The Soaring Eagle Academy: the Inception of a Comprehensive Post-Secondary Transition Program for Individuals with Intellectual Disability in Southwest Florida

Abstract

Higher education institutions committed to values of diversity, inclusion, and equity offer programs and practices that support individuals of diverse populations, including those with disabilities. Passage of the Higher Education Opportunity Act in the United States expanded access to individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) wishing to pursue higher education in Comprehensive Transition Programs (CTPs). Despite previous publications addressing the benefits of establishing such programs, little has been found regarding steps to develop these programs. Thus, this paper describes the case of the inception of the Soaring Eagle Academy (SEA), a CTP for students with ID in a Southwest Florida university, United States. Multiple data sources were collected and
analyzed with content analysis. The findings emphasized the importance of having a collaborative team empowered and supported by the university administration to create a life-changing program that would impact students with ID, their families, the campus culture, and the community. Recommendations for future research are included.

Keywords

Diversity – inclusion – intellectual disability – higher education – case study

Higher education institutions should respect fundamental goals and values of diversity, inclusion, and equity that manifest in programs and practices supporting individuals of diverse populations, including those with disabilities (Association of American Colleges and Universities n.d.; Uditsky & Hughson, 2012). Universities committed to these values strengthen individuals’ autonomy, enable the development of student agency, support their sense of belonging, and materialize efforts towards representation, opportunity, and social justice. Students with disabilities can benefit immensely from such higher education values because they tend to be marginalized on campus, adversely affecting their learning experiences (Corby et al., 2018; Judge & Izuzquiza Gasset, 2015; Leake & Stodden 2014). Moreover, students’ academic success, motivation, and persistence are influenced by diversity, inclusion, and equity practices, impacting retention and graduation rates (Freeman et al. 2007; Gunay, 2014; Vaccaro et al. 2015; Wofter, 2019). Most importantly, inclusive and welcoming campus and learning environments “serve as models for the wider society” (Leake & Stodden 2014: 406).

In 2008, the Higher Education Opportunity Act ([HEOA] 2008) enabled and extended academic access for individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) in post-secondary education programs in the United States. It represented a significant milestone in the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in higher education, as supported by federal law. According to Grigal and Papay (2018), the HEOA removed substantial barriers for students with ID “by defining that a financially eligible student with ID can access federal financial aid if they enroll in an approved Comprehensive Postsecondary and Transition (CPT) Program” (p. 78). Since then, the Think College website reported 303 current Comprehensive Transition Programs (CTPs) for students with ID (Think College n.d.). Nonetheless, worldwide higher education institutions that provide CTPs include curriculum and advising structures that aim to support students with ID to continue their academic, professional, or technical careers, envisioning their independent living, community engagement, and gainful
employment upon completion (see Corby et al., 2018; Equality Act, 2010; Judge & Izuzquiza Gasset, 2015; Project10 n.d.; Uditsky & Hughson, 2012).

It is particularly relevant that students with ID are provided with such opportunities because they are less likely to have employment experiences than individuals with other health impairments or disabilities. For example, recently reported data indicated that more than 69% of students with ID have no work experience before enrolling in a CTP (Florida Center for Students with Unique Abilities [FCSUA] 2020). Thus, students with ID benefit from CTPs’ career development strategies, opportunities for social activities (e.g., interpersonal relationships and friendships), and academic engagement (Grigal & Papay 2018; Jones et al. 2015). Moreover, CTPs contribute to students with ID becoming cultural trailblazers, “breaking the cultural barrier that always said young adults with intellectual developmental disability could not go to college” (Baker et al. 2018: 14).

While there is literature describing how to get support for post-secondary education programs for students with ID (Papay & Griffin 2013), scarce publications have addressed the development, inception, and early stages of CTPs (Bumble et al. 2019). Whirley et al. (2020) also recommended research that includes stakeholders’ perspectives. Therefore, this study aimed to fill this gap by exploring the inception and beginning of a CTP for individuals with ID in a mid-sized public university in Southwest Florida, United States. The goal is to describe the program’s starting point and how it was conceptualized, and launched, including the challenges and lessons learned to inspire and encourage other higher education institutions to initiate similar programs.

Students with Intellectual Disability

In the United States, intellectual disability (ID) was formerly referred to as mental retardation (American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities [AAIDD] n.d.). Although the terminology has changed over time, components of its definition have remained stable, including its early age onset and limitations in intellectual functioning. ID is characterized by “significant limitations in both intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior, which covers many everyday social and practical skills. This disability originates before the age of 18” (AAIDD n.d., definition section).

Nonetheless, controversies exist concerning the prevalence, definition, and methods of identifying individuals with ID (Shapiro & Batshaw 2013). Intellectual disability used to be defined primarily based on intelligence quotient (IQ) scores, thus, determining the degree of impairment of an individual—from mild and moderate to severe and profound. However, ID’s definition
recently shifted to a perspective that focuses on the support needed to enable an individual to function in an inclusive environment. Based on these definitions, it could be predicted that 2.5% of the United States population has an intellectual disability and will need aid ranging from intermittent time-limited support for some activities to pervasive long-term support in nearly all settings.

In education, the HEA (2008) defined students with ID as individuals who were eligible for free appropriate public education (FAPE) under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and whose mental retardation/cognitive impairment expressed intellectual and cognitive functioning limitations, as well as adaptive behavior limitations that restrict their social, conceptual, and practical skills. Thus, the HEA improved access of students with ID to post-secondary education and supported federal funding eligibility. Since then, the established programs aim to offer intensive support, focusing on helping students with ID develop independent living skills and preparing them for gainful and meaningful employment experiences (Dosa et al. 2013).

**Intellectual Disability in Higher Education in the United States**

Students with intellectual disabilities have not always been able to attend colleges in the United States; until recently, few of these students had the legal right to attend public primary or secondary schools in the United States. (Grigal et al. 2012). Litigation such as PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (1972) established the right for students with ID (Intellectual Disability, then called Mental Retardation) to attend public schools in the areas under its jurisdiction. However, it was not until the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA 1975) that this right was expanded to all children in the nation. The EHA had served as the bedrock for disability education law in the United States and began to require the provision of transition services when it was reauthorized and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1990 (IDEA 1990). Further, the age range of students eligible for service under this law was expanded downward to birth with another reauthorization in 1997 (IDEA 1997). Despite these revisions, college attendance was unavailable to students with ID.

**Comprehensive Transition Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability**

Higher education institutions nationwide offer CTPs for students with ID and fall under a federal designation category. They are established to include curriculum and advising structures that aim to help students with ID continue their academic, professional, or technical careers after high school,
envisioning their independent living and gainful employment upon program completion (Project10 n.d.). Thus, CTPs represent initiatives that address the inclusive needs of students with ID while counteracting the prevailing apathy, insensitivity, or even prejudice towards them in education and the job market (Gollnick & Chinn 2017).

In Florida, where this study was conducted, the enactment of the Florida Postsecondary Comprehensive Transition Program Act ([FPCTP] 2016) established the Florida Center for Students with Unique Abilities (FCSUA) to facilitate the establishment of CTPs in colleges and universities. Participating institutions have witnessed a 23% increase in enrollment of students with ID in the 2019–2020 academic year, currently serving 158 students across the state CTPs (FCSUA 2020). The proposed CTP in Southwest Florida falls under the auspices of the FCSUA, following the guidelines and purposes to

Increase independent living, inclusive and experiential post-secondary education, and employment opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities through degree, certificate, or nondegree programs and to establish statewide coordination of the dissemination of information regarding programs and services for students with disabilities. It is the intent of the Legislature that students with intellectual disabilities and students with disabilities have access to meaningful post-secondary education credentials and be afforded the opportunity to have a meaningful campus experience”

FLORIDA POSTSECONDARY COMPREHENSIVE TRANSITION PROGRAM ACT 2016: §2.

Therefore, the CTP described in this paper will provide opportunities for students with ID to increase personal, meaningful community employment as well as participate in social, recreational, and athletic events and experiences that will contribute to their development holistically, beyond merely the attainment of academic, professional, and career-related skills.

Inclusive Postsecondary Education Models for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

Previous publications have described the employment outcomes and the historical and philosophical nature of inclusive post-secondary education models (PSE) available for students with ID who transition from receiving services from their local school system under IDEA to two- and four-year public or private colleges and universities (Domin et al. 2020; Grigal et al. 2019; Hart
et al. 2010). Grigal et al. (2019) provided an overview of TPSID programs and essential statistical data concerning the demographics, course enrollment, employment, and engagement of students with ID served by higher education institutions nationwide during the 2018–2019 academic year.

Whirley et al. (2020) examined research published in 10 years since the enactment of the HEOA (2008). They found that early publications described and outlined program ideas, while recent ones focused on implementing programs for students with ID and reported reflections and evaluations. For example, Papay and Griffin (2013) described strategies to plan and develop inclusive PSE programs for students with ID, from assessing and documenting the needs for such programs in the local communities to working with a broad range of stakeholders and seeking online training, resources, funding, and support from the U.S. Department of Education and Think College. In addition, Raynor et al. (2016) described the implementation of comprehensive transition programs in California to provide a pathway to employment for students with ID, emphasizing the value of establishing partnerships with vocational rehabilitation centers and higher education institutions.

Specifically, Hart and colleagues (2006) differentiated the three main types of PSE models nationwide: the mixed/hybrid, the substantially separate, and the inclusive individual support models. They also stressed the value of such programs in providing educational opportunities for approximately 3,000 eligible students with ID annually. Hart et al. (2010) also emphasized the importance of PSE programs to practice inclusiveness and equity in higher education institutions for students with ID and the autism spectrum disorder. Despite traditional views that deem these students unfit for college, Hart et al. (2010) suggested that PSE programs advocate for and support inclusive educational opportunities; moreover, they must be seen as a continuity of inclusive practices in the K-12 system.

Joseph et al. (2019) stressed the importance of PSE programs in providing "students with disabilities the self-sufficiency, self-determination, and social skills training and practice they need to be successfully hired at competitive places of employment" (p. 4). Uditsky and Hughson (2012) posited that such programs offer authentic student experiences to students with ID in higher education. Such authentic experiences can be attained in five different ways—aademic, social, associational, employment, and family—promoting "belonging, learning, identity, and contribution" (Uditsky & Hughson 2012: 299). Kelley and Westling (2013) described the importance of CTPs coordinating support activities beyond academic ones, such as coaching and training, to help students with ID find employment and improve their quality of life.
The benefits of CTPs are numerous (Corby et al. 2020; Judge & Izuzquiza Gasset 2015; Moore & Schelling 2015; Wilt & Morningstar 2020). Corby and colleagues (2020) investigated the meanings individuals with ID construct of their experiences in these programs, highlighting the transformational role of education in the lives of students with ID. The authors also documented how students with ID see themselves through academic learning and its impact on opportunity, independence, positive interactions, and relationship-building with non-disabled students. Wilt and Morningstar (2020) examined the impact of peer support on students with ID’s college experiences. They found that the college students valued the academic, emotional, and informational peer support and the social networking forged in their interaction with one another. Prohn et al. (2018) found that students that lived on the college campus while participating in a PSE program learned to “function in ways that reduce the need for support while maintaining opportunities to engage in meaningful activities” (p. 130). Furthermore, McKay et al. (2015) found that students with ID in CTPs valued the program and their peer mentors’ support, which positively impacted their social skills and contributed to their sense of independence in college. Consequently, their study participants associated college with a safe place.

Moore and Schelling (2015) examined and compared graduates from an integrated and specialized PSE program for students with ID. Despite describing differences between the program outcomes concerning the nature and setting of employment placement of students with ID upon program completion, they found substantial positive employment outcomes for students with ID who attended these programs compared to those who had not participated. Similarly, Ross et al. (2013) found that the employment rate and independent living outcomes of graduates of a CTP exceeded the expectations for individuals with ID in the general population. In a survey of 25 graduates of a mixed-hybrid PSE program, Ryan et al. (2019) found that 96% of students got paid employment, and 44% lived independently. Their findings stress the importance a PSE program can have in the lives of individuals with ID. Grigal et al. (2019) found that the number of years students with ID attend a program and the credentials obtained during the program were positive predictors of students obtaining paid employment during and after completing the program. In this sense, the relationship between program participation and employment was more positive for students in four-year programs than those who attended two-year programs. In a Spanish university study, Judge and Izuzquiza Gasset (2015) found that post-secondary programs represent essential means to help students with ID achieve independent living and experience community integration. They reported that 92% of students who completed
the program were employed, out of which 74% had permanent employment contracts, equal to the reality of non-disabled workers in Spain.

Finally, another systematic literature review revealed that publications on inclusive post-secondary education programs focus on student enrollment, student access to college course content, and student progress measurement (Becht et al. 2020). Overall, publications on CTPs are increasing, indicating the significance of the HEOA (2008) passage to students with ID, educators (peer mentors and tutors), and the scholarly community. Therefore, this study aimed to contribute to the body of knowledge and literature on inclusive, comprehensive transition programs for students with ID by examining the case of the inception and early stage of a program in a Southwest Florida university. The goal was to answer the following research questions:

1. What was the process of planning a CTP in a Southwest Florida university?
2. How did the initiators of a CTP perceive its planning process?
3. What were the experiences of the initiators while planning the CTP?
4. What lessons were learned in the process of planning a CTP?

Method

A qualitative case study approach (Stake 2005) was used to explore and investigate the contemporary context and bounded system concerning the inception of the Soaring Eagle Academy (SEA), a comprehensive transition program for students with intellectual disabilities in a mid-sized public higher education institution in Southwest Florida. Following Stake’s (1995) assertions, the SEA is an intrinsic case study that allowed the researchers to focus on the case and its unique aspects: the only program designed to serve individuals in the ID population in Southwest Florida. In intrinsic case studies, the case must be described in detail, particularly its context. Therefore, in the following subsection, the context and background of the inception and early stages of the SEA are described. The goal is that the SEA case findings will lead to understandings and assertions that will build into lessons learned from the case and produce certain generalizations to be applied to similar higher education settings (Stake 1995).

The Case: the Soaring Eagle Academy

The case description is fundamental to give the readers “a sense of ‘being there, ...[portraying] the uniqueness and the ordinariness of the [case]’” (Stake 1995: 63). The Soaring Eagle Academy (SEA) is a fully inclusive six-semester academic program implemented in Fall 2021 for students with ID in a Southwest Florida university. The SEA is the first CTP to be offered on a university campus.
in the Southwest Florida region, thus, constituting an intrinsic case study (Stake 1995). The significance of the case is its ability to serve the local ID population; the prevalence of individuals with ID in the five counties that comprise Southwest Florida was 227 in Charlotte County, 480 in Collier County, 25 in Glades County, 113 in Hendry County, and 660 in Lee County (Florida Department of Education 2020).

The SEA students take foundational courses, including reading, technology, time management, study skills, the university colloquium, and electives from the university catalog. Field experiences and internships of increasing intensity are included in each semester of study, with career-specific instruction embedded into coursework. Students engage in person-centered planning and based on assessing their interests and aptitudes, their instruction becomes increasingly individualized and hands-on; therefore, completers will be ready for personally meaningful community employment in a job and industry of their choosing. By the program’s conclusion, students will have the skills to find employment and perform their work satisfactorily to meet employers’ expectations. The program provides a broad overview of career possibilities and teaches skills needed for all jobs.

The SEA students receive the social benefits of a college experience, including the opportunity to participate in Registered Student Organizations and attend social, recreational, and athletic events on campus. The SEA students also receive natural support and support from peer mentors who help locate activities that match the student’s interests, thereby enabling program completers to enter adulthood as well-rounded individuals capable of performing meaningful work and engaging in enjoyable recreation.

The SEA vision was defined as: “To provide model post-secondary education opportunities to traditionally underserved populations, thus preparing them to be civically engaged and economically contributing citizens of the Southwest Florida region.” The SEA mission was defined in conjunction with and supporting the university mission: “To embrace diversity and create educational and social opportunities for students with diverse educational needs through community partnerships that cultivate the habit of lifelong learning and the discovery of new knowledge.”

**Team Participants and Researchers’ Positionality**

The uniqueness of the SEA was reflected in its collaborative nature during the program planning process and research study, in which the participants (i.e., the SEA team members) and researchers worked together as coresearchers (Patton 2015). Each contributor recognized their expertise, insights, and contributions to the inception of the SEA program and valued their strengths.
in designing the case study (Kemmis & Wilkinson 1998). The consequence of involving participants in all aspects of the inquiry— from research focus and design to data analysis and final report— made the case more meaningful to them and their practice with the SEA program.

The participants of the study were six SEA team members who participated in the program’s conceptualization, planning, and inception with different roles, as depicted in Table 1. Two participants were also the second and third authors who took the dual role of researchers and participants in the study;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Education Background</th>
<th>Experience in Education</th>
<th>Job Position</th>
<th>Contributions to the SEA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant-1</td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>29 years</td>
<td>Professor of Special Education</td>
<td>Organizer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant-2</td>
<td>Educational Leadership</td>
<td>32 years</td>
<td>Assistant Director of Florida’s SPDG</td>
<td>Campus Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant-3</td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>45 years</td>
<td>Director of WVE and Florida’s SPDG</td>
<td>Grant Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant-4</td>
<td>Post-Secondary Disabilities Services</td>
<td>21 years</td>
<td>Director of Adaptive Services</td>
<td>Campus Liaison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant-5</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>23 years</td>
<td>Regional Director of a Center of Independent Living</td>
<td>Community Partnerships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant-6</td>
<td>Multicultural Education</td>
<td>17 years</td>
<td>Professor of Multicultural Education</td>
<td>Program Evaluator</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. SPDG = State Personnel Grant Development. WVE = Working with the Experts for Occupational and Physical Therapists.
although their involvement with the case could result in interpretation bias, their positionality strengthened the study as they had access to and provided exclusive information on the process of designing, getting approval, and the backstage functioning of the early stages of the SEA.

The first author, a doctoral candidate with research agenda in multicultural education, social justice, diversity, inclusion, and equity in higher education, was not a SEA team member. Therefore, her positionality allowed her to capture and value the participants’ experiences and perceptions as experts on the inception of the SEA program and, thus, minimize bias (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Johnson-Bailey, 2004).

Crucial to a study about a program for individuals with ID is the voice of students themselves, that is, the perceptions of the students of the SEA about the program. However, this was not possible because the purpose of the study was to investigate the conceptualization, design, and inception process of the SEA before it started. Consequently, when the study was conducted and data were collected, the students for the first cohort of the SEA had not been selected and the program had not started. Nonetheless, in the conclusion section, the researchers offer recommendations for future studies to explore the crucial perspectives and experiences of the SEA students and the impact of the program on their personal and professional lives. Table 1 below shows the SEA team participants of the case study.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Before collecting data, the study was approved by the university’s Institutional Review Board (Protocol #2020-01). Multiple data sources were collected to triangulate and increase the study’s credibility and trustworthiness and provide richness to the case under investigation (Patton 2015). The aggregated data ensured a rich, detailed, and in-depth description of the case of the planning and inception of the SEA and contributed to revealing the meanings of the participants’ experiences in the process (Denzin & Lincoln 2018; Stake 2005). The data sources included semi-structured interviews, field notes, and documents/artifacts (Patton 2015). The participants signed an informed consent to attend to the study’s ethical considerations, which ensured their right of non-response, of non-participation, and to withdraw from the study at any time.

In the semi-structured interviews, the participants described and explained their perceptions of and experiences during the SEA planning process (Creswell & Poth 2018). As Stake (1995) proposed, “the interview is the main road to multiple realities” (p. 64). In this sense, the interviews allowed the researchers to gain access to the detailed description and interpretation of the participants’ feelings, attitudes, opinions, motivators, challenges, and other key aspects of
their participation in the planning and inception of the SEA program. Thus, the interviews were conducted in person at the university and lasted an average of 60 minutes.

The field notes encompassed the participants’ non-verbal cues, reactions, and behaviors to the topics under investigation during the interview (Creswell & Poth 2018). The field notes also detailed the researchers’ insights, beginning analyses, feelings, reactions, interpretations, and reflections about the participants’ personal accounts (Patton 2015).

The documents collected included organizational documents (e.g., reports, strategic plans), public documents and artifacts (e.g., brochures, institutional video and website, and official memos), correspondence (e.g., weekly updates sent by e-mail), and minutes of meetings (Stake 1995). These documents provided the researchers with information about the SEA planning that could not be observed or captured during the interview process, such as goals, decisions, and communication among the team participants in their natural setting. In other words, the documents provided “a behind-the-scenes look at program processes and how they came into being” (Patton 2015: 563).

Before the data analysis procedures, the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed. Initially, the researchers resorted to data condensation, that is, the process of focusing, simplifying, and transforming the data collected from the interview transcripts, field notes, and documents into organized written texts that made the data stronger for the analysis (Miles et al. 2014). Then, the data were organized and coded into summaries, initial categories, and analytic memos to seek consistency among them. The goal was to find patterns that would help “understand behavior, issues, and contexts with regard to our particular case” (Stake 1995: 78). As a result, three themes emerged, which the next section discussed.

The following measures were adopted to ensure the findings’ credibility, trustworthiness, and accuracy (Denzin & Lincoln 2018): the data were triangulated from different points of view, analyzed separately and compared to check for inconsistencies (Stake 1995), and to minimize intrinsic interpretation bias from “single-methods, single-observer, and single-theory studies” (Denzin 2009: 307). Also, member-checks and experts were consulted to validate the consistency of the findings (Patton 2015).

**Findings**

The content analysis resulted in three themes: 1) collaborative team, 2) top-down support, and 3) life-changing program. Overall, the participants
emphasized the importance of empowering people by allowing the planning committee team to self-select, highlighted the crucial role of the university administration in supporting the program, as well as the team's motivation in creating a life-changing program that will impact students with ID, their families, the campus culture, and the community.

**Theme One: Collaborative Team**

The first theme emerged from the participants' recognition of the importance of choosing their planning committee team members. They enumerated the benefits of putting their team together, particularly the feeling of independence and empowerment in choosing their team members:

> I told the Dean that if we were going to do this, we needed certain independence. It was important to get together a team of people that could work well together. Others in our group mentioned that they had never been in a group like this that was so constructive. We're all able to keep our egos out of it and come up with the right solutions.
> **PARTICIPANT-1**

The other participants echoed this perspective, describing with enthusiasm the value of picking the team members and the synergy and collaboration that resulted from recognizing each other's strengths in the planning process. Participant-5 stated: “We were so lucky to have selected our small steering committee. We're a cohesive team who were just excited to create something wonderful for the community.” Participant-3 said, “I think that was important to have a team with really strong relationships and the willingness to be honest with each other regarding how, where, and what direction we thought we needed to go.” Participant-4 added: “we're an amazing group of people who complement one another in each of our skills and what we can offer to the group and the program.”

More than complementing one another, the participants acknowledged that their life and professional experiences culminated in their strengths and skills in planning the SEA. From teaching special education students, grant writing, establishing connections within the university and with the community to knowledge of management, program evaluation, and legislation involved in program development and implementation, each participant explained how their life-long experiences were built into necessary expertise in conceptualizing the SEA:
Our professional backgrounds and our whole lived experiences built us for this. So, when I heard they were planning this program, I just had to be a part of it. I had to be involved. This program combines what I’ve worked on my entire career, and I had no idea it would culminate in planning a program like this.

**Participant-2**

The team’s commitment to creating a life-changing program was another aspect highlighted by the participants when praising their ability to select the planning committee members. Each team member’s intrinsic motivation in creating this program was evidenced in their selfless dedication to it. Participant-2 commented that “you can accomplish a lot when you work together with dedication to a life-changing outcome.” Participant-6 summarized the participants’ feelings concerning their dedication to the group and the program planning: “This is the most democratic, open-minded group I’ve ever been a part of. No egos, personal or hidden agendas. We respect each other because we’re willing to do something for the good of the students, families, and society.” Participant-1 clarified that the team’s selflessness and commitment in creating this program were evidenced in the fact that they neither received extra payment for taking part in the planning committee nor had reduced work hours to dedicate to the program planning.

The participants’ narratives about the SEA planning process were permeated with excitement, joy, and overall positivity, including their descriptions of how the program was conceived, the team members’ collaboration and engagement, and the benefits of the program to the students with ID, their families, the campus culture, and the Southwest Florida community. The friendly and positive atmosphere created in the planning process was evidenced, for example, in the weekly meeting update memos sent to all team members and the College of Education’s Dean via e-mail. The thread messages carried a light-hearted tone, including links to YouTube videos with songs that matched the themes of the weekly meetings and decisions that had to be made. In other words, the communication among team members did not resemble strict, managerial, or hierarchical institutional messages but was engaging to the whole team, allowing for horizontal participation without losing sight of the decisions and actions that needed to be made.

Moreover, their commitment and dedication to being part of the planning committee were evidenced by them consistently using the pronoun “we” when describing the processes, meetings, decisions, and actions taken in the conceptualization and inception plan. In addition to valuing the team member’s commitment and experiences in planning the SEA program, the participants...
emphasized the support from the university’s administration, as will be discussed next.

**Theme Two: Top-Down Support**

The second theme to emerge was the participants’ emphasis on using a top-down approach to building campus support for the SEA. The participants highlighted the support from the University President and Provost, the Board of Trustees (BOT), and the Dean of the College of Education. They described that after an initial meeting with the university president to assess his openness to the idea, the planning committee spent approximately a year designing their program’s vision. The committee completed this process by working on three applications, namely, the approval as an FPCTP, a grant from the FCSUA, and approval by the U.S. Department of Education as a CTP. The participants emphasized that their work on these documents assisted them in crystalizing their vision for the program, while the committee translated the vision into a presentation, which they later shared with the President.

Once the President granted permission, the participants said that the next step involved adding the FPCTP application to a BOT meeting agenda to get their approval. In addition, the participants believed that BOT support would increase the project’s sustainability by ensuring continued support after the President’s anticipated retirement, and the BOT voted unanimously to approve. These were narrated with astonishment and excitement, for the participants had not anticipated the unrestricted support received from the university’s top administration, including the President, Provost, and the BOT. Participant-5 commented, “we had amazing support from the university President and the [College of Education] Dean. They embraced our vision and offered all support we needed to develop this program.” Participant-6 added, “the university administration was very supportive. They respected the program’s vision and trusted the strength of our team to have the means [money] to make it happen.”

Next, the participants shared that the university President authorized his Chief of Staff to distribute a survey of campus attitudes toward the inclusion of students with ID in academic and social activities on campus (Carothers et al. 2021). Once data collection had been completed, the President sent a campus-wide e-mail introducing the SEA. The participants shared that this introduction was delayed to avoid contaminating survey results. After data collection had been completed, two members of the planning committee invited representatives of all campus stakeholders to attend one or more of four orientation sessions scheduled to introduce the SEA, learn how it would impact each office’s operations, and ask for feedback regarding how SEA implementation plans could be improved. Because most of these administrators held rank
as various levels of Vice President, many arranged meetings between their core teams and SEA planning committee members to structure implementation at the grassroots level.

Participant-3 commented, “to our surprise, we had much more support from the President and the BOT than from other faculty and staff. This shows the importance of top-down support from the university administration and to not rely only on grass work.” In this respect, Participant-1 emphasized the crucial value of top-down support as opposed to grassroots work, saying, “we had immense support from the President and the BOT. Had we not had this support, a program like this wouldn’t fly off the ground with only grassroots efforts.”

Theme Three: Life-Changing Program

The final theme emerged from the participants’ shared vision for the SEA as a model program that will transform the lives of students with ID and their families, other students on campus, and the campus culture as a whole, as it will be weaved into the university’s fabric. Participant-2 spoke about the culmination of efforts in creating a life-changing program: “We feel we’re accomplishing the result of teamwork synergy to develop a life-changing program for these students, their families, and the others around them.” Similarly, one participant commented on the importance of the program being embedded into the university’s mission and values:

It was important to take into consideration the structure of the entire institution to weave this program within its own fabric, engrained in the university’s mission and the institution as a whole, something organic that will impact everyone, not just the students we’ll serve.

Participant-3

Moreover, the SEA is expected to bring change to the Southwest Florida community by fostering the inclusion of individuals with ID in the workforce, ready to take jobs, live independently, and contribute to the local community and businesses. Participant-5 stated that “we want this program to be a model across the nation and well-respected by our community.” Participant-4 added that “all we did was develop something great and, most of all, needed to transform the lives of these students and the community.” The participants’ dedication to creating a life-changing program was evidenced in the selflessness in participating in this study and manifested in Participant-6’s comment. “What we did was service for the community. A combination of collaboration and hard work that we wish to have as open data for whoever is interested in doing
something like this in their institutions.” Finally, Participant-1 synthesized the moral value of creating the SEA: “this program materializes efforts for doing what’s right, something important for these individuals, their families, and those who will interact with them.”

This motive, combined with the teamwork described in the first theme and the top-down support discussed in the second theme, contributed to the successful completion of the planning stage and facilitated the recruitment of the first cohort of students in less than a month. Those students began classes in the Fall 2021 semester.

Discussion

Despite the enactment and the revisions of the IDEA (1990), students with ID had not always been able to attend higher education institutions in the United States (Grigal et al. 2012). With the HEAOA (2008), CTPs for students with ID began to be offered and expanded by higher education institutions nationwide. The intent of these programs was to offer curricula and advising structures to help this student population continue their academic, professional, or technical careers upon high-school graduation, envisioning their independent living and gainful employment upon program completion (Project10 n.d.). Therefore, the establishment of CTPs in the United States manifested initiatives to address the inclusive needs of students with ID and counteract prejudice, discrimination, insensitivity, and apathy towards them in education and the job market (Gollnick & Chinn 2017).

Specifically in Florida, the enactment of the FPCTP (2016) allowed for the establishment of CTPs in the state’s higher education institutions and paved the way for the conceptualization and inception of the Soaring Eagle Academy (SEA) at a Southwest Florida university. The program was outlined nearly two years ago with full support from the University’s higher administration—the President, the Provost, the BOT, and the Dean of the College of Education—materializing in the first student-cohort beginning Fall 2021. As emphasized repeatedly by the study participants, the top-down support received was necessary to make even planning the SEA possible.

Another crucial aspect in the conceptualization of the SEA, highlighted by the participants, was their ability to choose their own planning team without external interference from the University’s administration. The participants’ freedom to put their team together, considering their previous life and professional experiences, strengths, and expertise, but, above all, the good
relationships they maintained, was fundamental to achieving synergy and collaboration to make important decisions about the program.

The life-changing program theme and aim for the SEA were in alignment with the benefits described by numerous scholars who investigated CTPs before, such as the transformational role of education in the lives of students with ID by providing opportunity, independent living, positive campus interactions, and relationship-building with non-disabled students (Corby et al. 2020). The participants emphasized the positive impact they expect the program to have on students with ID's college experiences that go beyond academic gains and include emotional and social support from peer mentors that can result in them associating their college experiences with a "safe place" to be (McKay et al., 2015; Wilt & Morningstar, 2020).

Future research should include studies on the SEA focusing on how well the program achieved its goals of transforming students’ lives with ID, and attitudes toward inclusion on campus, and in the Southwest Florida community. Other studies could investigate the experiences and perspectives of the students in the SEA program, the attitudes of other students on campus concerning their relationships and interactions with students with ID, parents’ views on the benefits of the program to their children, and the perspectives of faculty and staff on the impact of the SEA to the students served.

Furthermore, future studies could interrogate to what extent CTPs seek to normalize and establish conformity among students with ID cohort rather than question ableism in education and employment organizations. In this sense, researchers could explore the consequences of CTPs that emphasize the development of skills, abilities, and traits that meet employers' expectations and satisfy labor market demands rather than question in what ways these very skills, abilities, and traits facilitate or hinder disabled people's participation in the labor market. In this sense, explorations of whether CTPs disrupt exclusionary, prejudiced behaviors and practices from employers and the goal of finding “the right type” of disabled individuals could benefit scholarship and practice by offering important insights into existing parameters of the labor market towards the inclusion of individuals with ID.

One limitation of this study is that there is not yet evidence that the findings could be generalized to other universities or geographic regions. The case of the SEA illustrates lessons learned from the participants’ process of conceptualizing and starting the program; therefore, these lessons may be used as examples for other settings and contexts interested in planning and developing a CTP for students with ID in their universities (Stake 2005).
Conclusion

This study investigated the conceptualization and inception of a program for students with ID in a Southwest Florida university in the United States. The case of the SEA indicated significant aspects to planning the program, including the importance of selecting a good team and ensuring the buy-in of the University administration and key stakeholders. Most of all, the case evidenced the importance of the intrinsic motivation of the team members who were willing to create something great, without personal or hidden agendas, to transform the lives of students with ID, their families, the campus culture, and attitudes towards the inclusion of these students on campus and in the Southwest Florida community. Ultimately, the case emphasizes the value of inclusion and diversity in higher education by stressing the need to create programs that support individuals of diverse populations, mainly those with ID. Indeed, universities such as a public university in Southwest Florida that are committed to these values reinforce students’ autonomy, develop their agency and their sense of belonging to the campus community, and become models of representation, opportunity, and social justice to marginalized populations.

References


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