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Perceptions Regarding Service/Volunteerism in Postsecondary Education with Students with Intellectual Disabilities

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Perceptions Regarding Service/Volunteerism in Postsecondary Education with Students
with Intellectual Disabilities

by

Coraliz Martinez

A Thesis
Submitted to the Honors College of
The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to analyze the perceptions postsecondary education programs for students with intellectual disabilities have on the topic of service learning and volunteerism. The goal is to analyze college programs in the Southeast portion of the United States to determine if this topic is incorporated into their curriculum and analyze their perception of the topic. Twenty-six staff members from different postsecondary education programs completed a questionnaire that analyzed their program as a whole. The data indicates that the programs that incorporate service/volunteerism within their program prioritize service/volunteerism and state it has made a positive impact on students with intellectual disabilities within their program. Conversely, the programs that did not incorporate this topic within their curriculum expressed a neutral perception of the topic. Furthermore, participants from both populations prioritized service/volunteerism last among other topics such as employment, academics, socialization, and independent living. This study implies that college programs that incorporate service learning or volunteerism within their curriculum have positively affected their students with intellectual disabilities' personal, social, and professional lives compared to programs that do not incorporate these initiatives.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my family, especially my parents. Thank you for your continual dedication and the support you have given me throughout my life.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Firstly, I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Jerry Alliston. Dr. Alliston was there to guide me with every step of the process, while also giving me the independence I needed throughout the writing process. I'm deeply grateful for the support he has shown and the resources he has provided along the way. Second, I would like to thank Suraksha Khanal. She was one of the graduate students that were a part of Dr. Alliston's team that provided tremendous feedback, resources, and guidance throughout the survey process. Lastly, I would like to thank the Honors College at The University of Southern Mississippi for their guidance and resources that allowed me to complete this thesis.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ADA   Americans with Disabilities Act

CTP   Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary

HEOA   Higher Education Opportunity Act

IDEA   Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

SEPSEA   Southeast Postsecondary Education Alliance

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Legislative History of Postsecondary Education

Students with intellectual disabilities have not always had the freedom to access postsecondary education, much less a high-school education. However, legislation passed throughout the years has allowed students with intellectual disabilities to pursue inclusive higher education. The passing of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, also known as the Rehab Act, prohibited federal agencies and programs that receive federal funding to discriminate against individuals based on disabilities. The act defined individuals with disabilities as a person that has a mental or physical impairment that affects activities in their daily life, or a person that has had such impairment in the past (Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion, 2023). Section 504 of the Rehab Act enforced this idea by not only prohibiting discrimination in federally funded programs but also in school boards that operated on federal funding. Although the act did not specifically protect students with disabilities from discrimination, it assured protection for job applicants and employees in those federal programs (Baker, 2022).

In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed into legislation and reinforced the Rehab Act by expanding protection outside of federal agencies. The ADA provided protection from discrimination in not only employment, but also in transportation, communications, and access to state and government services (U.S. Department of Labor, 2022). Since the ADA broadened its protection to services outside of federal agencies, higher education programs were able to implement accommodations for students with disabilities. This act prohibited any discrimination against students with disabilities that required accommodations in their education (Baker, 2022). Furthermore,

the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was also revised in 1990. It was originally passed in 1975 as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act and made significant progress in providing access to quality education to students with disabilities (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2023). IDEA protected the rights of toddlers, children, and adolescents with disabilities in the education system by mandating that schools provide them with the resources and services necessary for their success. IDEA was further amended in 2004 by providing students with a more inclusive education. The amendment allowed students with disabilities to be integrated with non-disabled peers and access free public education. Additionally, educational programs catered to students with disabilities received more funding for services such as counseling or speech therapy at no additional cost to families (Baker, 2022). With the passing of each act, students with disabilities were able to experience a more inclusive and quality education that accommodated their needs.

Lastly, the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) was enacted in 2008 which revolutionized access to postsecondary education for students with disabilities. HEOA allowed students with intellectual disabilities access to financial aid such as Pell Grants or Federal Work-Study Programs. Often, students with intellectual disabilities were previously denied access to financial aid services due to a lack of a high school diploma or a General Educational Development equivalence (Lee, 2009). These requirements were waived by the Secretary of Education, and instead applicants were only required to be students enrolled or accepted into a comprehensive transition and postsecondary (CTP) program. CTP programs provide financial aid to students with disabilities pursuing a degree, non-degree, or certificate (Federal Students Aid, 2023).

These programs are offered at participating institutions and provide students with an academic curriculum, internships, career services, and guidance in independent living (Lee, 2009). With the passing of HEOA and higher education programs incorporating CTP within their services, more students with intellectual disabilities can pursue an integrated postsecondary education that prepares them for employment.

Academic Statistics of Students with Intellectual Disabilities

In the United States, there are over 300 postsecondary education programs catered for students with intellectual disabilities. Furthermore, there are only 86 postsecondary education programs in the Southeastern portion of the United States and only one in the state of Mississippi (Think College, 2023). Additionally, most postsecondary education programs have an enrollment of 5-10 students each academic year.

Students with intellectual disabilities are a small part of the overall number of students with disabilities in college. Only one-fifth of all enrolled college students have a disability (Long, 2023). When reviewing graduation rates, the college graduation numbers for students with disabilities are lower compared to non-disabled peers (Long, 2023). Nonetheless, the rate has increased significantly throughout the years. The 2023 Annual Disability Statistics Compendium report stated that around half of students with disabilities that enrolled at a four-year university graduated with a bachelor's degree within six years. In addition, around 20% of 25-35-year-olds with a disability received a bachelor's degree or higher (Long, 2023). Furthermore, the number of college graduates with disabilities has doubled between 2008 and 2021 as postsecondary education programs progress and provide more services (Long, 2023). With the increase of higher

education programs for students with intellectual disabilities, the overall enrollment of students with disabilities has and will increase.

Insight on Postsecondary Education Programs

Students with intellectual disabilities are able to choose from over 300 non-degree programs across the United States. The purpose of these non-degree programs is to provide students with intellectual disabilities with additional support in the areas of employment, independent living, socialization, and academics. Compared to traditional degree plans, these programs offer specific support for students with intellectual disabilities that prepare them for life after college. Students have access to services such as peer mentors, internships, and job-shadowing experiences that guide them through independent living and future job endeavors (Think College, 2022).

College programs for students with intellectual disabilities can be in a 2-year or 4-year university, community college, or even technical college. Depending on the academic program, the length can range between one year to five years and students have the opportunity to reside on or off campus. The programs themselves also vary depending on the goals of the student. For example, some programs are geared toward obtaining a general certificate, degree, or non-degree (Think College, 2022). On the other hand, inclusivity plays a large role in postsecondary programs. Inclusivity in postsecondary programs is determined by whether students with intellectual disabilities are integrated into classes with non-disabled students. Programs that state they are fully inclusive incorporate integration with non-disabled peers in their academic, independent living, and social life. However, some programs are less inclusive meaning more time is spent with other students with intellectual disabilities (National Parent Center on Transition, 2023).

Higher education for students with disabilities focuses on not only the topic of academics, but also employment, socialization, independent living, and at times service/volunteerism. However, each program may prioritize one topic over the other so students with disabilities must take into consideration a program that best fits their interests. In terms of employment, several postsecondary programs offer internships or job shadowing programs to their students. According to Mississippi State University's Access Program, their students are eligible to participate in job shadowing experiences on campus or within their community. Their program has partnered with organizations such as Barnes and Noble College Books, Mitchell Memorial Library, and even at Renasant Bank (Mississippi State University, 2023). By providing students with disabilities access to internships, these students can pursue their career interests and learn how to network.

Independent living and socialization also play a large role in higher education for students with disabilities. Many postsecondary education programs provide their students with a mentor during their academic and independent living experience. The UL Life Program at The University of Louisiana at Lafayette offers three types of mentors within their program that range from academics, internship, and social mentors (University of Louisiana at Lafayette, 2023). The role of academic mentors is to assist students with time management, scheduling, and even budgeting. These mentors guide students into working efficiently and act as tutors in designated assignments. The academic mentors monitor the progress of their students and ensure the students are excelling academically. However, not all students require continual monitoring, others may prefer minimal guidance (Workman & Green, 2019). The role of internship mentors is to assist students with their learning outcomes at their internship sites. The mentors guide students to

efficiently accomplish their tasks and manage their time during their internship. They also focus on teaching students professional behaviors and social skills that can be applied in their future careers (University of Louisiana at Lafayette, 2023). Lastly, social mentors play a large role in introducing students with disabilities to campus life. The role of social mentors is to assist students in participating in campus activities. The mentors achieve this by exploring the student's interests and introducing them to different campus organizations, activities, and peers (Workman & Green, 2019). They also assist students with the transition to independent living by aiding in grocery shopping, meal plans, and housekeeping. The presence of social mentors allows students to interact and create new peers from diverse backgrounds, including non-disabled peers (Carter, 2019).

Lastly, service learning or volunteerism can be found in a few postsecondary education programs for students with disabilities. Integrating service learning or volunteerism into the curriculum for these students helps them apply what they have learned academically, socially, and through internships (Carter, 2019). Service learning allows students to learn new skills that they can use in their future careers, while volunteerism allows individuals to assist local organizations or communities in their spare time. Introducing students with intellectual disabilities to volunteerism allows them to aid their local organizations and businesses in hosting events such as local fairs, marathons, or even fundraisers (Murphy, 2021). It also allows those students to learn fundamental skills such as teamwork, leadership, and communication skills. Additionally, students can interact in a more inclusive environment and meet new peers (Covey, 2022). By emphasizing service learning and volunteerism in postsecondary education programs,

students with disabilities can receive the benefits of volunteering while giving back to their community.

Service Learning Vs. Volunteerism

Key differences are seen when talking about service learning and volunteerism. Service learning is part of a school's curriculum where students can make a connection to their course material, while volunteering is done to help an organization or community. The purpose of service learning is to allow students to have a hands-on experience and apply what they have learned to their current topic (Murphy, 2021). This service may be done once or may be required throughout the program depending on the curriculum. Certain curricula require students to achieve a certain number of service hours to pass and often have an assignment for each activity done. Examples of service learning would include field trips to museums, mission trips, or tutoring other students. Additionally, service learning projects are beneficial for students that are pursuing specific disciplines such as medicine or engineering (Salam et al., 2019). These service learning activities provide students with valuable skills they can use once they enter the workforce.

The purpose of volunteerism is to aid organizations or communities in their own time and is always done voluntarily. Volunteering can be done multiple times or as often as the individual likes. An individual can choose to volunteer at one organization or even with several organizations. Examples of volunteering include assisting in a charity drive, cleaning the beach, or supporting an animal shelter (AmeriCorps, 2023). Although service learning is catered towards schools, volunteering can also be associated with them as well. Some schools require students to volunteer a certain number of hours to pass a class or graduate. In this case, the main difference between service learning and

volunteerism is that service learning requires students to reflect on what they have done while volunteering does not (Murphy, 2021). Even though service learning and volunteerism have key differences, they both share a similarity where individuals can learn valuable skills from their experience that they can apply to their own lives.

Barriers to Service/Volunteerism for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

Although volunteering and service learning has a multitude of benefits, they can also come with some barriers when it comes to individuals with disabilities wanting to participate. The three most common barriers these individuals with intellectual disabilities face when volunteering are attitudinal, programmatic, and economic barriers (Lowery, 2019). The most common among the three is attitudinal due to preconceived notions people may have due to a lack of interaction with individuals with disabilities. This can include thinking that individuals with disabilities are not capable of learning to do certain tasks or that they require a large amount of training and supervision. These preconceived notions can prevent individuals from being able to volunteer in their community, when in fact volunteers with disabilities have shown effective performances (Lowery, 2019).

When it comes to programmatic barriers, several organizations are unsure if they are able to accommodate individuals with disabilities. Organizations have difficulty finding the best resources in order to accommodate individuals with disabilities. However, the best solution is to ask the individual how they can best be accommodated. This allows the staff to prepare the appropriate accommodations and allows the individual to be included in assisting their community (Lowery, 2019). Lastly, economic barriers can be challenging for individuals with disabilities. This can include finding

transportation to the event, needing any equipment or attire, and other expenditures. These financial obstacles could be preventing individuals from assisting at any community events and are a barrier that organizations should reconsider. Organizations that provide any needed equipment for volunteers eradicate this barrier, allowing more individuals to participate (Whelley, Hart, & Zafft, 2004). Additionally, improving and making volunteer programs more inclusive allows students with disabilities to show others that they are capable and able to help their community.

Benefits of Service/Volunteerism for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

Service learning and volunteerism give students with intellectual disabilities the ability to learn essential skills that can be used in their future careers such as teamwork, leadership skills, and communication. Not only does it allow them to learn these essential skills, but they also meet new peers and aid their community. A study was conducted in 2016 in Lillehammer, Norway where a class of students with intellectual disabilities volunteered at their local Youth Olympic Winter Games. The study consisted of twelve students with intellectual disabilities, three teachers, and one head of volunteers (Undlien, 2019). The purpose of the study was to analyze the social values among the students regarding the event itself. The results revealed that the students with intellectual disabilities enjoyed doing their assigned tasks more than the event itself. Several of the students mentioned in their interviews that they enjoyed spending time outside of the classroom and aiding their community by picking up trash and recycling. Additionally, the students learned to communicate and work as a team to complete their assigned tasks (Undlien, 2019). A similar study was also conducted where students with and without intellectual disabilities were required to create a community service project together. The

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students with intellectual disabilities reflected that they enjoyed undertaking new service roles, serving the community, learning self-determination skills, and forming diverse relationships (Manikas et al., 2018). Incorporating volunteer experiences for students with intellectual disabilities allows them to gain more hands-on experience while assisting their community. It allows students to gain new peers and aid others instead of being the ones aided.

Not only do service learning and volunteerism have a grand impact on students with intellectual disabilities, but also on students without intellectual disabilities. A study was conducted consisting of 50 undergraduate college students teaching 24 students with disabilities over a biweekly 10-week course (Woodruff & Sinelnikov, 2014). The study focused on the interactions between the students and how their perceptions of students with disabilities changed over the course of the program. The undergraduate students and the students with intellectual disabilities learned how to interact and build relationships with each other over the course of the program. For example, one of the students decided to host his own basketball tournament with his peers, while another student confided in her mentors about her personal matters. During the final interviews, the undergraduate students revealed that this program had become one of their greatest experiences and they were able to build lasting bonds with their students (Woodruff & Sinelnikov, 2014). Not only were they able to build those bonds, but they also gained experience interacting with students with disabilities and were able to eradicate those preconceived notions they had. On the other hand, the students with intellectual disabilities learned how to display trust among their peers, learn patience, and move out of their comfort zone (Woodruff & Sinelnikov, 2014). The study shows how communication and teamwork between the two

parties allowed them to gain lasting bonds and experiences that can be used for future endeavors.

Purpose

The topic of service learning or volunteerism in postsecondary education programs is one that is often neglected in current curriculums. The majority of higher education programs for students with intellectual disabilities focus on the topics of academics, employment, socialization, and independent living. Although these topics are beneficial in the transition to life after higher education, volunteerism incorporates all of these topics and more. Incorporating service learning or volunteerism into curriculums allows students with intellectual disabilities to learn fundamental skills that can be beneficial to future careers. Additionally, students are able to assist in campus or community activities and interact with non-disabled peers. By placing these students in an inclusive environment alongside students without disabilities, they are able to learn new social skills and behaviors that they can use in the future.

This research focused on analyzing the perceptions that postsecondary education programs have on the topic of service learning or volunteerism. The study analyzed how many higher education programs incorporate this topic in their curriculum and compared their results to those that do not. Furthermore, the study evaluated the impact that volunteerism had on students with intellectual disabilities compared to students enrolled in programs that do not incorporate the topic. This study may provide beneficial information on the impact that service learning and volunteerism have on students with intellectual disabilities and lead to more postsecondary education programs emphasizing this topic within their curriculum.

CHAPTER II: METHOD

Participants

The participants selected for this study included member programs that are associated with an organization known as the Southeast Postsecondary Education Alliance (SEPSEA). The organization consists of the states of Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina. SEPSEA's goal is to promote inclusive postsecondary education for students with both intellectual and developmental disabilities and the purpose is to provide a quality education that is inclusive to all students regarding their postsecondary education. SEPSEA focuses on aspects such as program development, public policy, and even research (SEPSEA, 2023).

The study targeted a total of 86 college programs within the ten states. Specifically, the participants included any faculty members, administrators, or program directors that are involved in their program. These participants were selected based on their college programs being catered to students with intellectual disabilities in the Southeastern portion of the United States.

Procedure

Prior to data collection, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of The University of Southern Mississippi approved the study, and questionnaire sent out to participants. The study was fully conducted online. The questionnaire was reviewed by an expert panel which consisted of five individuals that specialize in programs that are catered to students with disabilities across the United States. The panel of experts selected was outside the SEPSEA region in order to retain the integrity of the study. The feedback collected from

the experts was used to revise and finalize the questionnaire. The questionnaire was sent

out electronically to a total of 86 college programs in the southeastern portion of the

United States using the Qualtrics management software. Participants were given a

summary of what the study involved in the email announcement, before proceeding to the

link for the Qualtrics questionnaire. Once participants reached the questionnaire in

Qualtrics, they received additional information about the study and were asked to consent

prior to starting the survey. They were able to review their rights as a participant and

review information such as the purpose, description, benefits, and risks of the study.

Once participants consented, they were able to begin the questionnaire.

The questionnaire contained a total of 30 questions. The first seven questions in

the questionnaire pertained to the participants' demographics. This included ethnicity,

education, and their role within the program. Questions 8-25 asked participants about

their program in general. Participants were asked how many students are currently

enrolled in their program, how many new students are enrolled each academic year, and

their inclusivity. They were also asked if they required service learning or volunteerism

in their curriculum. This included the required hours, where and what type of volunteer

opportunities students received, and any obstacles they faced while volunteering.

Participants were also asked if students received any recognition or scholarships for

service learning or volunteer activities. Question 26 consisted of a Likert scale format

where participants were asked three questions pertaining to how their program has made

an impact on their students. The first question asked respondents if they believe their

program helps prepare students with disabilities for life after college. The second

question asked if they believe service/volunteerism is a priority in their program, and the

final question asked if service/volunteerism made a positive impact on their students. Question 27 was formatted in a Likert scale format as well and asked respondents to rate the topics of service/volunteerism, academics, independent living, socialization, and employment based on how it is prioritized within their program. The final two questions in the questionnaire asked respondents if they would like to learn more about the topic of service learning or volunteerism and if they wanted to share anything about their program.

The link to the questionnaire was emailed to participants on January 8, 2023, through their public university email address and resent on February 13, 2023. The questionnaire closed on February 28, 2023. To ensure participants did not repeat the questionnaire after the Qualtrics link was sent the second time, an announcement was made to disclose participants not to repeat the survey if they had already completed it the first time. The data collected was also reviewed to ensure participants had not completed the questionnaire twice. The questionnaire was collected anonymously, and no personal information was obtained from the participant. To ensure participant confidentiality within the study, the data collected on Qualtrics remained confidentially stored on the password-protected software and password-protected computer. Any data accessed remained anonymous and protected throughout the study. No incentives were given for participating in the study.

CHAPTER III: RESULTS

The questionnaire was sent out to 86 college programs for students with intellectual disabilities in the Southeast. A total of 26 responses were received, giving the questionnaire a 30% response rate. Four responses were removed from data analysis due to incompletion.

Program Requirements

The first six questions in the questionnaire asked participants about their program's curriculum. Respondents were asked a series of multiple-choice questions that best described their program. Participants were first asked if they were currently a member of SEPSEA and if their program is a part of the Comprehensive Transition Postsecondary (CTP) program. The CTP program supports students with intellectual disabilities with financial aid to pursue a degree in their interest (Federal Student Aid, 2023). Current members of SEPSEA comprised 69% of the participants, while 31% stated they were not current members. However, 85% of respondents stated they were a part of the CTP program with 15% responding they were not part of the program.

Next, participants were asked about enrollment in their program. Respondents were given a series of ranging numbers and asked how many students are currently enrolled in their program and how many new students are enrolled each academic year. As seen in Figure 1, ten respondents stated their program has around 0-10 current students (38%), seven have 11-20 students (27%), and six have 21-30 (23%). Only two respondents stated their program has 31-40 students (8%), and one has 41-50 students (4%). In terms of new enrollments each academic year, nineteen respondents stated they received 0-10 students (73%). Only six received 11-20 students each year (23%), and one

respondent stated they received 31-40 students (4%). The data indicated that many of these college programs contain 0-10 students and have an enrollment growth of around 0-10 students.

Lastly, participants were asked how inclusive their program is and if they incorporate service learning or volunteerism in their curriculum. Respondents were asked about the percentage of inclusivity in their program ranging from 0%-100%. Seventeen participants stated their program has a 75%-100% rate of inclusivity while seven have a 50%-75% rate. The last two participants stated they have a 25-50% and less than 25% rate of inclusivity, respectively. Data indicated that all of the college programs that cater to students with intellectual disabilities are not 100% inclusive but the majority are 50% inclusive or more. Most university programs pursue an inclusivity rate of at least 50% to meet CTP guidelines, which 92% of the participants attained. In terms of service learning or volunteerism, fifteen respondents stated they required it in their program's curriculum (58%) while eleven respondents stated they did not require it (42%). Based on this data, the participants will be compared on their perceptions of service learning and volunteerism by whether they have incorporated this topic into their curriculum.
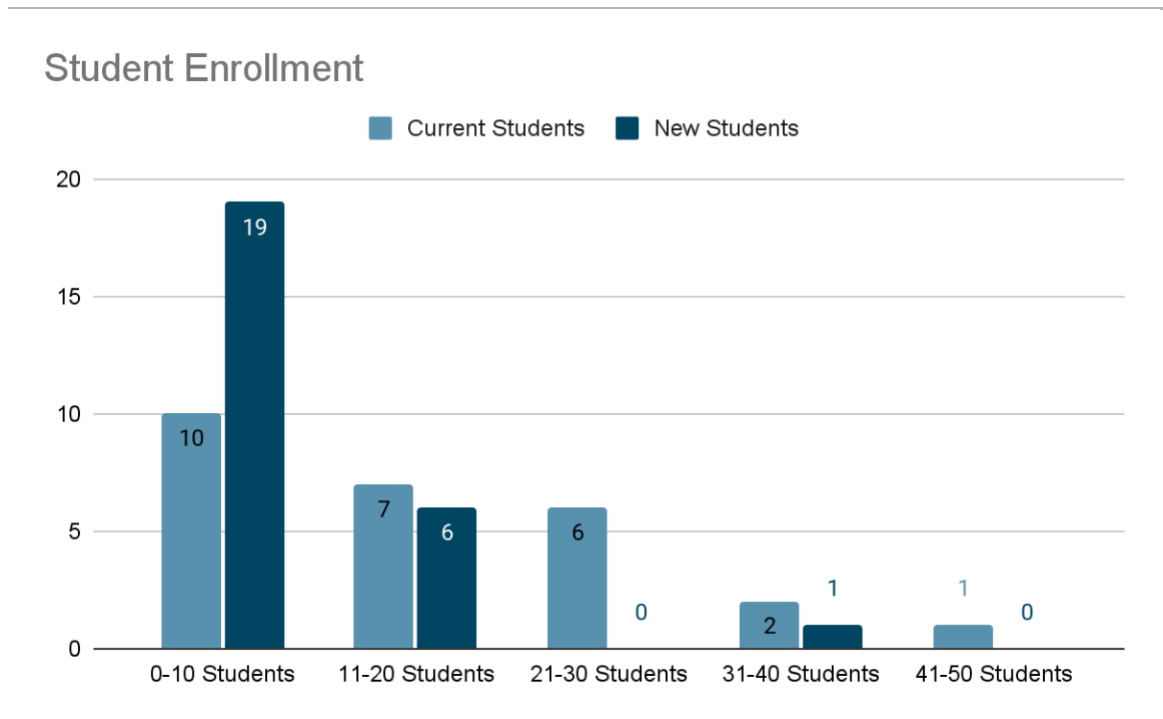
Figure 1: Student Enrollment in Programs Catered to Students with Intellectual Disabilities

Program Impact on Students

The next three questions in the questionnaire asked participants in a Likert scale format to select the choice that best describes their program. Respondents had to choose from the options: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. The statement participants were asked first was: "My program helps prepare students with disabilities for life after college (independent living, employment, etc.)." Participants received this question to determine a baseline of how prepared they feel their students are in the overall topics for life after postsecondary education. As seen in Figure 2, fifteen respondents stated they strongly agreed with the statement (68%), while seven respondents stated they agreed (32%). Out of the eleven participants that

stated they incorporate volunteerism into their curriculum, seven stated they strongly agreed (64%), while four stated they agreed (36%). On the other hand, the eleven participants that do not incorporate volunteerism into their curriculum had a slight increase in respondents that stated they strongly agreed with the statement. Eight respondents stated they strongly agreed (73%), while three stated they agreed (27%). Based on the data, both populations felt they equally prepared their students for life after college.

The next statement participants were asked was: "Service/volunteerism is a priority in our program." Respondents received this question to analyze if the population that stated they incorporated volunteerism into their curriculum prioritized more than the population that did not incorporate it into their curriculum. As seen in Figure 2, only three participants responded with strongly agree (13%) and five responded with agree (23%). On the other hand, fourteen participants stated they neither agree nor disagree with the statement (64%). The three participants that stated they strongly agreed with the statement were all the participants that incorporate volunteerism into their curriculum. Out of the eleven respondents that do not incorporate this topic into their curriculum, only two stated they agree with the statement (18%) with the remaining nine stating they neither agree nor disagree (82%). The data suggests there is an increase in prioritization of service learning and volunteerism with those that incorporate it into their curriculum, while those that do not feel neutral about the given statement.

The final statement participants were asked to respond to was: "Service/volunteerism has made a positive impact on students in my program." As indicated in Figure 2, eleven of the respondents stated they strongly agreed with the

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statement (50%). Six respondents stated they agree (27%), while five stated they neither agree nor disagree (23%). Of the eleven participants that incorporated this topic in their curriculum, nine stated they strongly agree with the statement (82%), and two stated they agree (18%). None of the participants in that population stated they neither agree nor disagree with the statement. When it came to the participants that do not incorporate this topic, five of the participants stated they neither agree nor disagree (46%). Only two respondents stated they strongly agree (18%), and four stated they agree (36%). It can be concluded from the data that the population that included this topic in their curriculum either strongly agreed or agreed that service learning or volunteerism has made a positive impact on their students. None of the participants in that population indicated they neither agree nor disagree. On the other hand, the population that did not incorporate this topic stated they neither agree nor disagree, with only a few stating they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.
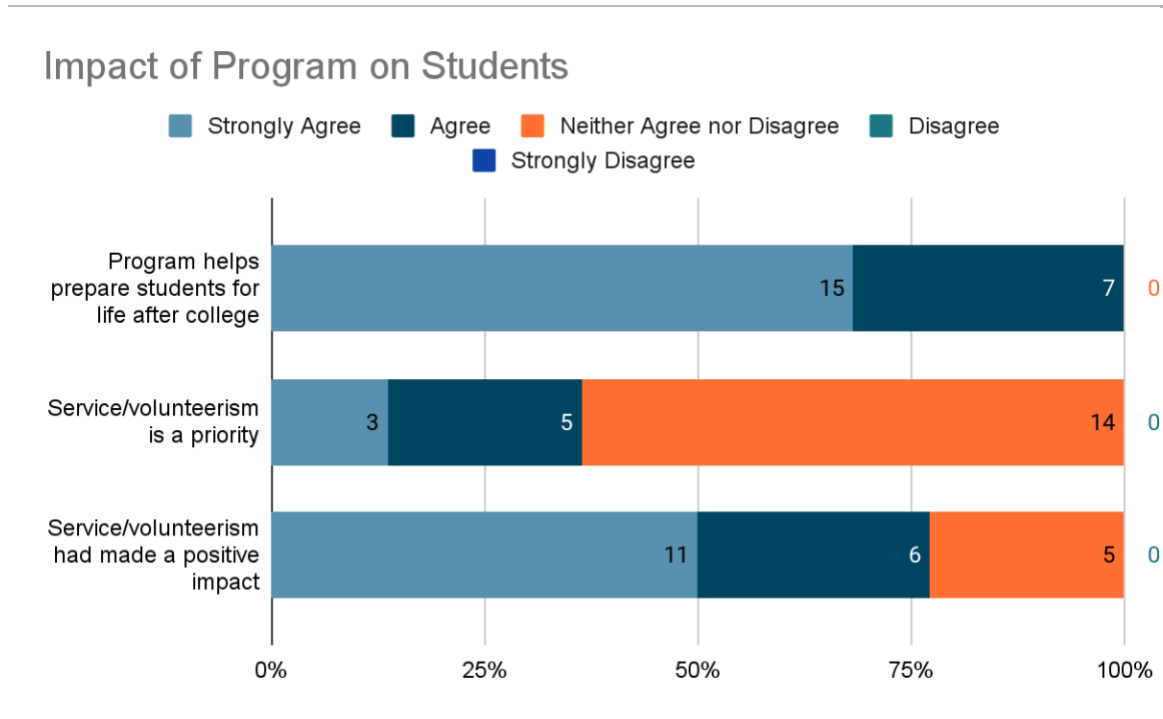
Figure 2: The Impact of College Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

Program Prioritization

      The final question in the questionnaire asked participants to rate the importance of five topics based on how it is prioritized in their program. The topics respondents were presented with were service/volunteerism, academics, independent living, socialization, and employment. These topics were selected since these topics are primarily emphasized in college programs catered to students with intellectual disabilities. The question was presented in a Likert scale format where participants could only choose one topic as first, second, third, fourth, and fifth place. As represented in Figure 3, participants responded that the main priority that they focus on within their program is employment. After employment, the second prioritized topic is academics. Third place was tied with both socialization and academic living. The least prioritized topic among the five was

service/volunteerism. A total of eleven responses voted for service/volunteerism as fifth

place, and no participant voted for this topic as first place. The remaining categories had

at least three votes for first place. In terms of the population that does not incorporate

volunteerism into their curriculum, eight out of the eleven votes for the fifth place came

from that population (73%). The remaining three votes came from participants who

incorporated that topic into their curriculum (27%). As seen from the data,

service/volunteerism is the least prioritized topic compared to other topics such as

employment or academics. This can especially be seen with college programs that do not

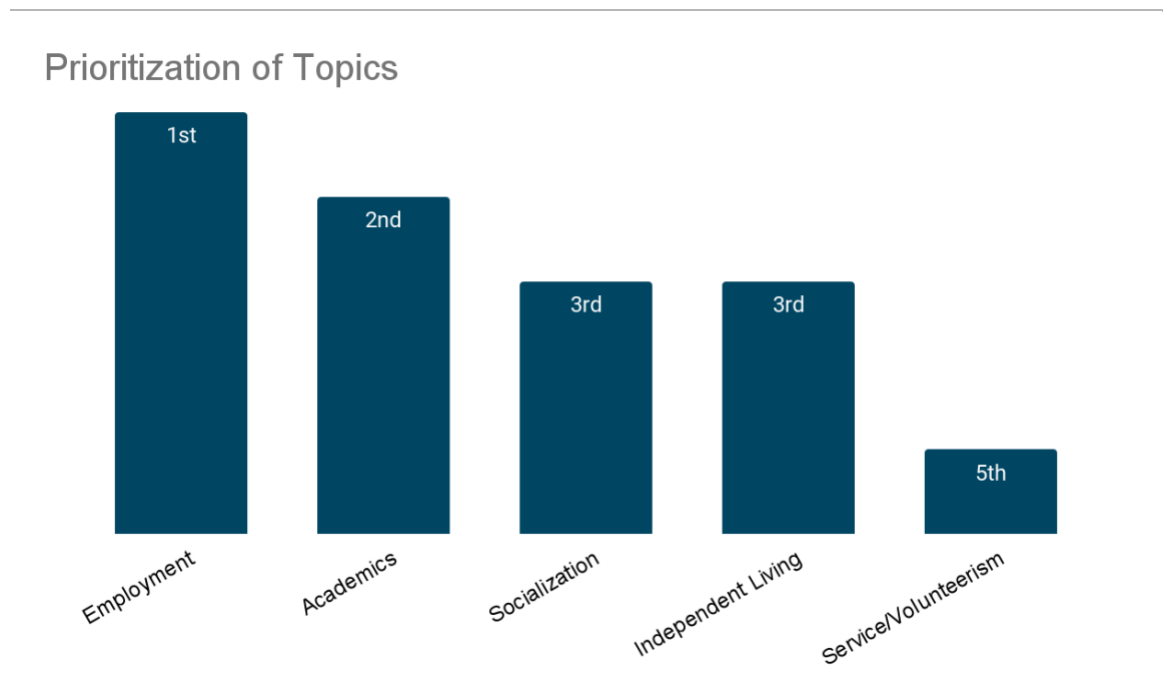incorporate this topic within their curriculum.

Figure 3: Prioritization of Topics in College *Programs*

CHAPTER IV: DISCUSSION

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the perceptions that college programs in the Southeast portion of the United States have on service learning and volunteerism for students with intellectual disabilities. As suggested by the study, several college programs either do not incorporate this topic within their program or do not prioritize it compared to other topics, such as employment, academics, socialization, or independent living. Prioritizing service learning or volunteerism allows students with intellectual disabilities to learn new skills that they can incorporate into both their personal and professional life. Students can learn skills such as teamwork, leadership, communication, and networking with local businesses (Covey, 2022).

The first six questions in the questionnaire catered to gaining an understanding of the program's curriculum. The data indicated that most of the participants stated they had a small program that consisted of up to ten students, with enrollments of ten new students each academic school year. Programs that incorporate smaller enrollments tend to focus more one-on-one with their students and provide a more inclusive environment. The majority of participants also stated they were currently a part of SEPSEA and are enrolled in the CTP program. Both SEPSEA and CTP programs emphasize providing students with intellectual disabilities with an inclusive environment. Furthermore, CTP programs prioritize providing equal access to financial aid for those students as well. However, one of the main requirements for CTP programs is they must be at least 50% inclusive meaning students must be participating in courses with non-disabled students. All of the respondents that were enrolled in the CTP program stated they were at least 50%

inclusive, signifying they are adhering to CTP guidelines. Therefore, students with intellectual disabilities in those programs can receive financial aid to pursue their degrees as well as interact with non-disabled peers. These interactions with non-disabled peers lead to students with disabilities learning new social skills and behaviors that can be applied in the workforce. Lastly, participants were asked if they incorporated service/volunteerism into their curriculum to determine their perception of the topic. Around 58% of respondents stated they incorporated the topic within their curriculum, while the rest did not. Approximately just over 50% of the programs surveyed had service/volunteerism as one of the primary program components.

The next three questions were geared to gain an understanding of how the participants perceive how their program has impacted their students. Both programs that incorporate service/volunteerism and those that did not indicated that they strongly agreed that their programs helped prepare their students for life after college. However, the data suggests a contrasting perception when asked if service/volunteerism was a priority in their program. The population that incorporated this topic stated they strongly agreed, while the opposing population neither agreed nor disagreed. The data indicates that the topics of service learning or volunteerism are more prioritized in those programs, compared to the programs that do not include it within their curriculum. The students with disabilities enrolled in programs that prioritize volunteerism are able to encounter more experiences with assisting their community and campus. This leads to more socialization opportunities with non-disabled peers as well as networking with local businesses, which can lead to future job opportunities or internships for these students. A similar contrasting response was encountered when participants were asked if service

learning or volunteerism has made a positive impact on their students. The participants that incorporate service/volunteerism stated they strongly agreed, while the opposing respondents stated they neither agreed nor disagreed. The data suggests that postsecondary education programs that incorporate service learning and volunteerism can identify the benefits students with intellectual disabilities have received from these topics. These skills learned from volunteering can be applied in their social life, academic setting, place of employment, and even with independent living. It allows those students to gain more confidence in their everyday life while assisting their local community.

The final question asked participants to rate the topics of service/volunteerism, academics, independent living, socialization, and employment based on how they prioritize it within their program. The data revealed that service/volunteerism was the least prioritized among the other topics. Although respondents that incorporated this topic within their program rated it higher than those who did not, it was still rated poorly among the other topics overall. The data suggests that even though some postsecondary education programs require service/volunteerism within their curriculum, other topics such as employment or academics have priority. For all survey items in which a possible correlation exists, further statistical analysis exploring the correlation should be conducted.

Service learning and volunteerism play a large role in employment and academics. By providing students with service learning projects, students with intellectual disabilities can create experiences outside of the classroom that they can connect back to their course material. This allows students to apply what they have learned academically and experience it in a new way. Additionally, encouraging students

with intellectual disabilities to volunteer in local organizations allows them to connect with businesses that can lead to future employment endeavors. Even though employment and academics are prioritized in higher education, service/volunteerism plays a large role in applying these topics.

Conclusion

Volunteering and participating in service learning activities provide students including those with intellectual disability several benefits that they can use throughout every aspect of their life whether it is personal or professional. It allows students to not only grow individually but also to bond with their community and aid local businesses. Students are able to meet new peers and learn how to network to find a career that best suits their interests (Covey, 2022). The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions that college program staff for students with intellectual disabilities have on this topic. The results suggested the participants that have incorporated this topic within their curriculum strongly agreed that it has made a positive impact on their students and aided in preparing them for life after college. On the other hand, the participants that had not incorporated service learning or volunteerism within their program stated they felt neutral about the topic. The findings from this study may lead other college programs catered to students with intellectual disabilities to start incorporating service learning or volunteerism within their curriculum. This would allow additional students to reap the benefits of volunteering as well as aid in their local community.

Limitations

A primary limitation of this study was the small participant population. The participant population that was selected for this study included programs that were

associated with SEPSEA. The questionnaire was sent to 86 college programs within the ten states represented in SEPSEA and only 26 complete responses were received. A way to improve participation in the study would be to reach out to college programs outside of the Southeast. Another way participation could have been increased was if an incentive was offered to participants such as a raffle. An additional limitation to this study was that the questionnaire was completed by staff members with different roles. This included the directors, associate directors, coordinators, and even managers. Since any staff member within the program was able to complete the survey, potential varied perceptions about service learning and volunteerism were collected. This limitation could have been prevented by solely collecting the perceptions of the director of the SEPSEA programs. The next limitation that occurred from this study is that only the perceptions of the staff members were collected, not the perceptions of the students as well. Although this study was geared toward staff members, analyzing the perceptions that students with intellectual disabilities have on this topic would be beneficial. Analyzing the students' perceptions would provide further information on how they feel about the topic and the benefits students would receive if more of these college programs incorporated volunteerism into their curriculum. The final limitation that resulted from this study is that participants were not asked to identify which state they were located. The questionnaire was sent to ten states, but it is unknown if a response was received from each state. Therefore, the results may not represent the perception of all states as a whole. A way to improve this limitation would be to ask respondents to identify which state their respective program was located. Overall, the results from this study may lead to more

research about the benefits of service/volunteerism for students with intellectual

disabilities.

APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

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INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
STANDARD (ONLINE) INFORMED CONSENT

STANDARD (ONLINE) INFORMED CONSENT PROCEDURES
• *Use of this template is __optional.__* However, by federal regulations ([45 CFR 46.116](#)), all consent documentation must address each of the required elements listed below (purpose, procedures, duration, benefits, risks, alternative procedures, confidentiality, whom to contact in case of injury, and a statement that participation is voluntary). Last Edited May 18th, 2022

Today's date:		
PROJECT INFORMATION		
Project Title: The Perceptions Regarding Service/Volunteerism in Postsecondary Education with Students with Intellectual Disabilities		
Protocol Number: 22-297		
Principal Investigator: Coraliz Martinez	Phone:228-213-4855	Email: coraliz.martinez@usm.edu
College: Other	School and Program: Institute for Disability Studies	
RESEARCH DESCRIPTION		
1. **Purpose:** The purpose of The Perceptions Regarding Service/Volunteerism in Postsecondary Education with Students with Intellectual Disabilities (Protocol # 22-297) is to analyze the perceptions that others have regarding service/volunteerism with students with intellectual disabilities. Questions in the survey will focus on the following: 1) incorporation of service/volunteerism in college programs, 2) ranking of priority of service/volunteerism, and 3) ability to accommodate students. The data collected from your responses will be used to develop resources, supports, and services identified as being needed in the disability community in states in the southeast.		

2. **Description of Study:**
   You are being asked to participate in this study by completing a questionnaire about service/volunteerism within your college program. The questions asked in this study are related to the benefits of service/volunteerism for students with intellectual disabilities in postsecondary education. Eligible participants for this study will be faculty members or program directors within college programs facilitated towards students with disabilities. This questionnaire will be sent to members of the targeted population in the southeast through email contacts. The estimated time to complete the questionnaire is 10 minutes. We are seeking a minimum of 40 participants for this study. The consent form and questionnaire will be collected using the online data-collecting platform Qualtrics. The information collected and stored will be confidential by using a coding system to protect any identifying data. Names of participants completing the questionnaire will not be collected. All data will be stored in software that is password protected and on a computer that is password protected. Data will only be accessed by members of the study team. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you can decline and terminate activity at any time to complete the questionnaire.

3. **Benefits:**
   The participants will be able to provide valuable information in the research on the benefits of service/volunteerism in postsecondary education with students with disabilities. The information provided by participants will enhance the research for service/volunteerism and provide awareness of the benefits that service may have on students with disabilities.

4. **Risks:**
   Although participants are not being asked for their name in the questionnaire, other pieces of information (IP address) and/or demographic information (sex and race) could potentially be used to identify an individual participant if the number of participants is small.

5. **Confidentiality:**
   The consent form and questionnaire responses will be collected using the online platform, Qualtrics, and then downloaded to the personal computer of the lead researcher. The information

collected and stored will be confidential by using a coding system to protect any identifying data. Names and emails of participants completing the questionnaire will not be collected. All participants can choose to not enter any information regarding demographics. All data will be stored using password-protected software on a password-protected computer. Data will only be accessed by members of the study team. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you can decline and end participation at any time.

6. **Alternative Procedures:**
If the participant does not want to participate in the online questionnaire but would like to provide responses, the lead researcher will be available to conduct the research via telephone. The contact information for the lead on this study is provided under "Project Information" on this form.

7. **Participant's Assurance:**
This project and this consent form have been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board, which ensures that research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations. Any questions or concerns about rights as a research participant should be directed to the Chair of the Institutional Review Board, The University of Southern Mississippi, 118 College Drive #5125, Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001, 601-266-5997.

Any questions about this research project should be directed to the Principal Investigator using the contact information provided above.

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

I understand that participation in this project is completely voluntary, and I may withdraw at any time without penalty, prejudice, or loss of benefits. Unless described above, all personal information will be kept strictly confidential, including my name and other identifying information. All procedures to be followed and their purposes were explained to me. Information was given about all benefits, risks, inconveniences, or discomforts that might be expected. Any new information that develops during the project will be provided to me if that information may affect my

APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

Office *of* Research Integrity

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI.

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NOTICE OF INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD ACTION

The project below has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services regulations (45 CFR Part 46), and University Policy to ensure:

- The risks to subjects are minimized and reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered involving risks to subjects must be reported immediately. Problems should be reported to ORI via the Incident submission on InfoEd IRB.
- The period of approval is twelve months. An application for renewal must be submitted for projects exceeding twelve months.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 22-297
PROJECT TITLE: Honors Thesis Project
SCHOOL/PROGRAM   Medical Laboratory Sciences
RESEARCHERS: PI: Coraliz Martinez
                      Investigators: Martinez, Coraliz~Alliston, Jerry~
IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Approved
CATEGORY: Expedited Category
PERIOD OF APPROVAL: 06-Jan-2023 to 05-Jan-2024

Donald Sacco, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chairperson

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