

# CHAPTER 7

## “I WANT TO GO PLACES ON MY OWN”: A CASE-STUDY OF VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY ACE-IT IN COLLEGE

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### ABSTRACT

*Purpose – The tendency to view disability through a medical lens leads to deficiency narratives which have pervasive consequences throughout life. This chapter focuses on impacts of these narratives on postsecondary education opportunities for individuals with intellectual/developmental disabilities (IDD). Specifically, we examine how disability as deficiency narratives translate into beliefs and relationships for students in Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) Academic and Career Exploration-Individualized Techniques (ACE-IT) program in College.*

*Methods/Approach – ACE-IT in College is an inclusive postsecondary education program for students with IDD. We reviewed the clashing narratives students with disabilities face from faculty, staff, other students without disabilities, and family members. In order to analyze postsecondary experiences of participants, a content analysis of the ACE-IT Spring 2015 semester was conducted using archival data of education coach notes, employment case notes, mentor case notes, VCU faculty evaluations, work supervisor evaluations, and parent and student survey responses. Ten case studies, each of an enrolled ACE-IT student, were developed and analyzed.*

*Findings – Three themes surrounding this program emerged: Inclusion (the inclusive nature of the ACE-IT program encourages independence), exposure*

*(the exposure of faculty to students with disabilities, the exposure of these students to a range of social relationships and community participation), and exclusion (the continuing power of deficit narratives).*

Implications/Value – *Because narrative analysis of consolidated themes suggests specific program recommendations, this study highlights the research potential of stories to identify program characteristics and needs for program improvement.*

**Keywords:** Disability narratives; postsecondary education; transitions; intellectual and developmental disabilities; exposure; inclusion

## INTRODUCTION

### *History of Intellectual and Developmental Disability in Education and Employment*

Individuals with I/DD have historically been excluded from education and employment opportunities. When education and employment did become available for individuals with disabilities, it was in separated and isolated settings, based on the belief that people with disabilities (PWD) could not be included with peers or contribute to the greater society as a whole on the basis that they were considered too disabled to work (Dague, 2012; Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). This assumption of deficiency has become the cultural narrative of disability. A cultural narrative can be understood as the collective representation of a social group, including normative expectations, rights, and responsibilities (Loseke, 2007). Integral to understanding the role and importance of narratives is recognizing who authors these stories, how these stories create meaning, and how they instigate change. A brief overview of the influence of the biomedical model in education and employment reveals how the biomedical model and assumption of deficiency have informed the cultural narrative of disability.

### *Biomedical Model as a Lens*

The biomedical model, which focuses on the medical diagnosis or impairment (Smart, 2016), is tied to early education of PWD. Some of the first individuals to systematically provide instruction for people with I/DD were doctors. However, the focus of these schools tended not to be educational, but vocational (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). This emphasis on functional skills continued into current special education practices, and has informed employment practices for PWD. The segregation of PWD in education and employment revealed a societal expectation that “normal” status could never be reached. Within this conceptualization, one must overcome their disability in order to participate in society.

Gradually, the exclusion and segregation of PWD have given way to integration. The 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education* deemed that education was “a right for all” and paved the way for legislation

like the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Education for all Handicapped Children Act of 1975, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 (Neuhaus, Smith, & Burgdorf, 2014). The shift from exclusion, to segregation, to integration has been an important civil rights step for PWD, but the pervasiveness of the biomedical model at the root of early legislation continues to constrain full inclusion.

A clear example of the influence of the biomedical model is the need for a medical diagnosis in order to access services for PWD. Foucault (1973) calls the abstraction, classification, and measurement of bodies the “medical gaze,” and describes the inherent unequal power dynamics involved. Use of the medical gaze to control access to services may appear to uphold policies in the objective realm, but in reality reinforces the dominance of disability over the individual. The result is that policies aimed to help PWD are based on an assumption of deficiency.

### *Cultural Narrative in Education*

Within education, the reliance on a medical diagnosis contributes to the categorization of students (Algraigay & Boyle, 2000). Though it could be argued that identification of a learning or developmental disability is necessary to provide appropriate learning supports, the use of such labeling is still inherently influenced by societal and cultural norms and such practices can have long term effects on educational and employment outcomes. For example, it is not unusual for the education of students with disabilities to focus primarily on functional skills, with the goal of moving students toward an approximate norm (Rees, 2017). This attitude is disturbingly similar to the early mindset that encouraged vocational based education (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). Ho (2004) cites Hacking’s (1999) description of students who, after removal from general classrooms, internalized and lowered expectations about themselves and other individuals with similar disabilities. This adjustment of expectations reveals how the medical diagnosis itself is not the root of educational differences, but rather the assumption of a cultural narrative of disability as dysfunctional.

### *Cultural Narrative in Employment*

It is impossible to separate employment for PWD from the cultural narrative of work. In American culture, the value of an individual is often defined by an individual’s productiveness, which raises the question of whether an individual with a disability can be a productive contributor to the economy. Stone (1984) posits that society has adopted a Malthusian perspective that only work and the prospect of earning wealth will save people from innate indolence. Policy implying that PWD are exempt from this expectation of work relies on a medical determination of disability and reinforces the cultural narrative of disability as dysfunctional (Silvers, 1995). The danger of this assumption is the implication that one’s disability prevents full participation and can also negatively affect the cooperative framework of society (Kirby, 2004). The result is that employment policy geared toward PWD is made with the idea of protecting able-bodied workers.

Early employment of PWD was limited to segregated environments, such as sheltered workshops where PWD performed tasks involving assembling and manufacturing pieces. These opportunities were not guided by individual interests and were originally intended as a temporary solution for employing PWD (Gerber, 1979). The segregated nature of such settings was based on a notion of charity, which in fact paved the way for subminimum wage. In 1934, President Roosevelt originally exempted PWD from minimum wage codes based on the concerns of donation based sheltered workshops (Bagenstos, 2011). Today, certified employers are still allowed to pay employees with disabilities subminimum wage through section 214(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act with justification that an employee with a disability has a lower production rate than employees without disabilities (Guilfoyle, 2015).

The desire to keep employed PWD segregated not only reinforces the cultural narrative of disability as dysfunctional but also perpetuates the idea that the “normal” worker must be protected. The result is a patronizing attitude toward employment for PWD; they are allowed to participate, but their participation will not interfere with “real” work.

#### *Policy Changes and Changing Narratives*

The momentum of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s helped to push through the first wave of disability rights legislation. Passage of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 protected the rights of individuals with disabilities, though it was limited to entities and agencies that received Federal funds (Aron & Loprest, 2012; Smith, 2002). For the first time, Congressional findings in 1974 that 1.75 million students with disabilities did not receive education services were interpreted as alarming and culminated in the creation of the Education for All Handicapped Children Education Act (EAHCA) of 1975 (Katsiyannis, Yell, & Bradley, 2001).

Disability rights policy has continued to adapt and encourage integration through legislation. With the passage of American with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, protections of PWD were expanded to employment, state and local government services, public accommodations, transportation, and telecommunications (Walk, Ahn, Lampkin, Nabizadeh, & Edlich, 1993). In 2004, with the reauthorization of Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA), formerly known as the EAHCA, the concept of Response to Intervention (RTI) became widely accepted. RTI minimized the profound weight that intelligence quotient (IQ) played in determining services (Aron & Loprest, 2012; Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009).

During this time, policy began to push a narrative differing from the cultural narrative that justified exclusion and seclusion of PWD. Institutional narratives, like cultural narratives, are influenced by larger societal stories, but institutional narratives differ specifically in that they have a direct effect on the people in the stories (Loseke, 2007). Riding on the coattails of the civil rights movement, stories began to enter the policy space that PWD were less victims of their disability

than of society's discrimination. An institutional narrative of integration was beginning to take form.

*Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students  
with Intellectual Disabilities*

In 2010, an initiative by the US Department of Education led to the founding of Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability (TPSID). The US Department of Education awards TPSID grants to universities through a request for programming process. Grantees are dedicated to expanding opportunities for inclusiveness in postsecondary education for individuals with I/DD (US Department of Education, 2015). The evolution of TPSID was a result of mandates on transition planning and accessibility for individuals with I/DD, as individuals with I/DD are historically underrepresented in postsecondary education (Grigal, Hart, & Migliore, 2011).

Students enrolled in TPSID programs are able to gain independent living skills, participate in internships, gain campus employment, engage with peers, and be a part of a college campus. For individuals with I/DD, experiences like these can lead to lifelong benefits. The "completion of nearly any type of postsecondary education significantly improves an individual's chances of securing" long-term employment (Zaft, Hart, & Zimbrich, 2004, p. 45). Furthermore, TPSID programs push the policy and institutional narrative of integration further. TPSID programs strive for inclusivity and are required to uphold basic expectations of campus integration (US Department of Education, 2015). This inclusivity is achieved by way of promoting diversified supports so students can be active participants in class, work, and extracurricular activities on campus ("What is a TPSID?" n.d.).

TPSID programs can also offer a social connectedness that is often lost after high school graduation. Research has found that adults with I/DD typically recognize family members and service staff as their friends (Amado, Stancliffe, Mccarron, & Mccallion, 2013). The identification of paid staff as friends reveals the social isolation that plagues many individuals with I/DD. By participating in a TPSID program and having access to a college environment, students with I/DD have the opportunity to expand their existing social network beyond family and paid support staff to age appropriate peers. Furthermore, TPSID programs endeavor to promote integration and inclusion on college campuses, an exclusive environment where race, class and able-bodiedness have historically acted as gatekeepers (Reid & Knight, 2006).

The work of staff in a TPSID program can be described as having its own organizational narrative. Because programs operate at the intersection of policy, social expectations, and personal experiences, these organizational narratives may often seem contradictory in order to create a preferred client narrative (Loseke, 2007). For example, a TPSID organizational narrative may be one that promotes college inclusion for people with I/DD but still require disability documentation because of the continued influence of the biomedical model in special education and employment policies.

However, the space occupied by organizations is also a fertile area to examine the clashing of various narratives and the resulting personal synthesis of these experiences. For example, how do professors and college students in an academically exclusive environment interpret interactions with TPSID students and staff who promote inclusivity for students with disabilities? How do TPSID students and their families navigate the transition from a compliance heavy education model to a postsecondary education or employment environment where services are voluntary and require personal disclosure? In many ways, examination at an organizational level can be seen as a microcosm for clashing cultural, institutional and personal narratives.

Based on these questions, this study focused on the experiences of college students, college professors, students, and their families who participated in an inclusive TPSID program, ACE-IT in College, at the Virginia Commonwealth University. Archival data from one semester were reviewed to examine how individuals used narratives to describe their work and experiences.

## METHODS

### *Research Design*

A multiple case study was conducted to analyze narrative construction and synthesis in a semester of Virginia Commonwealth University's ACE-IT in College program.<sup>1</sup> In the first cohort analyzed, five ACE-IT students were enrolled in and graduated from a five semester college program from September 2013 to 2015. In the second cohort analyzed, five students were enrolled in September 2014, with three students graduating December 2016. Each student in these two cohorts served as a case study to compare and contrast program supports and interventions during the Spring Semester of 2015. These two cohorts were chosen for analysis from the TPSID funding period because of program maturation and similarities in program structure, specifically an emphasis on individualized internships and job development. The 10 students also represented a wide variety in racial diversity, socio-economic status, and medical diagnosis. Students ranged in age from 19 to 24 years old.

### *Data Collection*

Content analysis was conducted on documents collected during the Spring Semester of 2015. Reviewed documents included education coach case notes, education coach surveys, employment support case notes, faculty evaluations, work supervisor evaluations, parent survey responses, student survey responses, and mentor case notes. Though data collection was reliant on archival review, the sourcing of documents from a variety of sources allowed for triangulation. Furthermore, all case note documents and survey questions were open ended, allowing for candid answers and written descriptions from each respondent. Post program employment outcomes such as employment status, work location, pay rate, and work hours post-graduation were also collected.

*Data Analysis*

The unit of analysis for this study was each student enrolled in the ACE-IT in College program during the Spring 2015 Semester. All students were assigned pseudonyms and written references to a student uses their assigned pseudonym. During a first round of open coding, the first researcher developed 14 descriptive codes based on archival data (Table 1). Nvivo 11 Pro software was used to

**Table 1.** Descriptive Codes and Sub-codes.

Descriptive Codes	Sub-codes
INCLUSION	
Advocacy	
Campus inclusion	Class Facilitator Leisure & recreation Segregation
Career	
Independence	
Introspection	
Life skills	
EXCLUSION	
Advocacy	Failure to disclose or advocate
Coping and compensatory skills	Avoidance
Expectations	
Prompt dependency	
EXPOSURE	
Coping and compensatory skills	
Self-esteem	
Social relationships	
Stress management	
Supports	Academics Accommodations Disability support services Fading supports Program logistics

categorize codes and store reflexive memos shared between the two researchers. To check for intercoder reliability, the second researcher reviewed descriptive codes, each coded datum, and sensitized codes to develop a shared code book. All available archival documents from Spring 2015 were coded, and it became apparent that researchers had reached saturation when no additional codes were developed. A second axial coding analysis was conducted with both researchers to identify and develop the major themes present in the coded data. Finally, employment outcome data were analyzed to compare with each student's tracked progress within ACE-IT in College.

## RESULTS

Three major themes developed during the axial coding analysis: (1) exclusion, (2) inclusion, and (3) exposure. The 14 descriptive codes were sorted based on their relevance within each theme. For example, inclusion encompassed codes like "independence" and "universal accommodations" while codes like "prompt dependency" and "segregation" were sorted into exclusion. Exposure as a theme contained descriptive codes like "social relationships," [ACE-IT] "program logistics," and "employment." These themes fit into the larger theoretical paradigm of models of disability (Smart, 2016), and the ecology of social inclusion (Simplican, Leader, Kosciulek, & Leahy, 2015). Of the five models of disability defined by Smart (2016), the biomedical model informs the cultural narrative of disability as deficient and the theme of exclusion identified in this research paper. The Sociopolitical Model (Smart, 2016) and its perspective on societal limitations are similarly akin to institutional and organizational narratives. The concept of exposure as a mitigating factor was first revealed during the textual analysis of staff trained to work with PWD when compared to peer supports and faculty not previously trained to work with PWD. Trained staff produced clinical objective notes whereas previously untrained staff wrote case notes that revealed their assumptions about PWD. Simplican et al. (2015) theorized a model that "separates social inclusion from the processes that may produce social inclusion" in order to identify and define the components of interpersonal relationships and community participation (p. 22). Identifying the categories, structure and level of involvement of interpersonal relationships and community participation is important because it is these relationships that "facilitate bonding and bridging" by building upon each other (Simplican et al., 2015, p. 22). However, it is often the lack of meaningful opportunities in both social relationships and community participation that keep each domain impoverished and prevent the two from interacting symbiotically. The theme of exposure as a mitigating factor reflected how ACE-IT in College provided opportunities for people without disabilities to interact with PWD in mainstreamed environments with varying levels of participation and in a variety of categories like classes, campus activities, and employment. Indeed, the noted difference between staff trained to work with PWD and faculty or peer supports demonstrates the important role that exposure serves in providing a bridging link that can lead to deepening relationships or community participation. This is especially important when

considering narrative construction and perpetuation. Interactions and relationships between PWD and individuals without disabilities can challenge, change, or produce narratives about how PWD are perceived or perceive themselves.

Finally, employment outcomes for graduates reinforced the benefits of ACE-IT's inclusive practices. Two individuals did not complete the ACE-IT in College program and their employment data were not included in the outcomes. Additionally, one graduate did not report employment outcomes and another student moved out of the country and did not report employment outcomes. Of the remaining six students, one is still looking for employment and five are gainfully employed in competitive, community integrated positions earning at least minimum wage with a range of US\$7.50 hour to US\$14.50 per hour. These results positively compare to statistics in *Persons with a Disability: Labor Force Characteristics* (2017), which shows a 34% employment rate for individuals with I/DD between the age of 21 and 64, and only 18% employed in a competitive setting. All employment outcomes reflect interests identified by the students and are a continuation of their class, employment, or internship experiences. For example, one student was enrolled in a college radio course during the Spring 2015 Semester and is now employed at a music venue where he assists with venue preparation and post-show clean up and organization. One student entered the program with a very specific goal of securing a clerical position. Through ACE-IT, she was able to hone clerical and receptionist skills at her campus employment and internship. At the conclusion of her internship, she was offered and accepted full time employment as an office support assistant.

## DISCUSSION

### *Exclusion*

Within the theme of exclusion, the researchers observed how the descriptive codes revealed a continued deficit based narrative. For example, the code "expectations" included education coaches' comments that indicated lowered expectations for ACE-IT participants. One education coach shared that he felt "much more comfortable" after the student greeted him professionally and with confidence. The code "prompt dependency" revealed a failure on the part of educators and parents to adequately prepare students for independence, and their tendency to lower expectations. Often, the coded data showed that it was assumed that students could not advocate or make decisions for themselves.

When expectations were lowered, parents, education coaches, and professors circumvented students which consequently led to segregation. There was a concentration of double coding "finance" and "segregation." Meaning, when parents and mentors had financial questions, they would seek answers without involving the student and avoid creating opportunities for students to become more knowledgeable about income, tuition, and financial aid. Examples of exclusion sometimes resulted from good intentions, such as when a student had extensive familial involvement. One student attended an academic advising meeting with "classes that his mom thought would be good for him to take."

Here the family member denied the student the chance to learn how to advocate for wants. Expectations of what students can and cannot process led to further exclusion of students in academics. When asked if the professor had to make any modifications to the class to accommodate the student's needs, one professor responded, "YES. I have to omit all issues dealing with mentally impaired when discussing Nazi Germany and Project T4." This professor mirrored the cultural narrative of exclusion by excluding the role of PWD from the Holocaust to an entire class of college students. Not every disability is visible or disclosed to professors, and from this subjective omission, the professor missed the opportunity to include and conceptualize individuals with disabilities in an important part of history.

One professor highlighted the strengths of two students in the ACE-IT program in his class. An education coach reflected on this and shared that though the professor's

heart was in the right place and he was trying to demonstrate what an excellent job both of these students have done all semester, but it felt like he was setting them apart from the class by bringing so much attention to the fact that they are not your average student.

The professor's action demonstrates unintended segregation; it draws attention to these students and devalues their hard work by setting them apart as different. This example also demonstrates how interactions between the education coach and ACE-IT program can change narrative interpretation. Rather than embrace the performative narrative of overcoming odds, this education coach recognized its pernicious nature.

### *Inclusion*

Inclusion as a theme was initially composed of descriptive codes that reflected the inclusive nature of the ACE-IT in College's program. Education coaches were specifically asked in their reports to describe inclusive practices in the classroom and use of campus facilities. Because of these questions, there was a strong component of evaluating inclusion in physical spaces and codes such as "campus inclusion/class" and "campus inclusion/facilities" developed. Recognizing physical campus inclusion is important because college campuses are safe spaces for exploration and self-discovery for all college students. Other inclusive codes also developed from the data such as when students participated in "leisure and recreational" activities on campus. This code included descriptions of students using their free time to have lunch or participate in student activities like the video gaming club.

Coded data reinforced the inclusive practices of ACE-IT when students expressed academic interests and career goals different from parental expectations. Here students were able to advocate their desire to have the space and time for self-exploration and discovery, just like any of their college peers. When asked about life after college, one ACE-IT student stated, "I want to go places on my own."

Inclusion in college would not be possible without inclusion in academics. One professor reflected on the ACE-IT program, “I enjoy having to rethink how I educate and approach varying topics in my course through differentiated instruction.” This professor embraced diversity and the opportunity to incorporate universal design. An education coach talked about class inclusion as a bystander. He observed the ACE-IT student he worked with engaging in class with “the kid sitting next to him” discussing responses to a question the professor had asked and how both students “laughed a lot about it.” Campus inclusion makes community inclusion more attainable and broadens opportunities for exploration and self-discovery. An education coach’s friend shared thoughts about an ACE-IT student staying

on campus Thursday so he could come see an art show I had mentioned to him earlier in the day. It was showcasing VCU student work and my boyfriend had a couple of pieces on display. “Jeremy” was very excited to meet him and he asked a lot of great questions about all of the art.

“Jeremy” independently decided he wanted to go to an art show, determined how to travel to the event, and attended the event with other VCU students.

College serves as a platform for finding a career through education, work, networking, and professional development. For individuals with I/DD, college hasn’t always been, and still typically is not, the expected next step after high school. The parent surveys collected and analyzed overwhelmingly had similar sentiments on abilities and skills acquired through their child’s college experience. One parent talked about her student being “far more prepared to pursue a full time employment opportunity with the skills, internship/part time employment history and volunteer work.”

The development of inclusion and exclusion as themes revealed a third theme that bridged the gap between a deficit narrative to an inclusive narrative: exposure. The data suggest that ACE-IT offers not only a route to employment through preparation and exploration but also served as a building or bonding relationship that facilitated deeper and more meaningful interpersonal and community participation.

### *Exposure*

Though ACE-IT is inclusive in practice, it exists at the center of clashing cultural, institutional, and organizational narratives about students with disabilities. By utilizing facilities, integrating college classes, and participating in VCU activities, VCU faculty and students are exposed to PWD. ACE-IT is therefore synonymous in nature with exposure and assists professors, and students with and without disabilities to adjust the lens through which they view disabilities. One education coach shared in a self-evaluation that his process was to “fully understand the information myself as if I was taking the class, then modify the information [...]” This reflection reveals not only the pedagogical process he used but also the ability to empathize with ACE-IT students. Another education coach reflected that what he liked most about participating in the program was

“the experiences and friendships I got to build [...]” again reinforcing the value of ACE-IT in College in providing bonding and bridging opportunities.

Likewise, faculty at VCU had the opportunity to reflect on how they were able to accommodate students with I/DD in their classes. Once professor shared that

due to the playful and hands-on nature of the class, “Georgia” was a natural fit so none of the exercises or activities had to be modified. The only thing that I did differently was allow her to work script in hand on the first day that lines were supposed to be memorized, which I think was a confidence issue more than an issue of having her lines memorized.

These accommodations provide professors the opportunity to reflect on how their course content or testing procedures can be modified for students with disabilities. In fact, one professor shared the feedback that they would suggest “providing detailed recommendations to faculty indicating how they might best alter their materials/assessments to fit the needs of specific students in the program.” The acknowledgment that accommodations could be varied between ACE-IT students showcases the importance of differentiated instruction.

The concept of exposure was not limited to exposure to PWD. In fact, coded data revealed that ACE-IT students and their families benefited from exposure to available supports and decision opportunities. As described in the exclusion discussion, it was not uncommon for parents, though well intentioned, to have lowered expectations of their child. However, time in the program and reliance on supports and staff other than family provided both parents and students the opportunity to reflect separately on their growth and abilities. One ACE-IT staff shared that “after some prompting, ‘Cameron’ was able to write about how he wants to be a videogame designer, but his mom wants him to be in the food industry.” A parent shared that one of the most valuable aspects of ACE-IT was “Independence and the ability to have a ed coach to support him.” Beyond the availability of supports, many parents recognized the importance of ACE-IT in providing opportunities for students to make independent decisions: “The experience, the avenue towards independence and exposure. All of this is Amazing [*sic*].” and “‘Jeremy’ has the advantage of inclusion thru [*sic*] his enrollment in ACE-IT. He has the opportunity to experience challenging academics that help raise his level of awareness.” “‘Jeremy’s” education coach shared a similar reflection when she wrote, “for ‘Jeremy’, he had to learn everything from scratch. Racism and discrimination were things he had “heard of” but didn’t actually understand.”

Early in the analysis process, data related to discussions of friendships and campus or staff relationships were coded into the descriptive code: social relationships. During the axial coding process, social relationships were categorized under exposure as a theme because the coded data reflected what was shown in the literature review that PWD often identify paid staff as friends (Amado et al., 2013). One student in particular behaved in a way that indicated she believed her relationship with her education coach was more personal.

I told her that some of what she said and did bordered inappropriate. I thought [*sic*] her that though I was flattered she found me ‘cute’, it was not professional to tell me everyday [*sic*].

ACE-IT provided the opportunity for students to receive explicit instruction on appropriate social interaction in a more conducive environment than if this behavior had first manifested in a work environment. As exemplified by this parent sharing, “She is learning little by little how to really be a friend, colleague – what’s okay and what isn’t in a friendship.”

Conceptually, relationships with paid staff may cross over all three domains of exclusion, exposure, and inclusion. Hall (2010) expresses that a sense of belonging may be more important than just social inclusion for the sake of inclusion. If we consider this ecological approach to inclusion then we can view relationships with staff as a mitigating factor for both PWD and persons without disabilities. It is the opportunity for PWD to establish and grow their network beyond family members. It is also the platform in which people without disabilities can interact with PWD in a supported environment. Furthermore, these interactions can lead to deepening levels of engagement that serve emotional functions for both parties. One education coach shared on his end of semester evaluation that what “I like most about being an education coach was the experiences and friendships I got to build with both Akira and Andrew.” Indeed, one aspect of ACE-IT in College is the use of college peers as education coaches. While the structure of the relationship may be initially based on providing educational supports, it is also the opportunity to build bonding or bridging relationships with age appropriate peers. One parent shared, “She gets to learn new things, experience a sense of accomplishment and independence and she is meeting people her own age.” The ability to interact with similar aged peers in a variety of categories such as class, clubs, or employment is a defining aspect of inclusion.

#### *Limitations and Next Steps*

For the purpose of our study, we only selected one semester to analyze. This limited the scope of people we surveyed to two cohorts. The purpose for selecting one semester is that this semester hosted the two cohorts that were the last two over the funding period and renewal. Additionally, since the methodology we used was archival, we could not ask follow-up or clarification questions regarding responses to ensure participant validation. Our information was thus limited to the responses received at the time. The reliance on survey responses and case notes means we must acknowledge the possibility that responses may be biased by socially acceptable responses. Furthermore, the available archival data were skewed toward education coach case notes. Though these notes often contained some of the most insightful textual analysis, it should be noted that future research with more emphasis on employment case notes might reveal more information about connections between expectations, experience, and employment.

## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

ACE-IT in College frequently served as an exposure element to help rewrite pre-conceived narratives about students with disabilities. The focus and strength of

ACE-IT in College have been the emphasis on the symbiotic nature of education and employment. Students gain skills from taking college courses and twenty-first century work skills from campus employment and internships. The employment outcomes of ACE-IT in College reveal employment informed by personal self-discovery and choice. Illuminated in this study are the additional social benefits to campus culture, faculty, students, and families. By acting as a conduit to increase social and bonding opportunities between peers with and without disabilities, ACE-IT can have a direct effect on changing expectations and disability related narratives. The conceptual implications of this research study reveal the importance and power ACE-IT in College holds as a bridge between a deficits-based perception of PWD to a skills-oriented and inclusive lens. It is our recommendations that ACE-IT in College continue to investigate ways in which the program can increase campus awareness and participation. Further research and interviews with past and current participants, their families, education coaches, and VCU faculty may reveal how participation and decision making on a college campus shifted perspectives, raised expectations, and changed internal narratives.

## NOTE

1. All aspects of the research upon which this chapter is based were reviewed for compliance with ethics in research with human subjects by the institutional review board of Virginia Commonwealth University.

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