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Promoting Virtual Engagement: Addressing the Social and Mental Health Needs of Students with Intellectual Disabilities in a Remote Postsecondary Environment

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Introduction

Until recently, individuals diagnosed with intellectual disabilities (IDs) rarely received the opportunities afforded to students through the college experience. After secondary school, their futures often became limited, forcing them to navigate through adulthood without such benefits.

With support from the Higher Education Opportunity Act, the number of inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs on college campuses have increased (Madaus, Kowitt, & Lalor, 2012). This expansion has led to the increased enrollment of students with IDs in college, with over 265 programs across college campuses today (Weir, 2020).

Research has demonstrated that students with IDs benefit most from an inclusive curriculum facilitating engagement with their peers without IDs (Odom, Buysse, & Soukakou, 2011). Inclusive Postsecondary Education (IPSE) provides students with IDs the opportunity to grow socially, academically, and professionally, thereby fostering self-sufficiency and increased competitiveness within the workforce ("Florida IPSE Credential Guidance Brief: # 1 Background on Inclusive Postsecondary Education," 2019). Such programs have also been shown to improve employment rates and civic engagement among participating students (Grigal & Hart, 2012). An integrated IPSE program allows students with and without intellectual disabilities to take classes together, with further inclusion in residential life and extracurricular activities. This inclusion is not only conducive for the growth of students with IDs but also creates a more diverse college experience for those without IDs, cultivating a more informed and inclusive student body (Athamanah, Fisher, Sung & Han, 2020).

Inclusive Education Services (IES) at the University of Central Florida (UCF) is one of these integrated IPSE programs. With the goal of providing students with IDs an inclusive, comprehensive non-degree seeking academic experience, IES fosters independence and professional development among students through campus involvement and work experience ("IES Overview - Inclusive Education Services - UCF," n.d.). Through IES, students with IDs have the opportunity to live on campus, audit university courses, engage in extracurricular activities, connect with other students with and without IDs, and develop the professional skills necessary to gain meaningful employment upon graduation. I was impressed by the tremendous support from faculty and staff in students' academic endeavors, as I saw that tutoring, academic support, and personalized meetings were integrated into the program to ensure that each student's educational needs were met. However, I noticed a gap between the students with IDs and many of the resources available to them through the university.

To provide additional support to the students with IDs enrolled in IES, I helped to start Knights Exemplar (KE), a service-based organization at UCF. The name "Knights Exemplar"

echoes our emphasis on training UCF Knights to serve as peer mentors of the highest quality to support students with IDs connected with IES. The mission of KE is to support and promote campus engagement and professional development for UCF students with IDs through the establishment of a campus-wide mentorship program. As an intermediary between students and collegiate resources, KE aims to create accessibility for students with IDs to make the most out of their experience at UCF by facilitating events in academics, campus involvement, health & wellness, and career exploration.

Throughout my time working with KE, I have been incredibly proud of the strides we have made in the UCF and greater Orlando community in such a short period. Since KE's inception in October 2019, we have trained over 80 peer mentors to provide support to our IES students, and the resulting impact has been transformational. Not only have our students with IDs been able to access additional resources across campus, but with the support received through KE, they have also reported increased confidence in day-to-day interactions with fellow students, improved social skills, and greater engagement with the campus community, as verified by weekly surveys and peer mentor evaluations.

However, six months after KE was founded, UCF shut down due to safety concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic. This sudden disruption to the organization's functioning created an array of challenges that needed to be addressed to resume virtual operation. In dealing with these struggles, while prioritizing the needs of our students with IDs, we have transformed the structure of KE as I experienced my journey of personal growth while learning to adapt to new challenges amid the pandemic.

The COVID-19 Disruption

With the closure of the UCF campus in March 2020, all planned in-person KE activities were canceled. IES students, staff, and KE peer mentors, including myself, were confused and uncertain of the future of instruction, events, and activities, as we worried about balancing the needs of our students with IDs with the safety concerns of the pandemic. With less than two months remaining in the Spring 2020 semester and UCF transitioning to remote instruction, my leadership team and I decided to suspend the remainder of the semester's events. While IES resumed classes virtually, KE initially struggled to provide meaningful support to students due to the challenges associated with this transition. Students initially struggled to use Zoom, the primary software utilized by UCF for remote learning, which made it difficult to meet with students as frequently as in the past.

Just as our students with IDs were beginning to feel integrated with the campus community, their world changed overnight. Many IES students who came to UCF from all over the country had to return home. Instead of spending just one week away from campus during spring break, students were suddenly faced with the prospect of being apart from their friends, campus, activities, and newfound independence for an unforeseeable period. With such an uncertain future amid growing fears of COVID-19, many students reported feeling isolated, sad, lonely, and depressed. Our efforts through KE during the Summer and Fall 2020 semester sought to combat such negative feelings and promote virtual engagement and social interaction among our students from the safety of their own homes.

The Response

A major challenge caused by campus closure and the remote transition was the increased difficulty in communication between the leadership team, faculty advisor, and our students with IDs. As we adjusted to utilizing Zoom, I emphasized the need for clear and consistent communication in times of such uncertainty and change. To implement this, we began weekly

meetings with our faculty supervisor and my officer board to provide a seamless virtual transition and maintain communication with IES students and peer mentors.

To provide our students with IDs with much needed social interaction during quarantine, I implemented weekly socials through KE. They quickly became a huge success, as measured by students increased reported satisfaction and attendance at such events. We observed that students attended socials far more frequently than previous in-person events as they looked forward to engaging with their friends. These events became therapeutic for everyone involved, including myself, as we interacted with friends, checked in on everyone's mental health, discussed the uncertainties of COVID-19, and simply had fun. While we started by catching up on each other's lives, our socials gradually turned into game nights including Pictionary, trivia, and Among Us, which further evolved into themed celebrations such as "Movie Knights," Cooking Classes, and holiday socials. I attribute the tremendous success of these socials to our emphasis on tailoring them to the needs of our students with IDs and peer mentors, as we adjusted their frequency, content, and themes based on members' feedback. A key aspect of the KE mission is to encourage students to develop social skills, and these socials have been extremely beneficial in maintaining a continuity of social interaction and emotional support, based on student and peer mentor surveys, student leader observations, and parent feedback. As a result, our socials have exceeded our expectations in the positive impact they have had on the lives of our students and my fellow peer mentors, indicated by high reported personal satisfaction at the conclusion of the semester.

While socials made up the bulk of our events in the Summer 2020 semester, we decided to introduce new virtual events in Fall 2020. Previously, as a relatively new organization, we had put great effort into creating many events for our students with IDs and peer mentors. However, since the remote transition due to the COVID-19 pandemic, our new philosophy has been quality over quantity. With limited opportunities to advertise KE to prospective peer mentors, we focused on strengthening the relationship between our current peer mentors and students with IDs. Since we had fewer peer mentors, we reduced the number of events from five to three per week. However, despite this reduction, we noticed that event attendance among members increased. Despite our reduced membership, our efforts in collecting and implementing feedback have ensured that our current members are truly committed to the organization, serving as excellent role models for fellow students with IDs.

An additional change in our virtual transition was the shift from one-on-one mentorship to group mentorship. Originally, we had a Circle of Support program in which peer mentors were paired with individual IES students for more personalized support. However, due to the limited options for remote one-on-one activities, we instead employed a group mentorship model, encouraging interaction between all peer mentors and students with IDs for increased social interaction and better allocation of our fewer peer mentors. This organizational change turned out to be extremely successful, as students connected with more peer mentors and formed new friendships, as the excitement of seeing new faces encouraged them to attend more virtual events. Soon, one-on-one relationships between peer mentors and IES students developed organically and more effectively than if they had been through formal matching. Overall, I was very pleased to see this mentorship model work so well in fulfilling the social needs of our students. When we once again resume in-person events, I hope to adopt a hybrid model combining the individualized attention of one-on-one mentorship with the increased socialization of group mentorship.

Following such success at the beginning of the pandemic, we experienced a slow decline in event attendance midway through the Fall 2020 semester, as students adjusted to the virtual environment and courses became more demanding. In response, we created a new IES liaison position and appointed a student with IDs to encourage fellow students to attend events and generate enthusiasm for KE. Additionally, our IES liaison was tasked with assisting their peers with technology as they navigated the Zoom platform. Through this position, we have a direct line of communication with our IES students regarding events, suggestions, and ideas, and have noticed a subsequent increase in virtual event attendance.

Conclusion

While leading KE's transition to a virtual environment, I had to adapt to several challenges, but the most profound improvement was that of my outlook. I, like most people, was wary of the shift to remote instruction as I worried that our interactions would cease to feel natural, and our events would begin to feel forced. However, I could not be happier with the way that everything turned out, despite the hurdles created by COVID-19. The dynamic between our students with IDs and peer mentors is closer than ever, as the excitement of virtual events and socials maintains an atmosphere of positivity. Our officer board has bonded through our shared experiences tackling these challenges and our students have become more involved and engaged by taking on leadership positions and providing more feedback. Overall, the flexibility of the online format has allowed us to provide additional academic support to our students, connect them to campus-led activities, provide guidance in navigating virtual resources created by the university, and continue to emphasize career development through virtual resume and professionalism workshops. As a result, I have realized that despite the initial hardship of virtual adjustment, the online setting offers many benefits such as fostering close relationships, seamless communication with out-of-Orlando students, and the flexibility to attend events from the comfort and safety of our homes.

From these experiences, I have grown to realize the vital importance of social interaction in maintaining our mental and emotional health and have learned of the power of positivity in adjusting to widespread change and uncertainty. By leading this transition within KE, I learned to adapt to disruptions by relying on communication, community engagement, and the cycle of feedback, assessment, and improvement. I used to believe that the best way to make a difference in a community was to impact the greatest number of people, but now I realize that it's by creating the most meaningful impact on each individual. Through my experiences leading KE during this period of change, I am proud of our efforts in creating a more diverse experience for UCF Knights, both within and outside of our organization. I encourage those facing the challenge of adjusting to such disruptions to embrace change and utilize creativity to approach all difficulties. They might find that the unique needs and opportunities that arise from such change will serve as lessons for the future and improvements to the status quo. Ultimately, our experiences can serve as a lesson for other university-based IPSE programs seeking to provide more significant support to students with IDs in a virtual environment.

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