

Brief Report

Examining a leadership development initiative for college students with intellectual and developmental disability: A brief report

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Abstract.

BACKGROUND: The number of inclusive college programs for students with intellectual and developmental disability (IDD) in the United States has steadily increased in recent years. As access to college becomes a more realistic prospect for people with IDD, there is a pressing need to examine the offerings and impacts of these programs critically.

OBJECTIVE: One potential offering of inclusive college programs that has not been given much attention is opportunities for student leadership development (LD). The purpose of this brief report was to evaluate the perspectives of staff members in a program geared towards providing a paid LD opportunity to students with IDD in an inclusive college program in the southeastern United States.

METHODS: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten student-employees staffing this LD opportunity and constant comparative analysis was employed to organize interview content by themes.

RESULTS: Four primary themes arose as a result of the analytic process: character development, communication, opportunities for leading and mentoring others, strategic reflection, and individual empowerment. Each is explored in summation and through exemplary quotes from participants.

CONCLUSION: The findings of this study provide important implications for professionals and future research to support maximizing the positive impact of these programs on the lives of students with IDD.

Keywords: Inclusive postsecondary education, higher education, intellectual disability, developmental disability, leadership

1. Introduction

Leadership development (LD) is frequently emphasized as an integral aspect of the high school experience (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). Despite a

modest literature base investigating these experiences for students, there is a scarcity of research on leadership opportunities for individuals with disabilities, particularly students with an intellectual and developmental disability (IDD), during their high school years (Tan & Adams, 2023). Further, while higher education is renowned for fostering rigorous leadership opportunities for students, little is known about

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the involvement of individuals with IDD in these opportunities. This area warrants exploration, especially considering the growing number of individuals with IDD pursuing college education. Currently, over 300 programs across the United States offer opportunities for students with IDD (Think College, n.d.), indicating a steady increase in inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs.

While research has provided valuable insights into how students are supported in areas such as employment, socialization, and academics within these programs (Whirley et al., 2020), more emphasis on leadership opportunities is needed in the literature. Moreover, despite the well documented significance of LD for college students in general (Adams et al., 2018; Brungardt, 1996; Dugan & Komives, 2010), the potential for LD opportunities for college students with IDD remains largely unexplored (Carter et al., 2011; Tan & Adams, 2023). Thus, the purpose of the current brief report was to examine the perceptions of college students regarding their participation in a LD program.

1.1. The College Access and Preparation Program (CAP)

When the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) went into effect in 2014, it brought with it some major changes to the way vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies operate. One of the most substantial changes came in the form of a requirement that VR agencies allocate at least 15% of their total federal funding to Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) for students with disabilities (SWD), age 14 to 21, that are *potentially* eligible for VR services (Carter et al., 2021). A target population for *receiving* Pre-ETS has naturally been students with IDD (Thelin et al., 2019). One IPSE program in the southeastern United States, has been working to explore the LD potential of college students with IDD *providing* Pre-ETS.

The College Access and Preparation (CAP) Program was started in 2019, and it was born out of a desire to improve postsecondary learning opportunities for young adults with disabilities. Additionally, the CAP program provided unique opportunities to college students with IDD in an inclusive college program. The CAP Program fulfills two pre-employment transition service areas: postsecondary education counseling and self-advocacy and was created to function as an IPSE program student-led, peer mentoring-based Pre-ETS offering

that extends across three semesters (Summer, Fall, & Spring). At the heart of the CAP program lies the offering of educational and skill development avenues for high school students with disabilities, aimed at exploring postsecondary education possibilities. Given the service delivery climate during the Covid-19 pandemic, the program has evolved to offer a blend of curricular approaches that include both in-person and distance learning.

Peer mentoring may mean many things in many different contexts. For the purposes of the CAP Program, peer mentoring was defined as the support transpiring between high school students with disabilities, namely those receiving special education services, and mentorship-trained, college age students with IDD in an IPSE program. Within this context, IPSE students are recruited, hired, and trained to fulfill the paid role of CAP Ambassador and “mentor.” In this way, students who have experience moving from special education into a college program aligned with their long-term goals are uniquely situated to share personal experience relevant to current high school students attempting to navigate similar decisions. Participating high school students connect individually with CAP Ambassadors if they are interested in talking more about transitioning to postsecondary education. The interactions that form as a result are tracked to capture the degree of high school student engagement across CAP Program offerings.

The CAP program was created and facilitated at the direction of college students with IDD to support high school students in navigating, setting goals, and advocating for themselves regarding their postschool education options. The program consists of two distinct emphases: (1) Supporting transition-age youth in high schools (i.e., Pre-ETS service delivery) and (2) supporting select college students to build leadership skills through skill building opportunities including providing mentoring to high school students. This latter aspect of the CAP Program centers on the LD of participating college students with IDD and is the focus of the current brief.

As an LD offering, IPSE program students are supported to serve as peer mentors and to engage in a structured LD experience through a two-course sequence (one course in Fall and one course in Spring). These students, the CAP Ambassadors, are provided support on aspects of leadership and peer mentoring relevant to their role. Such support includes general professional skill support (e.g., time management and self-reflection), targeted mentorship skill support (e.g., public speaking and

self-reflection), and content knowledge (e.g., postsecondary education and career training options). As a practical necessity for their role, CAP Ambassadors are supported to understand and deliver information related to increasing awareness of available postsecondary education and training options as well as the skills needed to be successful in college environments.

Much of the CAP Ambassadors' work is conducted as a team effort, supported and supervised by one to two paid graduate assistants known as CAP Coordinators. The primary role of the CAP Coordinator is to catalyze the LD of CAP Ambassadors by facilitating (a) regular self-assessments on professional performance, (b) engagement with professional development opportunities, and (c) strategic reflection. The guiding goal of this work is to support CAP Ambassadors in their unique journey as aspiring professionals and mentors for high school students with disabilities.

The work of the CAP Ambassador has evolved during the life of the program but generally includes efforts that support the creation and delivery of synchronous and asynchronous content for high school students in online environments and in-person events. Each year, CAP Ambassadors, with the support of a CAP Coordinator, support between 100 and 200 high school students with disabilities to learn more about postsecondary education and career training options and self-direct their pursuit of options aligned specifically to their (i.e., high school participants) own goals.

With an interest in the impact of the CAP Program on the LD of CAP Ambassadors, a small team set out to conduct an internal evaluation of the initiative. The purpose of this evaluation was to gather information regarding the lived experiences and perspectives of current and past CAP Program employees, both Ambassadors and Coordinators, on the LD experiences of CAP Ambassadors. It was driven by a single evaluation question: how do current and past staff of the CAP Program characterize the program's overall impact on the LD of students with IDD? As an evaluation of an existing university program, it was deemed exempt from review by the authors' Institutional Review Board.

2. Methods

An initial semi-structured interview protocol was developed based on an extensive review of the

Table 1
Interview participant make-up

Participants	Role	Years affiliated with CAP program
Cece	Coordinator	1
Aly	Coordinator	1
Coach	Coordinator	2
Joan	Coordinator	1
Jessica	Ambassador	1
Reagan	Ambassador	1
Abby	Ambassador	3
Nick	Ambassador	1
Schmidt	Ambassador	2
Winston	Ambassador	1

research literature on leadership for young adults with disabilities. After a series of refinement processes, the protocol was finalized with 20 open-ended questions and probes. In total, all four CAP Coordinators and all six CAP Ambassadors accepted an invitation to be interviewed over the course of two months in late 2022 through the online video conferencing platform, Zoom. Each interview participant is listed alongside the pseudonyms provided to them and the duration of their tenure in the CAP Program in Table 1.

Each interview was recorded, and transcripts were created for roughly ten hours of total interview content. The authors of this brief report used these transcripts to conduct a constant comparative analysis, coding and generating themes from interview content. Each author independently read each transcript twice to generate initial lists of codes (Saldaña, 2011) and then met together to reconcile their respective code lists into a single, comprehensive codebook. With this codebook, the third author independently coded each of the 10 interview transcripts in their entirety using a line-by-line analytic approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Two authors and an external auditor then convened to reconcile all instances of discrepancies in coded content. Finally, all three authors and an external auditor met to agree on emergent themes. Member checks were conducted with all participants by sending them individual summaries of each respective interview to allow them to refine evaluator interpretations (Brantlinger et al., 2005).

3. Results

The qualitative data collected yielded four primary themes related to the CAP Program's impact on the LD of Ambassadors: character development, communication, opportunities for leading and men-

toring others, and individual empowerment. These four themes are explored here alongside some illustrative quotes from those interviewed.

3.1. Character development

The most common theme to emerge from Ambassador and Coordinator interview content related to the ways in which working for the CAP Program facilitated character development for Ambassadors. Through the CAP Program experience, interview content indicates that Ambassadors developed characteristics such as patience, responsibility, and professionalism. Ambassador Nick stated that, as a result of his role in the CAP Program, he learned “patience is key to being a good leader.” Ambassador Schmidt discussed how learning to take professional responsibility related to his adult life: “This is what you’re going to do as an adult, taking responsibility.” Ambassador Winston spoke to the way in which his experience with the Program translated into his view on professionalism: “We all have our bad days and stuff, and just whatever you’re going through, just leaving it at the door.” Meanwhile, speaking on character development more broadly, another staffer described the importance of creating a space that supports self-examination and self-acceptance. Coordinator Cece described her particular view of character development: “I think that leaders are best developed by, one, coaching and supporting people in recognizing their own strengths, but then, two, allowing people to acknowledge and embrace their shortcomings.”

3.2. Communication

A second theme that emerged through the interview content was the positive influence of the CAP Program on Ambassador communication. Ambassador Regan summed up the importance of effective communication to leadership: “If you’re not communicating with the people, you’re not leading them.” Ambassador Nick discussed his growth in understanding the role of communication in teamwork: “If I don’t communicate well, then I might be in trouble [...] communication is key. If I communicated like I do every time and every day as I do in the CAP Program, then I’ll feel better.”

In another sense of this theme, Coordinator Coach described the programmatic approach to communication as central to LD. When supporting an LD experience, he described, you have to communicate

effectively about “what they want to get out of the experience” and the “professional and personal goals that they want to set as a leader.” He went on to describe some communication prompts that may be particularly helpful when working with someone in a structured LD experience:

What can I do to help facilitate your development as a leader?

What can you do [to be] more independent on your end? [W]hat can we do together?

When we spend time [working] together, what can that look like?

3.3. Opportunities for leading and mentoring others

The importance and nature of opportunities to lead and mentor others emerged as a third major theme from interview content with CAP Program staff. The impact of authentic experiences leading others through mentorship was a powerful aspect of the CAP Program for Ambassadors. It was an experience that Ambassador Abby characterized as “being in the same space and bubble as them.” Such authentic experiences should balance both structure and opportunity. Ambassador Nick expanded on this sentiment, stating, “[l]eaders lead by example. So, like, leadership is learned by example.” Ambassador Jessica explained, “before you become a leader, you need to learn about it,” echoing the idea that structure and opportunity go hand in hand.

Coordinator Joan described a belief central to the perspective of CAP Coordinators supporting Ambassadors: “given the environment and the opportunity, anyone can become a leader if they’re challenged to and supported.” Offering a slightly different take on this theme, Coordinator Aly described the importance of scaffolded support within LD opportunities. As she stated, it’s critical that LD opportunities include a “framework of the level of additional prompts or support that you provide.” In so doing, she described, you provide developing leaders with “an opportunity to [lead] with some support, knowing they’re going to be backed up.” As a result, she went on, Ambassador confidence in their leadership abilities increased.

3.4. Individual empowerment

Both Ambassadors and Coordinators discussed the idea of empowerment as a central element of LD provided under the auspices of the CAP Program.

Empowerment allowed Ambassadors to develop self-efficacy regarding their professional development while supporting self-confidence as a result. Ambassador Jessica described LD to be especially important for young adults with disabilities because of the support provided to “be more independent and [to be] more open to themselves.” Ambassador Winston expressed his own sense of empowerment as follows: “I enjoyed going to the schools [. . .] because I never thought in a million years that I would be able to do something like that. And the program really helped me out a lot because I was really self-conscious about the way I talk and the way I act towards my disability.” Ambassador Winston went on to state, “they didn’t hold our hand; you know what I mean? We gave the presentations, and they were just on the side watching, and if we messed up some, they corrected us after they just let us do it ourselves, you understand what I’m saying? It was awesome.”

4. Discussion

The CAP Program was originally created to promote access to postsecondary learning opportunities for high school SWD. The purpose of this evaluation, however, was to examine a corollary benefit to the CAP Program: the LD opportunity it provided for college students with IDD. As such, the aim of this evaluation was to understand how the effects of the program extended beyond its main audience. These findings suggest that Ambassadors benefitted from the opportunities and support presented in the program in four primary domains: character development, communication, opportunities for leading and mentoring others, and individual empowerment. These findings partially reflect those of Carter and colleagues (2011), who identified several essential facets of leadership falling under two key indicators of leadership: (1) Attitudes and skills and (2) Influence on others. Within these attitudes, effective communication and confidence emerged as significant factors. Additionally, they highlighted the importance of assisting others and setting a positive example as crucial aspects of influencing others.

On the whole, these findings offer many broad and specific directions for future scholarship and important implications for professionals supporting young people with IDD. In broad terms, future research and practice should continue to challenge prevailing support paradigms in which young adults IDD are seen

within passive roles. Instead, as evidenced in this brief report, there is a need to continue exploring support dynamics in which young adults with IDD may serve as mentors rather than mentees, leaders rather than followers, and service providers rather than service recipients. In more specific terms, existing approaches to LD for young adults with IDD within and outside IPSE programs should be documented and evaluated to further this important conversation for the field at large.

5. Conclusion

Given the promise of college as a pathway to positive adult-life outcomes, including higher wages and high-skill careers, efforts to maximize opportunities for success for young adults with IDD are paramount (Hendrickson et al., 2013; Mock & Love, 2012). It is vital that college programs offer a variety of rigorous opportunities for students. IPSE is built on the belief that people with IDD have a fundamental right to be fully included in their communities, and college is a natural progression to inclusive community settings where adult learning is taking place (Udit-sky & Hughson, 2012). The findings offered in this brief report are offered in the hope that they might catalyze researchers and professionals supporting young adults with IDD to consider the potential of opportunities to *lead* and *support* others rather than focusing solely on opportunities for them to be *supported* and *led*.

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None to report.

Conflict of interest

The first two authors (AJP and CBW) have both held formal roles within the IPSE program housing the CAP Program. In addition, both authors have had a role in the conceptualization and administration of the CAP Program since its inception. The corresponding author (Anthony J. Plotner) is an editorial board member of the Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation.

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Ethical approval

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