The role of academic advising in campus integration for students with intellectual disabilities: A case study

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ABSTRACT

On-campus postsecondary programs like Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary (CTP) programs started in response to increasing numbers of students with intellectual disabilities (SWIDs) entering higher education. The problem for many students with intellectual disabilities is the lack of support for an overall integrated academic experience once they matriculate into higher education from P-12 education. Collaborating with campus units such as academic advising, CTP programs, and individual academic advisors can enhance support and promote the successful academic integration of students with intellectual disabilities. Research has shown how an area like academic advising increases retention, graduation, and overall student success for students, and students with intellectual disabilities should be no different. Using a phenomenological single case study approach, seven students and two advisors participated in semi-structured interviews. Key findings include the importance of on-campus interconnectedness and support for an overall connected experience as important considerations for assisting successful academic integration for students with intellectual disabilities. Implications from this study contribute to the lack of research on how best to support the successful integration of SWIDs within academic advising, on campus, and in higher education communities.

Keywords: academic advising, students with intellectual disabilities, comprehensive transition postsecondary (CTP)programs

INTRODUCTION

Student populations have continued to evolve in higher education as more students from backgrounds not typical of the last 20 years increasingly continue to matriculate past Pk-12 education. One such student population is students with intellectual disabilities (SWIDs). A student with an intellectual disability is defined as a student with a "…cognitive impairment, characterized by significant limitations in both intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior as expressed in conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills…" (National Parent Center on Transition and Employment, n.d.). Higher education has seen increasing numbers of these students in the last 20 years (Agarwal et al., 2021; Griffin et al., 2010; NPCTE, n.d.). These students arrive at post-secondary education with specific needs that until recently were not part of any coordinated program or office. This has led to the rise in post-secondary education programs to specifically support the needs of SWIDs in higher education. While these programs are still a relatively new endeavor for many institutions, there is growth in these programs on campuses (Grigal et al., 2012; Kelly & Westling, 2019; Plotner & Marshall, 2014; Raynor et al., 2016). Additionally, as these

programs support unique needs or provide specific resources for SWIDs, access to higher education does not mean these students necessarily matriculate or succeed (Kleinart et al., 2012; Raynor et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2024). With unique needs, SWIDs often do meet the matriculation requirements of institutions, which are different than what is provided in the P-12 educational setting. This leads to concerns by some institutions that SWIDs cannot take advantage of the fully integrated higher education experience (Björnsdóttir, 2017; Kleinert et al., 2012; Plotner & Marshall, 2014; Raynor et al., 2016). This is important because research has shown that SWIDS attending higher education are employed with higher wages than SWIDS who did not (Cimera et al., 2018; Grigal et al., 2011; Grigal et al., 2019; Moore & Schelling, 2015; Ryan et al., 2019; Semerci et al., 2021; Sannicandro et al., 2018; Bruijnzeel et al., 2022; Brunner et al., 2025). Additionally, research has shown increased levels of academic skills, independent living skills, and self-advocacy from SWIDs who attend postsecondary (higher) education (Grigal et al., 2012; NPCTE, n.d.; Thoma et al., 2011). However, institutions have not entirely kept pace in meeting the increasing attention and interest of SWIDs attending higher education with specific programs or areas working with this student population. For this study, the researchers are using postsecondary education and higher education synonymously based on what is in the literature.

In 2024, there were 356 programs existing in higher education with particular emphasis or focus on assisting SWIDs when matriculating into an institution (Think College, 2024.). Twenty years ago, only a handful of these types of programs on campuses worked with SWIDs (Kelley & Westling, 2019). The growth of programs in higher education is in direct response to the increasing numbers of SWIDs with an interest in continuing their education beyond P-12. Different types of programs for SWIDs in higher education address the varying needs of these students in higher education. Example programs include dual enrollment, comprehensive transition and postsecondary (CTP) program, and transition and postsecondary program for students with intellectual disabilities (TPSID). The various programs provide different functions and services for SWIDs. The more comprehensive and funded these programs are, the more SWIDs can take advantage of student support services on campus available to all students.

One such area is academic advising. The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) recognizes advising as "integral to fulfilling the teaching and learning mission of higher education" (2006). Research has shown how interactions with advisors have become integral to retention, progression, and overall academic success for all students (Campbell & Nutt, 2008; Henning, 2014; Nutt, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1987; Young-Jones et al., 2013). Academic advisors provide important and timely information to students related to coursework, programs/majors, academic support, graduation, and career guidance. SWIDs can benefit from their interactions with academic advisors as much as other students when attending higher education. Because programs that support SWIDs on campus are still developing and not numerous in higher education, the benefit of working with advisors, and how academic advisors are connected and integrated into the education experience for SWIDs is important to understand (Dong et al., 2023). This study sought to understand the experiences of both SWIDs and academic advisors as they worked together in navigating the successful integration of these students in understanding and matriculating through academic life on campus. Currently, the research documenting the experience of SWIDs working with academic advisors in any postsecondary program is limited, which includes how programs working with SWIDs utilize academic advising and advisors. The purpose of the phenomenological case study is to identify and understand the lived experiences of both SWIDs while working with academic advisors, and the academic advisors who work with these students. The specific phenomenon under study is collaborative experience between students with intellectual disabilities (SWIDs) and academic advisors as they navigate academic integration and progression through campus life. Our primary goal was to capture both the essence and meaning of these experiences from SWIDs and academic advisors, from the perspective of both students and advisors. The following research questions were developed to provide insight into the phenomenon.

1. What are the experiences of students with intellectual disabilities (SWIDs) as part of a comprehensive transition and postsecondary (CTP) program when working with academic advisors at a university?
2. What are the experiences of university academic advisors assigned to work with SWIDs as part of supporting student success?

How do academic advisors support campus integration for SWIDs throughout the advising relationship?

Conceptual Framework

Social constructivism is the guiding lens for this qualitative phenomenological single case study. Social constructivism emphasizes the importance of culture and context in understanding what occurs in society and constructing knowledge based on this understanding (Derry, 1999; McMahon, 1997). Social constructivism's three main underpinnings are knowledge, reality, and learning. Hence this framework highlights that one's reality is constructed through human interactions, knowledge is socially constructed through interaction with others and the environment to create meaning, and learning is therefore the social process that occurs when individuals engage in social activities (McMahon, 1997).

Furthermore, social constructivism seeks to understand the world in which the participant lives, works, and interacts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participants' social worlds are constructed from their interactions with their culture and society. Thus, knowledge of each SWID's social world assists in interpreting participants' constructions of meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Postsecondary education programs can be viewed as social worlds in which students can encounter different learning and social–based experiences. These experiences ultimately foster the opportunity for new knowledge to be obtained and for individuals to shape their own derived positionality. All in all, social constructivism corresponds with the goal of postsecondary education programs to deliver experiences that will enable students to construct their meaningfulness and use these experiences to drive their career selections and pursuits. Therefore, social constructivism can be considered an appropriate framework for this research.

Review of Literature

The need for postsecondary education options for SWIDs has been well-established in the literature (Becht et al., 2020; Grigal & Hart, 2010; Bozalek et al., 2024; Grigal et al., 2013; Kelley & Westling, 2019; Kleinert et al., 2012; Roberts-Dahm et al., 2019; Westling et al., 2013). Traditionally, SWIDs were not considered suited for the college experience; they did not meet the matriculation requirements and had intense support needs (Kleinert et al., 2012; Raynor et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEOA, 2008) in 2008, spawned the availability of more postsecondary education opportunities for SWIDs (Kelley & Westling, 2019; Raynor et al., 2016; Rifa'I, 2023; Dogutas, 2025). This impact has been felt nationwide with twenty states now having legislation that addresses postsecondary education for SWIDs.

Much like traditional peers, SWIDs are now turning to postsecondary education opportunities to seek the most appropriate educational options to meet their long-term career goals and objectives (Grigal & Hart, 2010; Kelley & Westling, 2019; Kleinert et al., 2012). Think College in 2010 highlighted that SWIDs must consider their needs, goals, and objectives for wanting to attend a postsecondary educational opportunity to match the best fit (Grigal & Hart, 2010). While the existence of 356 postsecondary programs nationwide (ThinkCollege, 2024) is considered progression, ensuring that institutions of higher education continue to integrate these programs into the campus environment is imperative for sustainability.

Postsecondary Education Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

With the new development of postsecondary education (PSE) programs, it has been apparent that access has not always equated to success as postsecondary education opportunities for SWIDs were not traditionally viewed as realistic (Grigal et al., 2012; Kelley & Westling, 2019; Kleinert et al., 2012; Raynor et al., 2016; Shaari et al., 2022; Gjini & Hernandez-Gantes, 2025). For example, since SWIDs did not meet the "traditional" matriculation requirements for higher education due to their unique learning needs, it was assumed that SWIDs would not be well in an integrated collegiate experience (Björnsdóttir, 2017; Kleinert et al., 2012; Plotner & Marshall, 2014). This assumption was a major factor in why postsecondary education opportunities for SWIDs were not available until the 2000s (Raynor et al., 2016). Before the 2000's, only a select few postsecondary education programs for SWIDs existed. However, presently there are approximately 356 PSE programs for SWIDs nationwide (ThinkCollege, 2024).

This expansive growth in postsecondary education opportunities was deemed a response to the rising number of SWIDs exiting high school and seeking educational opportunities within higher education. PSE programs are in three categories: Dual-Enrollment (DE) programs, Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary (CTP) programs, and Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability (TPSID) Programs.

Dual-Enrollment Programs

As of 2018, 108 dual/concurrent enrollment programs nationwide existed to serve students still enrolled in public school after 12th grade (Grigal & Hart, 2010; Grigal et al., 2012; Grigal & Papay, 2018; Thoma et al., 2011). SWIDs enrolled in DE programs may need additional transitional support under the purview of IDEA. Hence these students are still under IDEA protection and would still be considered students at their corresponding school district. DE programs are an important opportunity for SWIDs who need additional preparation in acquiring the academic, social, or independent functioning levels to be successful in a fully inclusive HEI postsecondary program.

Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary (CTP) Programs

CTP programs are non-degree-seeking programs designed to support and educate SWIDs through a sponsoring college, university, or technical education center approved by the USDOE (Grigal & Papay, 2018; Project10, n.d.; VanBergeijk & Cavanagh, 2012). The program requirements for admission vary, programs serve SWIDs by providing individual support and services for academic and social inclusion in courses, extracurriculars, and other

aspects of the HEI regular postsecondary program. An example of a statewide CTP is found in Kentucky, this program features academic enrichment, career exploration, independent living instruction, social integration, and eligibility for federal and state scholarships (Parker, 2025).

Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability (**TPSID)**

Programs

TPSID programs are PSE programs funded by the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) and are managed by ThinkCollege (Grigal & Papay, 2018; Grigal et al., 2019; USDOE, n.d.). TPSID programs serve SWIDs just as CTP programs do; however, the TPSID grants are highly competitive, which explains why only currently 38 TPSID-funded programs exist nationally. TPSID programs are regarded as the model for comprehensive transition and postsecondary education programs for SWIDs and provide a focus on academic enrichment, socialization/inclusiveness, independent living skills, self-advocacy, and integrated work experiences and career skills that lead to gainful employment (USDOE, n.d.). Examples of these kinds of program include University of South Carolina-CarolinaLIFE (USC CarolinaLIFE, n.d.) and Louisiana State University ICS Program (LSU Integrative Community Studies, n.d.).

Table 1. Summary Comparison of CTP and TPSID Programs

Feature	CTP Programs	TPSID Programs
Approval source	ED approval under HEA for financial aid	Federal ED competitive grants
Service focus	Academic/life-skills in a campus environment	Inclusive model programs with comprehensive wrap-around services
Examples	Kentucky CTPs, Forward Pathway	CarolinaLIFE (USC), ICS (LSU), NSF-funded centers
Outcomes/Evidence base	Designed for academic and social integration	National data on credentialing and employment success

Institutional Research

Presently when reviewing literature regarding postsecondary education programs for SWIDs there is ample research on the development/descriptions of postsecondary education programs for SWIDs, empirical literature about faculty and staff, and the experiences and perspectives of traditional students who have interacted with SWIDs during their postsecondary journey. In this section, there is a brief synopsis of the literature present in each of the domains described.

Program Development

Almost one-third of the articles included in a meta-analysis focused on programmatic literature, such as program description, program development, and program evaluation (Papay & Grigal, 2019). In reviewing these articles, it was noted that most were published after 2010, correlating with the explosive growth of PSE programs. The articles mostly focused on program description and development research and program evaluation research. While this research is not directly related to this specific study it is essential to acknowledge the saturation of literature about programs' initial beginnings, overall structures, and evaluation methods.

Faculty and Staff

Faculty and staff members are integral stakeholders in promoting an inclusive educational experience for SWIDs; hence exploring literature regarding their attitudes, beliefs, and views is critical (Gibbons et al., 2015; Gilson et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2016; McCabe et al., 2022; O'Connor et al., 2012). Before 2021, there were only three articles published focusing on faculty and staff perspectives on the inclusion of SWIDs in PSE programs (Gibbons et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2016; O'Connor et al., 2012). The findings of all three studies indicated that the staff strongly supported inclusive educational opportunities for SWIDs and there was a level of willingness to develop additional accessible instructional practices. Both O'Connor et al. (2012) and Jones et al. (2016) found that SWIDs positively affected the classroom setting. However, a study by Jones et al. (2016) provided further insight into the inner workings of the barriers and challenges that faculty experience during the inclusion process. Gibbon et al. (2015) was one of the first studies to consider traditional students and faculty alike. The results of the study found that the faculty were willing to embrace the programs and there was apprehension regarding the effect on the overall classroom environments and traditional peers. In contrast, the students surveyed within this study did not display apprehension towards inclusion.

To further understand faculty and staff perspectives, in 2021 a study examining campus-wide attitudes before bringing a PSE program to campus was conducted (Carothers et al., 2021). This study specifically examined the campus-wide attitudes of all constituents toward the academic and social inclusion of SWIDS (Carothers et al., 2021). The study's results denoted that all constituencies (administration, faculty, staff, and traditional university students) displayed a positive attitude toward the inclusion of SWIDs in academics. In 2022, another study was conducted to examine faculty's motivation for including SWIDs in their courses from diverse academic disciplines (McCabe et al., 2022). The results of the study indicated that faculty were willing to have SWIDs in their courses and indicated that teaching in an inclusive college course personally and positively affected them.

Traditional Students

Traditional university students' views, attitudes, and perspectives are valuable to consider as they are integral to inclusive college experience for SWIDs as well as they are the consumers in the education world and have a direct impact on the campus climate regarding inclusive PSE programs. While the review revealed that few studies have been conducted solely on traditional student's perspectives, the results from two studies investigating traditional students' perspectives indicated support for SWIDs' rights to inclusive programs at the postsecondary level (Griffin et al., 2012; Westling et al., 2013). As mentioned in the previous section, studies have been conducted on faculty and student attitudes toward the inclusion of SWIDs (Gibbons et al., 2015; Gilson et al., 2020) as well as campus-wide attitudes toward the inclusion of SWIDs (Carothers et al., 2021). These studies showcased a higher response rate for traditional students and noted their overall support for inclusion (Carothers et al., 2021; Gibbons et al., 2015; Gilson et al., 2020). In Carothers et al. (2021), 71.74% or 1018 of campus-wide respondents were university students, in Gibbons et al. (2015) 97.1% of university student participants felt that SWIDs should be allowed a typical and regular life, and finally, the Gilson et al. (2020) study revealed that 86% or 1273 university students agreed that SWIDs should have the opportunity to continue their education at a PSE program.

Advising for SWIDs in Postsecondary Education Settings

Presently when reviewing literature regarding postsecondary education programs for SWIDs there is ample research on the development/descriptions of postsecondary education programs for SWIDs, empirical literature about key stakeholders, and the experiences and perspectives of traditional students who have interacted with SWIDs during their postsecondary journey. As many colleges and universities across the country are broadening their mission to promote educational opportunities to an increasingly diverse population which includes SWIDs, more research is emerging regarding the critical considerations and discussion points to help guide HEIs in program development (Plotner & Marshall, 2014). This includes participant admission, access to academic and nonacademic services, and areas of liability (Plotner & Marshall, 2014).

Access to Advising

As higher education institutions seek to develop new postsecondary program options, significant planning must occur to create inclusive access throughout the campus. Successful planning requires engagement throughout the campus including academic/student services, financial aid, health services, university housing, disability services, academic departments, and of course, student advising (Grigal et al., 2021). However, while it seems important that SWIDs have access to advising-based services, a survey completed in 2009 by Grigal et al. (2012) found that of the 149 PSE programs across 39 states, half of the students did not access academic or disability-related advising throughout the institution of higher education. The programs that were not using the services stated they provided more "specialized services" through their program staffing. However, another study conducted in 2018 examined predictors of access to college classes of 672 SWIDs attending TPSID programs and noted that one significant positive predictor was whether a student attended a program offering access to regular student advising (Papay et al., 2018).

Access in High school

Transitioning from high school to PSE programs or employment can be challenging for all youth especially SWIDs (Wilczenski et al., 2017). The literature is unclear on what kind of academic advising access SWIDs must help prepare them for the transition into PSE programs and experiences. While students with intellectual disabilities can and do attend college (Kleinert et al., 2012), the question is, how and with what support? With the significant advances in educational programming and PSE program options for SWIDs, the transition period from adolescence to adulthood is critical (Wilczenski et al., 2017). Therefore, SWIDs need more shared responsibility for transition options and an understanding of how to access and prepare to enter and be successful in higher education. This shared responsibility involves collaboration across a variety of service providers and supports in

the K-12 settings (Wilczenski et al., 2017). While the need has been acknowledged, there is limited to no literature about access to advising services in the K-12 system that supports the transition to higher education PSE programs.

Methodology

This study proposed to understand not only how academic advisors are connected to a particular program that supports and works with SWIDs at a university in the southeastern United States, but also to learn more about the experiences of both SWIDs and advisors when working together. Using a program built specifically to work with and support SWIDs on campus and the academic advisors assigned to work with this program will help the researchers hear directly from both groups about their experiences with academic advising. To achieve this goal, the researchers employed a phenomenological single case study to listen and understand the unique perspectives of students with intellectual disabilities and the academic advisors who support them. For this study, the case is the comprehensive transition and postsecondary (CTP) program at a medium-sized four-year institution in the southeastern United States. As there are still very few types of programs serving SWIDs in higher education, it is important to understand how the students served by the CTP program perceive their academic advising experience in a real-life contemporary bounded system (Creswell, 2018). This study incorporated open-ended semi-structured individual interviews with both students in the program and advisors who serve them to gain a deeper insight into participants' voices and perceptions of academic advising (Yin, 2009).

History and Structure of Program Under Study

The specific comprehensive transition and postsecondary (CTP) program used for this study was established following state legislation in 2016 to provide postsecondary opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities. It became the first program of its kind in the region served by the institution and celebrated its inaugural graduation in May 2023. The program operates on a two-year model with four consecutive semesters, requiring 41 credit hours that include core inclusive courses, electives, and experiential learning such as internships and service-learning. Students receive individualized academic and career support, mentorship, and access to campus resources to promote independence and employment readiness. Enrollment is limited to approximately 20 students, with up to 10 new participants admitted annually, and funding includes scholarships and grant support to sustain program growth and accessibility.

Participants and Sampling

To gain insight into the perceptions of their experience with academic advising as part of a comprehensive transition and postsecondary (CTP) program at a medium-sized four-year institution in the southeastern United States, a purposive sample of 7 (2 male and 5 female) first and second-year students enrolled (in the CTP and institution), for the spring and fall terms, and two (1 female and 1 male), university assigned academic advisors (Advisor I and Advisor II), participated in this study. A purposive sample allows researchers to collect information-rich data from participants who have knowledge or experience with the phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Creswell 2017; Patton, 2002). Students were asked to participate in the study if they had met with their university academic advisor at least two times over two academic terms (fall and spring). 12 students were invited to participate, with 7 providing consent and agreeing to participate in an individual interview with either one or both researchers. Both university-assigned academic advisors were invited and agreed to participate in the study. Participants were informed that their responses would remain confidential, and pseudonyms would be used for any reporting of data.

Data Collection

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was acquired before data collection began to ensure the ethical treatment of participants. Again, 12 students were invited to participate, but only 7 agreed to participate in individual interviews. Two academic advisors were invited and agreed to participate. Individual interviews were conducted and lasted approximately 20-40 minutes, depending on the participant. All interviews were conducted face-to-face using Otter.ai, a real-time AI interview and transcription online tool. To fully explore and understand the extent of the lived experiences of SWIDs enrolled in a postsecondary education program at a university in the southeastern United States, the researchers collected data by conducting one-on-one interviews with SWIDs, conducting one-on-one interviews with academic advisors, and reviewing course of study/elective documentation.

The first data source was the student interview questions used to guide the one–on–one interviews with SWIDs, which sought to delve into the students' perceptions of academic advising, their experiences working with a university academic advisor, and how it benefited their integration into the university.

The second data source was the academic advisors' interview questions used to guide the one-on-one interviews with advisors to provide context into their advising philosophy(s), experiences working with SWIDs, and how the

advising community at large and at the institution understands and serves SWIDS. Furthermore, this data source was also used to support statements and experiences expressed by SWIDs.

The third data source was the program of study document developed in collaboration with postsecondary education program staff and academic advisors. This data source was used to provide an understanding of the sequence of courses SWIDs enrolled in and how the coursework aligned with their long-term goals and experiences.

The three sources provided validity of the data through triangulation. It is vital to "employ triangulation of data collection or analysis to achieve a rounded, multilayered understanding of the research topic" (Yardley, 2000, p.222). This provides a more robust reporting of the phenomenon under study.

Data Analysis

Each student and academic advisor interview was recorded using the Otter.ai transcription tool. After each student interview, the transcription was briefly reviewed to ensure that the researcher's understanding of the students' responses was correctly labeled in the software. After this, the researchers conducted a second review of the transcript to provide multiple opportunities for member checking with assistive reading as needed throughout each research process. Finally, after reviewing the transcription, the students completed a final check for validity. Both academic advisor interview transcripts were reviewed and sent to each participant for member checking after each interview.

The researchers read the transcripts separately and identified keywords and ideas relevant to the study. Next, each researcher reviewed notes from each transcript to begin coding keywords and allowing themes to emerge. The two researchers then came together to compare notes and themes to find any congruency in the data of both the student participants and academic advisor participants. After analyzing all the data, the congruent themes were used to create significant descriptions and statements (Yin, 2009). This led the researchers to identify distinct experiences as part of the phenomenon being studied.

Attempting to increase the verisimilitude of the study, the researchers purposely analyzed the content of all the data separately and then collaboratively compared notes for emergent themes. This method of content analysis allowed themes to emerge from the data (Patton, 2002). Trustworthiness and confirmability of the data were established by ensuring that the findings and discussion best represented the realities of the student and advisor participants (Patton, 2002). Additionally, the researchers established credibility by identifying and describing their experiences about the phenomenon under study.

Results

Based on the review of participant-approved interview transcripts, the researchers identified two main themes (a) interconnectedness and (b) support for a connected experience. These themes are ranked in order of importance, determined by how frequently they emerged from the participant interviews. Each theme contains as many descriptive details as identified in the participants' interview accounts. Participants are comprised of students with a documented intellectual disability and academic advisors who support them; some accounts were not as detailed in certain theme sections.

Theme One: Interconnectedness

Interconnectedness as a theme was not unexpected. It is the interweaving that provides a closeness to the campus and institution. This theme was uncovered and expressed through many participants' accounts. For example, Bob stated, "The transition to student made me feel welcomed, like a community." Similar thoughts were shared by Ziva in her account stating, "My advisor helped me feel better about being here, made me feel more connected, more connected to the university."

Acculturation

Acculturation refers to the adapting process one goes through when entering a new cultural experience. This word best describes the lived experience reiterated by the participants when starting the PSE program. Doris described, "When I first started, I was so nervous, but they helped me get used to it, so I was good and more comfortable with everybody." Part of the role of advisors is to help with the acculturation process, with many participants giving accounts of these experiences. Ziva explained, "My advisor gave me advice when I started as if I was struggling." This sentiment was also reiterated by Brittany who stated, "She helped me."

The accounts of the participants indicated they felt supported and assisted by their respective advisors, allowing the acculturation process to occur more smoothly. One specific testament demonstrating that was expressed by Nisha; "Academic advising means to me when there is an advisor to help you and support you in any way possible

related to your academic work." Jim, who was advisor II, described one of his favorite parts of the acculturation process:

> I think one of my favorite things is just working with people with different intellectual differences because at the end of the day, we are all extremely similar and our needs here on campus are pretty much going to be the same. To take classes, make friends, and you know grow as a person, grow as a student, and really do things with intention.

Awareness

Awareness was another component that both participants and advisors felt was pivotal in providing proactive and relevant support. Nisha explained that her advisor "knows I have a disability, and she provides me with a lot of guidance." The advisor's knowledge and awareness of her disability allowed for a more prescriptive advising style. Ironically, when Nisha's advisor was asked about her specific advising style she mentioned "prescriptive." From the advisor standpoint, advisor II disclosed his experience working with SWIDs in the high school setting and described how this experience allowed him to be a better and more aware advisor. Advisor II, Jim also stated:

> College campuses are here for everybody but especially for us as advisors, we must strive to meet the needs of our students, regardless of who that may be, and what that might look like. And I think as the world changes and as the world evolves around us and we become more inclusive as a society it is really important conversations about awareness are at the forefront.

Lack of Availability

Certain college classes can be in high demand, causing frustration for students attempting to access needed courses that may fill up quickly. One major role of advisors is to help students select the appropriate classes based on their interests, previous course history, and career paths. Advisor II Jim mentioned that he has mastered the art of skillfully advising students who may need support in selecting the most appropriate course based on their needs and strengths. He provided an example explaining to a student, "Yeah I understand that you love biology but maybe bio one may not be the best class this semester." This was his attempt at guiding a student in selecting a course that matched the appropriate track needed to complete his program of study.

Another issue highlighted by both advisors is the struggle to find courses, especially for SWIDs, because of the limited 1000-2000 level courses each semester. Advisor II Jim shares that these courses tend to be competitive and fill up quickly, and since SWIDs in PSE programs are considered "non-degree seeking students", it can be challenging to enroll them in the appropriate courses.

Theme Two: Support for a Connected Experience

Theme two highlights the importance of the support system students build with advisors during the college experience, allowing them to become interconnected with the campus. During their search for support, participants highlighted relationships and described how they were pushed to expand their bubble until it popped as impactful points. The following components allowed them to feel the direct impact that advising provided, with that connected experience then emerging.

Relationship building

Building a relationship with SWIDs can help to gain trust and allow for more open communication. Advisors who put relationship building at the forefront allow students to feel a more individualized advising style instead of hundreds of students who need support. Nisha stated that her relationship with Advisor I, Alice, was incredibly impactful on her overall experience and getting connected. Nisha shared, "I love her so much because we have the same her like energy and her willingness to actually want to help me and achieve like all my goals and academics. I resonate with her as a person." The relationship that Nisha's advisor built with her allowed her to feel excited about her advising sessions and begin to understand how to access her support system in higher education. As important as a good relationship can be, the void students can feel from not having this experience can be just as impactful. Brittany describes her experience as "different because" her advisor "left in the middle of the year." This transition was hard, but she admitted that when she "got a new advisor. I did not know who she was, but this year has been amazing now that I know her and have a relationship and she is helping."

Expanding the bubble and popping

Visualizing an expanding bubble that grows and grows until it pops is the detailed imagery that participants described in this study. Students would enter the PSE program and begin rather reserved, apprehensive, and nervous. Through the support of both program staff and the assigned advisors in exploratory advising, the participants provided this image of the support increasing and testing their limits, pushing them outside their typical comfort zones. Eventually, students' bubbles are expanded so they pop, generating a student who is fully supported and embedded in the variety of on-campus supports. Nisha described discussing her big dreams when first arriving on campus, never thinking they would become a reality, "I discussed being an RA with her and coming back to a non-degree seeking program", and now she is working for the campus housing department and continuing her education post-graduation. Bob, a first-year year student recalls how his "advisor helped me think about things and get more involved." This was so pivotal to him during this time.

Discussion

As increasing numbers of SWIDs have entered post-secondary education in the last 20 years, programs to assist in their transition, integration, and success have also grown. From a mere handful in 2000 (Kelley & Westling, 2019) to more than 356 in 2024 (ThinkCollege, n.d.), programs that work specifically with SWIDs have become integral within the higher education student service landscape. One such student service area is academic advising, specifically the relationship SWIDs build with academic advisors. This study specifically chronicled the lived experiences of both SWIDs as part of a comprehensive transition and postsecondary (CTP) program, and the academic advisors assigned to work with them. Although most of the SWIDs interviewed for this study had no prior experience working with an academic advisor in post-secondary education, they reported significant implications in their newly established advising relationships aspositively impacting their successful integration into the campus. The study's findings highlight important aspects of how SWIDs strengthen their connection to the university by working with academic advisors, helping to create more opportunities for them to push their boundaries and challenge past helping behaviors.

The participants in this study indicated a willingness to engage with academic advisors in similar ways to other student populations. This engagement creates opportunities for both groups; SWIDs and academic advisors to build a relationship where both groups can mutually benefit from working with each other. For the SWIDs, the student/advisor relationship created a connection not only to university academic advising services but also to the much broader campus community which is often a natural evolution from the advising work. As research has shown this relationship supports increased rates of retention and progression among college students (Braxton et al., 2014; Campbell & Nutt, 2008; Nutt, 2003), it also promotes connection and integration among students into the wider campus community which in turn supports retention efforts (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1987; Young-Jones et al., 2013). For participants in this study, this interconnection created in the advising relationship contributes to increasing the integration of SWIDs into the larger campus environment.

As research supports the positive benefits of the advisor/student relationship in connection to the university, it is not without challenges. As our study participants indicated, for SWIDs to become more connected, the university needs to provide more resources and support. Without the work of a grant-funded CTP on a university/college campus to advocate and support SWIDs in their postsecondary journey, universities/colleges are not likely to provide direct financial resources to engage and connect SWIDs. This again is where academic advisors play a pivotal role in connecting SWIDs to the larger campus community, in partnership, but also independently of the CTP program, leading to greater integration in all parts of the campus experience. This is not unlike other student populations engaging with their academic advisors during regular advising meetings, who also want to learn more and can connect beyond this advisor/student relationship with specific program faculty or staff, other students, and various departments and organizations across campus. The literature has shown that colleges and universities that encourage, support, and create opportunities for students to engage in both academic and co-curricular activities, have a much stronger connection to the institution, are more likely to be engaged, retained, and persist to graduation (Astin, 1984; Kuh, 1995; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1987, 2000, 2005). Ultimately, based upon the lived experiences of the SWIDs, there is a strong desire and benefit from purposeful and deliberate connection and integration into the campus community, often supported by the advisor/student relationship.

The findings from the study indicate that when an on-campus CTP program collaborates with academic advisors from the campus advising community, it creates opportunities for greater connection and in turn campus-wide integration for SWIDs. Working with academic advisors creates and strengthens interconnectedness for participants, which leads to greater awareness of campus resources and involvement opportunities. As study participants stated, this symbiotic relationship expands their awareness of resources and pops the 'bubble' that many operated in. Which in some cases was limiting how much responsibility they took for their success and

integration into the greater campus community. Collaborative efforts also create more awareness for academic advisors in understanding and learning more about working with diverse populations such as SWIDs. Additionally, the study also highlighted a larger university issue of lower-level course availability that acutely impacts SWIDs, as they are considered non-degree-seeking students and have a later registration deadline and limited courses that would be the best fit based on program requirements. Furthermore, course availability is also part of a larger issue in how the university prioritizes different student populations on campus like non-degree seeking students. To ensure the sustainability of CTP programs on university and college campuses nationwide; campus commitment to interweaving CTP programs into the fabric of the hosting institution is critical. This process will ensure proper resources and opportunities are available, such as academic advising, for all student populations on campus to connect, integrate, and succeed during their postsecondary journey.

Implications, limitations, and recommendations for future study

This study has implications for post-secondary programs serving SWIDs, academic advising, and university administrators supporting these programs on campuses. These stakeholders have a role in helping SWIDs connect and fully integrate into the higher education experience that is available to the entire general student population.

The limited number of post-secondary programs serving SWIDs in higher education presents a challenge in how much change they can advocate and produce for SWIDs as part of the overall student population on a campus. However, the funding and with it, new programs, have grown in the last 20 years (Kelley & Westling, 2019). With over 356 programs as of 2024 (ThinkCollege, n.d.), and continued interest from state education agencies, the potential to gain critical mass in the number of programs continues to grow. While these programs can vary in location, design, and structure, they all serve the needs of an increasing population of SWIDs in higher education (Agarwal et al., 2021; Griffin et al., 2010; NPCTE, n.d.; Qian et al., 2020). CTP programs need to continue building toward a fully integrated experience for SWIDs, so these students can continue to benefit from higher employment rates and wages (Cimera et al., 2018; Grigal et al., 2011; Grigal et al., 2019; Moore & Schelling, 2015; Ryan et al., 2019; Sannicandro et al., 2018), and higher levels of academic skills, independent living skills, and self-advocacy than SWIDs who do not attend post-secondary education (Grigal et al., 2012; NPCTE, n.d. Thoma et al., 2011). This could include a purposeful and deliberate building of relationships between a newly established on-campus CTP program and the academic advising unit that exists to work with the entire student population.

One of the first university areas college students interact with is academic advising. This interaction creates a connection to a university and research shows is vital to the early and continued success of increasing student persistence (Braxton et al., 2014; Campbell & Nutt, 2008; Nutt, 2003). Research finds students with intellectual disabilities who do attend higher education are employed at higher rates with higher wages than their counterparts who do not. Academic advising and advisors have a key role in supporting the necessary workforce skill development needed by SWIDs and in helping connect these students to the larger campus which in turn supports a more integrated higher education experience. Research on all students shows that participating in a fully integrated experience supports student success and persistence, as data from this study demonstrates, SWIDs should have the same opportunities (Astin, 1984; Kuh, 1995; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1987, 2000, 2005), it can start with academic advising.

Finally, university stakeholders, who support post-secondary programs for SWIDs on campuses, and oversee academic advising efforts, have the ability and power to provide support through actions and institutional buy-in to create a fully integrated experience for SWIDs. University stakeholders must collaborate, support, and provide resources that back the efforts of programs for SWIDs and areas like academic advising. While many post-secondary programs are grants or outside funded, they still require space on campuses, staff to support them, and opportunities, both academic and non-academic, for SWIDs to connect to the full higher education experience. Examples include creating additional sections of important courses with space for SWIDs or even opening specific degree or program pathways for SWIDs. A fully integrated experience for SWIDs should include the opportunities available for all student populations.

Limitations

Study limitations result from a small sample and one program case study, which makes it challenging to apply to other post-secondary programs for SWIDs. Participants in the study are all from the same CTP program and attend the same university. Considerable variations in participants' age, educational levels, previous work experiences, and social experiences could affect their perceptions in the study. Finally, as this was a qualitative study, a mixed-methods approach could expand the scope of the study and findings.

Recommendations for future study

As mentioned earlier, creating specific program pathways for SWIDs as part of a non-degree program could expand these students' opportunities to connect to their peers, and more faculty teaching in a program. It could create greater exposure to the larger academic community on campus, additional academic advisors, and more awareness of organized student groups. Additionally, as has become progressively popular in higher education, increasing access to digital badging, industry certifications, and micro-credentials for students with intellectual disabilities as another academic pathway, could help increase the numbers of SWIDs entering the workforce from higher education. This in turn supports SWIDs in gaining higher wages, which the research has shown is increasingly more likely for SWIDs who attend and complete some amount of post-secondary education.

In creating more focused academic pathways for students with intellectual disabilities, their success becomes even more important to institutional performance metrics. As funding decisions are increasingly tied to certain performance metrics like retention and graduation of students, institutions with CTP programs, and/or increasing numbers of students with intellectual disabilities, administrators and policymakers would be wise to consider how well their campuses support a fully academic and on-campus experience for students with intellectual disabilities. Using areas like academic advising to increase the support and success of students with intellectual disabilities is a natural fit, one that already exists and, in many ways, would not require new or additional resources.

The current study featured only one CTP site and students who were part of that program. Future studies could include multi-site case studies, as the location of the CTP program under study is in a state with multiple post-secondary programs for SWIDs, funded similarly. Involving additional programs, at different institutions with potentially varying advising structures, could yield more generalizable study results. It may also be beneficial to study newer and established programs to understand how differences in time and structure impact the integration of SWIDs on campuses.

The increasing numbers of SWIDs attending post-secondary education and the post-secondary programs that serve them warrant a more comprehensive approach to creating a fully integrated higher education experience. This begins in part by connecting SWIDs to an area like academic advising. Academic advising is a crucial step in helping students connect academically and socially on a college campus. SWIDs who work with campus-wide academic advisors can benefit from a stronger connection to the institution, increased opportunities for student success, and a more fully integrated higher education experience during their time on campus.

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