the C.A. program has shown effectiveness, with 59% of students being engaged in paid employment 1 year after graduation (Grigal et al., 2021). Moving forward, an expansion of the real-world application with hands-on training and practice would help expand the C.A. program and help more individuals with IDs. The C.A. program at P.C.C. could also be used as a model program for the creation of more inclusive programs across the state and country.

### *Addressing Inclusivity and Social Engagement on Campus*

There are mixed feelings about the inclusivity on the P.C.C. campus. This indicates there is room for improvement in fostering a more inclusive environment. Outliers in the data found that participants longed for more inclusion while on campus. A few participants suggested more access and information about clubs on campus or partnerships with their neurotypical peers. One participant mentioned receiving emails about clubs but said the clubs did not interest them. In a study conducted by Shogren et al. (2015), neurotypical peers think that actions at school and class level could favor a sense of belonging and promote reciprocal friendships with peers with IDs. Through the data collection process, it is apparent that there is a need for a bridge between the C.A. program and the P.C.C. campus as a whole. Although the participants have been invited to some events on campus like a spring fling pep rally, there are varying levels of engagement with the broader campus community. It is important to note that peers shape the social experiences while instructors determine the culture of the learning environment (Cress, 2008).

There is a need for support networks that can provide a more supportive and inclusive environment for individuals with IDs. The partnership with the local university could serve as a pilot program for a more inclusive approach to the C.A. program.

### *Fostering a Sense of Belonging*

There were many positive comments about the environment of the C.A. program indicating that the instructors find it important to foster a sense of belonging among the participants with IDs. When using real-world experiences, engaging computer programs, and hands-on activities, the participants feel like critical components in the C.A. program and as integral parts of a team that help with their success. While the researcher was observing , the class was participating in a game of Jenga. The students had to answer a life skills question and then they would get to move a Jenga piece. This activity helped them to review what they had learned but also helped the class work together toward a common goal. The ability to socialize is essential for students in any PSE program, as it provides them with a sense of belonging (Kern et al., 2018), acceptance, and companionship (Shanay et al., 2013). Supporting student participation and interaction within the courses is a fundamental aspect of inclusion in college (Griffin et al., 2016). Without an emphasis being placed on fostering an environment that makes participants feel like they belong, there may be fewer positive comments and success within the C.A. program. This information implies a need to continue the prioritization of a supportive and inclusive environment within the C.A. program. When participants feel comfortable, happy, and connected, those feelings allow for greater growth and success as they move through the program. Extending and continuing to foster a sense of belonging among the participants will allow for the growth and expansion of inclusion not only in the program but on the entire college campus.

### *Facilitating Inclusion and Relationships With Neurotypical Peers*

Chickering and Reisser (1993) noted that "a student's most important teacher is often another student" (p. 392). A desire for more inclusion was mentioned by the majority of participants in the study. When discussing their limited relationships with their neurotypical peers, the comments were positive overall. The limited interactions with neurotypical peers on the P.C.C. campus demonstrate a need for more inclusion opportunities for the C.A. program. This highlights the importance of promoting understanding, acceptance, and interactions on the college campus with neurotypical peers. Peer-mediated interventions have been used to increase communication, social, academic, and employment skills for different populations of students with IDs (Kaya et al., 2015). Ways to facilitate more inclusion include awareness campaigns, mentorship programs, meaningful jobs on campus, and initiatives that involve interactions between individuals with and without disabilities. Specific curriculum classes could also use the C.A. program for practicums or internships such as the ones the local university does to increase interactions across the college campus. It would also be beneficial to invite the C.A. program to any events that are held on the broader college campus.

### *Supporting Relationships With Faculty Members Not Involved With the C.A. Program*

Through the data collection process, it is apparent that the faculty in the C.A. program are supportive and nurturing and that they help the participants learn in all facets of life. These positive relationships show the significance and need for supportive faculty not only in the C.A. program but across the college campus. Only one participant in the study had interactions with faculty who were not involved regularly with the C.A. program. Such limited interactions hinder the growth within the inclusive C.A. program. It is clear that simply having a seat in a college classroom is not equivalent to inclusion (Uditsky & Hughson, 2012); rather, inclusion is

manifested through attitudes of connection, belonging, acceptance, and value throughout the community. This is a social justice perspective, offering dignity and equality in the higher education community to all members (Hall, 2010). Participants with IDs may have other educational goals, such as a trade job they want to explore, but there has not been a connection formed between the faculty in the C.A. program and the other programs on campus that could help the participants explore different careers. Creating opportunities for faculty members not directly involved in the C.A. program would contribute to a more inclusive experience for the participants with IDs. These interactions could lead to partnerships with different academic programs on campus, which would in turn provide more hands-on job training for the C.A. participants.

## Implications for Policy or Practice

Findings from this research study provide implications for policy and practice. The implications for policy include inclusive education polices and funding for inclusive programs, bridge programs, and transition support. The implications for practice include faculty training on inclusion, individualized support plans, and advocacy for inclusive policies.

### *Implications for Policy*

The first implication for policy includes a need for more inclusive education policies. Currently, there are federal laws that guarantee public education for individuals with IDs from ages 3-21 years. There are currently no laws that guarantee education or programs for individuals with IDs beyond the age of 21. There is VR legislation that makes programs available to individuals with IDs, but it has income limits and other requirements that can exclude some of this population. The Americans With Disabilities Act mandates that all PSE institutions “are required by law to provide any reasonable accommodation that may be necessary for those

people with an identified disability to have equal access to the educational opportunities and services available to neurotypical peers who are neurotypical, if requested" (PL 101-336; PL 105-17, p. 327). This means individuals with IDs may receive support but that does not guarantee a program that fits their specific educational needs. With the enactment of more inclusive policies, individuals with IDs will have more opportunities to pursue their educational and career aspirations. More inclusive policies would ensure that higher education becomes more inclusive, which is important to not only the individuals with IDs but also their neurotypical peers and faculty. Inclusive education policies are imperative to the creation and sustainment of programs for individuals with IDs in higher education.

The second implication for policy includes funding for inclusive programs. Although funding is not guaranteed for any student in PSE programs, once students with IDs transition from high school they are left with fewer options compared to their neurotypical counterparts. More funding would allow students with IDs to have opportunities after aging out of the public school system instead of being left with little to no options. Although there are many funding opportunities available to higher education organizations, higher education institutes are not required to use this funding or to create programs for individuals with IDs. The HEA of 2008 made access to PSE programs easier for individuals with IDs by offering more financial assistance and easier access to PSE programs for individuals with IDs (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). The lack of creation of these programs can be attributed to a lack of education on this specific type of program, population, funding, the number of individuals who are willing to lead a program like this, and the space on campus to house the program. Higher education institutes may blame the lack of programs on funding because the funding may not cover all expenses of the program, which could be solved through scholarships, grants, or charging

nominal fees. Many of the programs for individuals with IDs take place on community college campuses, and if these programs were to expand to universities, more costs would be involved for room and board. With access to specific funding for programs that target the education of people with IDs, higher education programs must take advantage of the available funding.

The third implication for policy is bridge programs and transition support. As mentioned above, some laws guarantee education and support services for individuals with IDs until the age of 21. There is a clear need for bridge programs and transition support for individuals with IDs after finishing public school. Transition support must be interwoven into the creation of more inclusive education policies so that this population is not left on their own after the completion of high school. Inappropriate accommodations, along with the inability of student support services to assist persons with IDs, can considerably impede progress on the educational trajectory (Garrison-Wade, 2012). Transition support and bridge programs are important for the succuss and obtainment of more educational and career skills that individuals with IDs need to become independent and members of the working class. When discussing funding, transition support and bridge programs would also need to be included to prevent push back from higher education programs. Implementing transition support and bridge programs would help make a seamless transition for individuals with IDs to higher education.

### *Implications for Practice*

The first implication for practice is faculty training on inclusion. In some studies found in the related literature, many faculty members did not want individuals with IDs in their classrooms because they did not know how to serve them appropriately. The lack of training opportunities, academic accommodations, postsecondary disability laws, and the over needs of students with IDs are also barriers for faculty members (Lombardi et al., 2013). This study

addresses the clear disconnect between faculty members not directly involved with the C.A. program and the participants with IDs. With more training on inclusion, faculty could feel more comfortable and educated on how to appropriately teach individuals with IDs who are appropriately placed in their classrooms. The faculty members would also be able to modify and accommodate the needs of individuals with all disabilities and not just IDs specifically. Training faculty on inclusion could create partnerships with career programs, which could provide hands-on job training for individuals with IDs. Mandating inclusion training for all faculty members is beneficial to students with IDs, students with other disabilities, neurotypical peers, and the college campus as a whole.

The second implication for practice is individualized support plans for individuals with IDs. Throughout their time spent in a public school, most of the participants have had an individualized education plan (IEP). An IEP presents an individual's strengths and weaknesses and sets goals for the individual to work toward. Related services they may need such as speech or occupational therapy are also included in the IEP. Once the participants complete high school, they no longer have this IEP or extra support needed to be successful and independent. The lack of adequate preparation in secondary schools and differences in academic achievement between students with and without disabilities are among the most important constraints to a successful transition to higher education (Chatzitheochari & Platt, 2019). Providing an individualized support plan for individuals with IDs before high school completion paired with transition support would lay out a plan for them post-high school completion. The individualized support plans could be implemented for all students or students who are actively seeking further education or job preparation programs. Individualized support plans could mimic an IEP with input from the individual on their goals for the future. To prepare these plans, a representative

from the high school and the college could meet with the student to develop this plan. Without proper planning, individuals with IDs can be less successful after completing high school and moving on to higher education or paid employment.

The third implication for practice is advocacy for inclusive policies. When discussing programs for individuals with IDs, most people have no idea that there are programs in higher education for this population. Prior research demonstrates that the values, philosophies, and attitudes of faculty members impact the overall climate of the university (Rao, 2004) with faculty members' perceptions either facilitating or deterring overall success (de A Moreira et al., 2000). While visiting and observing the college campus, the only faculty I saw interacting with the participants were the instructors in the C.A. program. This program is housed within the continuing education building; therefore, other faculty members could support and partner with the C.A. program. With more support and information being shared about the program, greater advocacy could be achieved. Though educators, parents, higher education institutes, and individuals with IDs can talk about their experiences and all they have gained, there needs to be more. Real change needs to come with the advocacy of more inclusive policies. Advocating for more inclusive policies opens the door for the creation and sustainment of programs like C.A.

**Theoretical and Empirical Implications**

The theoretical implications are centered around the social model of disability and social constructivism. Applying the social model of disability, this study aims to provide more insight into societal structures and environmental factors that contribute to the experiences of individuals with IDs in inclusive college programs. The theoretical implication of the social model of disability shifts the focus from viewing disabilities as just an individual medical condition to understanding that the implications of the disability can be better or worse due to societal

barriers or support (Oliver, 1986). Using the social constructivism theory, this study explored how social interactions of individuals with IDs and the neurotypical peers and faculty influence the learning experiences in inclusive PSE programs (Vygotsky, 1978). These theoretical implications emphasize the role of social interactions in shaping individual learning and development among individuals with IDs. This study has the potential to contribute and expand upon existing theories by explaining how inclusive college programs have evolved over the years to better accommodate individuals with IDs. By keeping this information up to date and expanding upon the existing theories, this study helps to redefine societal norms in PSE and can better serve this underrepresented population in higher education.

Empirical implications include literature review findings, themes, phenomenological descriptions, and supporting existing literature. Literature has been found on PSE programs in the United States (Gilson et al., 2020; Kim & Kutscher, 2020; Lee et al., 2021; Rumi et al., 2021) and employment statistics of individuals with disabilities (Moore & Schelling, 2015; Park & Park, 2021; Sannicandro et al., 2018; U.S. Department of Labor, 2020). Literature was also found on the effects that PSE has on the individuals, peers, and faculty who work in the inclusive programs (Carter et al., 2019; Nota et al., 2010; Ryan et al., 2019; Watts et al., 2023). Literature on employment perspectives from individuals with disabilities was also examined (Bonaccio et al., 2019; Gilson et al., 2022; Hemphill & Kulik, 2016; Wehman et al., 2018). The literature review conducted as part of this study identified gaps in the understanding of the lived experiences of individuals with IDs in an inclusive PSE program. Working to fill these gaps, the empirical significance of the study provides new information and insights into the literature. The themes and phenomenological descriptions found through this study have empirical significance by offering concrete, firsthand accounts of the lived experiences of individuals with IDs

participating in an inclusive college program. Through the existing literature, it was found that students with IDs value higher education as a positive experience because it provided them with a normalized context that they wished to continue (Weldon & Riddell, 2007). The university experience is seen by students with IDs as an opportunity that strengthens them personally in the face of difficulties derived from their disability (Moriña, 2017). Overall, this study contributes to the empirical significance of the literature by supporting existing findings on the effects of inclusive higher education on individuals with IDs, their neurotypical peers, and faculty. By providing additional empirical evidence, this study strengthens the existing body of literature on this topic area.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

Limitations for this study included the sample size, geographical location, program specificity, and timeframe. The study was limited to 10 participants enrolled in the C.A. program at P.C.C. This small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings to a broader population of individuals with IDs in inclusive higher education programs. This study takes place in a specific rural area in North Carolina. Findings may not be generalizable to individuals with IDs in other locations with different socio-cultural contexts. This study focuses specifically on the experience of individuals with IDs enrolled in the C.A. program. Findings may not apply to individuals in other PSE programs for individuals with IDs or in different types of educational settings. There was no mention of a time frame for data collection within the study. The limited time for data collection could restrict the depth or breadth of the study.

Delimitations include the setting, participant characteristics, program focus, and research design. The study is delimited to a specific community college in a rural area of North Carolina where the C.A. program is located. The findings are limited to the experiences of individuals

with IDs in this specific setting. This study includes college-aged students from 18-50 years old with a diagnosed ID. Some participants have disclosed their specific ID, and some have not. The findings are delimited to this specific demographic group. The study focuses on the lived experiences of individuals with an ID enrolled in the C.A. program at P.C.C., specifically their experiences in inclusive PSE programs with a focus on career and technical training. Findings are delimited to the experiences within this program context. The study utilizes a transcendental phenomenological research design. The findings are delimited to the understanding and description of the universal essence of the phenomenon among the participants within the chosen research design.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research should focus on collaboration with stakeholders, such as educators, policymakers, and advocacy groups, to find actionable strategies for improving the inclusivity and effectiveness of higher education programs for individuals with IDs. More research is also needed to develop inclusive educational policies and practices that better support the individuals with IDs, the faculty who support them, and the college. A comparison study could be completed that looks at individuals with different types of disabilities not just IDs and identifies common challenges and effective support strategies among the participants with disabilities. Further research could also have different time frames. This would provide a deeper understanding of the educational and career trajectories of participants with IDs. Following a group of participants from start to finish in the C.A. program may give a different outcome than what was found in this study due to the time constraints for dissertation completion. Other studies could be conducted that use surveys, interviews, and observational data to triangulate findings and enhance the validity of the research. Further research could be expanded to include other

community colleges and universities that have programs with individuals with IDs. This would help researchers understand how program structures and curriculum impact the experiences and outcomes of individuals with IDs.

## Conclusion

This research study examined the lived experiences of individuals with IDs enrolled in the C.A. program at P.C.C. Utilizing a transcendental phenomenological research design, the study explored the inclusive PSE setting that focuses on career and technical training for individuals with IDs. The study followed 10 participants from ages 18-50 years with a diagnosed ID who are enrolled in the C.A. program. The participants shared their experiences through interviews, journal prompts, and focus groups. Findings from the study included five overarching themes: educational and career aspirations, the concept of inclusion, inclusivity and social engagement, campus engagement and support networks, and a sense of belonging. Two sub-themes emerged from the data: career and professional development and real-world application and practice. This study had limitations that included the sample size, geographical location, program specificity, and timeframe. The delimitations of the study included setting, participant characteristics, program focus, and research design. Despite the study's limitations and delimitations, the research offers valuable insight into the lived experiences of individuals with IDs in an inclusive PSE program. By recognizing these things and providing recommendations for further research, the study contributes to an ongoing effort to enhance the inclusivity, effectiveness, and creation of higher education programs for individuals with IDs.

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## Appendix A

## IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

October 23, 2023

Jami Granberry Susan Stanley

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY23-24-283 A Phenomenological Study Of The Lived Experiences Of Individuals With Intellectual Disabilities And Their Participation In Post-secondary Job Training Programs: A Qualitative Study

Dear Jami Granberry, Susan Stanley,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

For a PDF of your exemption letter, click on your study number in the My Studies card on your Cayuse dashboard. Next, click the Submissions bar beside the Study Details bar on the Study

details page. Finally, click Initial under Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the Submission Details page. Your information sheet and final versions of your study documents can also be found on the same page under the Attachments tab.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP

Administrative Chair

Research Ethics Office

## Appendix B

September 12, 2023

MEMORANDUM

TO: Jami Granberry

FROM: Andrea Stamper, Director, QEP & Assessment

SUBECT: Permission to include REDACTED students in research

This letter is to confirm that Jami Granberry has permission to include REDACTED students in her “Phenomenological Study of the lived experiences of individuals with intellectual disabilities and their participation in Post-Secondary job training programs: A Qualitative Study” research project. Melissa Morlock, Director of Transitional Studies, will coordinate with Ms. Granberry on access to the REDACTED students.

**This approval is contingent upon the study team providing me with a copy of all Liberty University IRB approved documents prior to conducting any study activities.**

Please contact me if you need any additional information.

Respectfully,

Andrea Stamper
Director, QEP & Assessment
Office of Planning & Research
REDACTED
REDACTED
REDACTED

**Appendix C**

Recruitment Flyer

# Research Participants Needed

**A Study of The Lived Experiences of Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities and Their Participation In Post-Secondary Job Training Programs: A Qualitative Study**

- Are you between the ages of 18 and 50?
- Are you currently enrolled in the C.A. program at P.C.C?

If you answered **yes** to each of the questions listed above, you may be eligible to participate in a research study.

The purpose of this research study is to describe the lived experiences of individuals with I.D. in the C.A. program at P.C.C.

Participants will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview (1 hour), three journal writing prompts (30 minutes), a focus group (1 hour), and member checking (1 hour).

If you would like to participate, contact the researcher at the phone number or email address provided below.

Jami Granberry
REDACTED
jvgranberry@liberty.edu

A consent document will be given to you at the time of the interview.

Jami Granberry, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.
**Please contact Jami Granberry at REDACTED or jvgranberry@liberty.edu for more information.**

# Recruitment Verbal

Hello Potential Participant,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to describe the lived experiences of individuals enrolled in the inclusive C.A. program located at P.C.C. and if you meet my participant criteria and are interested, I would like to invite you to join my study.

Participants must be college aged students between the ages of 18 and 50 who have a documented intellectual disability and are enrolled in the C.A. program at P.C.C. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in one-on-one audio-recorded interviews, journal prompts, audio-recorded focus groups and member checking. It should take approximately 4 hours to complete the procedures listed. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

Would you like to participate and or allow your student to participate?

[Yes] Great, can we set up a time for an interview?
[No], I understand. Thank you for your time. [Conclude the conversation.]

A consent document will be emailed before your scheduled interview time to give time to review the document. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview.

Thank you for your time. Do you have any questions?

## Appendix D

## Consent

**Title of the Project:** Understanding the Experiences of People with Intellectual Disabilities in College Programs
**Principal Investigator:** Jami Granberry, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University

### Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

We want to invite you to join a special research project. To join, you need to be between 18 and 50 years old and have a known learning challenge. This includes things like Autism, Williams Syndrome, Down Syndrome, or a brain injury. You should have a proper diagnosis from a doctor or school. You should also be a part of the C.A. Program at the community college.

You don't have to join if you don't want to. It's your choice. But before you decide, make sure to read this whole paper and ask any questions you have.

### What is the study about and why is it being done?

We are conducting a study to learn about the experiences of people with intellectual disabilities in college programs. We want to know how they feel about being in college and what they think about their experiences.

### What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you decide to be part of this study, you will:

1. Have a conversation with us (interview) that will take about 1 hour. We will talk about your experiences.
2. Write down your thoughts on a few topics, and each time will take about 10 minutes. You'll have two weeks to do this.
3. Join a group chat with a few other students who are also in college programs. We will talk together for about 1 hour.
4. Help us make sure we understood what you said. This might take about 1 hour.

### How could you or others benefit from this study?

This study won't give you any personal benefits, but it could help colleges, universities, and employers understand how to support students with disabilities better. By sharing your experiences, you can contribute to making our society more inclusive and helping people with disabilities find better job opportunities.

### What risks might you experience from being in this study?

Joining this study is very safe, and you won't face any unusual risks. If you talk about child abuse, neglect, or someone wanting to hurt themselves or others during our conversation, we have to tell the right people to keep everyone safe.

**How will personal information be protected?**

We will keep everything you say private. We won't use your real name when we talk about your answers. Our interviews will be in a private place, and we will make sure no one else hears us. While we can't promise complete privacy in group chats, we'll do our best to keep what's said there confidential. Your information might be used in future studies, but we will remove any details that could identify you.

**Is study participation voluntary?**

You don't have to join this study if you don't want to. It won't change your relationship with Liberty University or your college program. You can say "no" to any question or leave the study at any time.

**What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you decide you don't want to be in the study later, just let us know. We'll stop using your information, except for group chat information, which we won't share if you leave.

**Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**

If you have questions now or later, you can talk to Jami Granberry at REDACTED or jvgranberry@liberty.edu. You can also contact Dr. Susan Stanley at skstanley@liberty.edu.

**Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

**Your Consent**

By signing this paper, you agree to be part of this study. Make sure you understand the study before you sign. You'll get a copy for yourself. We'll keep a copy too. If you have questions after signing, you can ask us.

I have read and understood this information. I agree to be part of the study.

[ ] Yes, you can record me.

[ ] No, you can't record me.

**Printed Name:** _____

**Signature:** _____

**Date:** _____

**Legally Authorized Representative Permission**

If you are someone's legal guardian, you can give permission for them to be in the study.

I have read and understood this information. I agree to let the person named below join the study.

[ ] Yes, you can record the person.

[ ] No, you can't record the person.

**Printed Name of the Person in the Study:** _____

**Printed Name of Legal Guardian:** _____

**Relationship to the Person in the Study:** _____

**Signature of Legal Guardian:** _____

**Date:** _____

## Appendix E

## Journal Prompts

Journal Prompt 1:
Using 4-5 sentences, please tell me about some of the things that you have done since you started in the C.A. program at P.C.C. These things could be activities, projects, or classes you have done since being in the C.A. program.

Journal Prompt 2:
Using 4-5 sentences, please tell me about the teachers in the C.A. program at P.C.C. You could talk about your favorite activities you have done with the teachers, things they have taught you, ways the teachers help you, or any other things you would want to share about your teachers.

Journal Prompt 3:
Using 4-5 sentences, tell me about the students within the C.A. program as well as outside of the program. Who are your friends within the Academy and outside the Academy. Do they help you on campus? Do they talk to you when they see you on campus? Do you do any activities with students outside of the C.A. program?