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# A Qualitative Study on Perceptions of Parents and Their Young Adults with Disabilities Regarding Postsecondary Education

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A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTS AND THEIR YOUNG  
ADULTS WITH DISABILITIES REGARDING  
POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

By

Kelli Summers

A creative project in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION

in

Special Education

Approved:

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## Abstract

Postsecondary education (PSE) participation is a predictor for positive employment outcomes for students with or without disabilities (Newman et al., 2011; Test et al., 2009). In recent years, there has been an increase of students with disabilities participating in PSE. Students with intellectual disabilities (ID) have had the lowest enrollment rate of all the disability categories in PSE programs (Newman et al. (2010). This project examined the perceptions of parents and their young adults with ID regarding PSE. Participants included parents of young adults with ID and their young adults who were attending a PSE program on a college campus in the western region of the U.S. Parent and young adults participants were interviewed separately. Interview questions related to demographic characteristics, family values, perceptions regarding college, and reactions to PSE experience. Parents and their young adults reported a variety of perceptions regarding PSE. The researcher analyzed the data and identified two main themes that emerged which were *high expectations* and *independence*. These results add to the research literature on parent perceptions about PSE for their young adults with ID.

A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTS AND THEIR  
YOUNG ADULTS WITH DISABILITIES REGARDING  
POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Researchers have shown that postsecondary education (PSE) participation is a predictor for positive employment outcomes for students with or without disabilities (Newman et al., 2011; Test et al., 2009). From 1990 to 2005 there was a 19% increase of students with disabilities receiving PSE in some format within 4 years of leaving high school (Newman, Wagner, Cameto, et al., 2011). Although students with intellectual disabilities (ID) have also had an increase of PSE program enrollment, they have had the lowest enrollment rate of all the disability categories according to Newman et al. (2010). Historically, the exclusion of students with ID from PSE programs has contributed to the poor adult outcomes and low expectations of community members and educators of post high education options (Grigal, Hart, & Paiewonsky, 2010 as cited in Kleinert, Jones, Sheppard-Jones, Harp, & Harrison, 2012). However, students' and their parents' expectations for PSE are increasing. Some students with ID are succeeding with support in college programs (Grigal, Hart, Smith, Domin, & Sulewski, 2013; Thinkcollege.net). Youth who make the transition to PSE programs may be those who have supportive parents (Lindstrom, Doren, Metheny, Johnson, & Zane, 2007). However, additional research is necessary to confirm this hypothesis and investigate the kinds of support provided by parents of youth in PSE. One variable that distinguishes these students from others may be the support provided by parents. However, this hypothesis is supported by only minimal research (Lindstrom, Doren, Metheny, Johnson, & Zane, 2007). Therefore,

research is needed to determine whether parent support relates to success in college programs.

### **Literature Review**

Using PsycINFO, EBSCOhost, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, ERIC, Education Source, and Education Full Text (H.W. Wilson), I searched for literature on postsecondary education for individuals with disabilities, specifically intellectual disabilities and family or parent perspectives. I used the following search terms in various orders: *postsecondary education, college, intellectual disabilities, disabilities, parent perspectives, parent perceptions, parent surveys, surveys, higher education, and special education*. I conducted secondary searches by reviewing literature therein. In total I found approximately 60 studies related to postsecondary education for individuals with disabilities or ID and/or family or parent perspectives. I examined 25 of those that seemed to relate to PSE. The rest of the articles were excluded because they did not apply to PSE for students with ID or have some kind of parent/ family involvement. The three most relevant articles reviewed below were those that related to PSE, intellectual disability, and parent/family involvement.

First, Papay and Bambara (2011) conducted a survey of PSE programs for students ages 18 – 21 with ID and developmental disabilities (IDD) in the United States. The purpose of the study was to gather information on the characteristics of the PSE programs and access to college classes. Programs were identified through the Think College ([www.thinkcollege.net](http://www.thinkcollege.net)) database. Programs were included that (a) provided access to the PSE institutions' campus (e.g., 2-year or 4-year community college or university), (b) served students with IDD, (c) served students ages 18-21 still receiving

special education services, and (d) were located in the United States. Of the 87 identified eligible programs, 58 program coordinators responded. Six of those were excluded because they did not meet the criteria leaving 52. The survey asked the coordinators to choose a model of practice used at their campus: separate, mixed, or individualized. Separate programs provided instruction in separate classes with only students with disabilities with no opportunities to participate in activities with typical aged peers ( $n = 6$ ). Mixed programs provided separate classes for instruction, but also provided opportunities for inclusive activities with typical aged peers ( $n = 36$ ). Individualized programs provided inclusive instruction and activities with typical aged peers based on individual needs and no separate settings for instruction ( $n = 6$ ). The findings of the survey showed the degree that students with IDD were involved in the PSE programs, the purposes for having them on college campuses, and their level of participation in college classes. The majority of students with IDD were involved in program models that were mixed or individualized. These programs on a college campus focused on employment training opportunities, inclusion with typically aged peers, development of independent living skills, and participation in college classes. The study also suggested that access to college classes followed two patterns: (a) enrollment in classes for credit usually were vocational or remedial classes and were at 2-year colleges, and (b) classes that were audited were academic, health, and fitness classes and tended to be at 4-year colleges. The students with higher academic skills were more likely to take classes for credit. Twenty-four percent of the students in all the PSE programs were taking college classes; 100% of individualized programs and 85% of mixed programs had at least one student in the program enrolled in a class. While this study provided important information on PSE

program characteristics and access to college classes, the research did not explore parent perceptions of PSE.

Morrison, Sansosti, and Hadley (2009) conducted a qualitative study on parent perceptions of supports needed by their college-bound students with Asperger's Syndrome (AS) to be successful in college. A focus group methodology was used to examine parent perceptions about (a) supports and accommodations needed by their children in college to adjust to the expectations of the college experience (academically and socially) and (b) self-advocacy skills needed by their children to navigate the college system and obtain the supports and accommodations needed. Four parents with sons with AS participated in the focus group. The participants included: Ms. Peters whose son was 16 years old and in 10<sup>th</sup> grade at a public high school, Ms. Harrison whose son was 15 years old, in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, and attended the same public high school (although the parents had never met before the focus group), Ms. Clark whose son was 14 years old and attended a public middle/high school, and Ms. Vincent who had two sons with AS. Her older son was 12 years old and attended sixth grade at a Catholic elementary school. His brother was 8 years old and attended second grade in a special program for students with AS in a public elementary school. There was also a professional from the Student Services Program of a local, private, 4-year university and a faculty member from the Department of Counselor Education of another local, private, 4-year Catholic University who served as the facilitator and hosted the focus group on that campus. The focus group lasted approximately 1 ½ hrs. The session was recorded using a digital audio recorder and then transcribed into a written record of all words spoken. Transcriptions revealed two primary themes. First was the need for appropriate accommodations and supports

which included collaboration with the Student Services Program to help with scheduling, matching students with specific instructors who understand AS and employ best-practice instructional strategies, and advocacy. The second theme was the need for effective self-advocacy skills and again collaboration with the Student Services Program. The parents recognized that their role would diminish as an advocate for their son and the students would need to advocate for themselves in order to be successful in the college setting. This study adds to the literature on parent perceptions of anticipated needs and expectations for their college-bound students with disabilities. However it does not address the role of parents in supporting postschool outcomes for students with disabilities.

Lindstrom et al. (2007) investigated the influence of the family on supporting career development and postschool outcomes for young adults with learning disabilities by determining which family structural variables (parental employment, education level, and socioeconomic status) and family process variables (family involvement, support, advocacy, and career expectations) are related to postschool outcomes and career development. This study included 13 young adults who had (a) a documented specific learning disability, (b) received special education services during high school, and (c) been out of school 3 to 5 years. The young adults ranged in age from 21 to 27 years old and included 8 women and 5 men. Eight of the young adults graduated with a standard high school diploma, three with a modified diploma, and two dropped out of high school during their senior year. The socioeconomic status (SES) varied across participants. At least one parent and one high school teacher or transition specialist of each young adult participated as well. A multiple-method multiple-case study design was utilized for the



research. Data were collected over 9 months. Fifty-nine interviews lasting 90 min to 2 hrs were conducted: 26 young adult interviews (each was interviewed twice), 18 parent interviews, and 15 school staff interviews. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed. Families also filled out a background questionnaire that included information on education levels, family income, and employment information. The researchers also conducted file reviews on all the young adults' special education and vocational rehabilitation files. After analyzing all the data, results showed family structure was not directly linked to employment outcomes but low SES of the family was linked to early career aspirations due to the young adults wanting to improve their situations. However, family process variables and family interactions did influence career development and postschool outcomes. These variables combined to form three patterns of parent/child interactions. The researchers categorized them as:

1. *Advocates*. Parents in this group provided support, advocacy, and intentional career activities; their young adults lived independently and had high-wage jobs.
2. *Protectors*. Parents in this group provided support and were highly involved with their young adults. Parents did not provide intentional career activities and were more controlling, setting limits on independence; and their young adults were employed in low wage jobs.
3. *Removed*. Parents in this group had low levels of support and involvement with their young adults, and had no intentional career activities because they seemed overwhelmed by their responsibilities and jobs. Young adults in this group were all employed and had surprisingly positive outcomes.

Existing research is limited and more is needed to determine whether parent perceptions and support relate to success of their young adults in college programs. This study adds to the body of literature on the role of parents in PSE experiences of their young adults. Additionally, this study will address whether perceptions of parents and young adults regarding PSE are similar or different.

### **Purpose Statement and Research Question**

The purpose of this study was to explore perceptions of parents and their young adult children with disabilities regarding their experiences in PSE using interview process and qualitative data analysis. This study addressed the following research questions:

1. Given six young adults with ID attending an inclusive PSE program on a college campus, what perceptions and factors about PSE do the parents of these young adults report during individual interviews?
2. What perceptions do the young adult college students with ID report during individual interviews about PSE?
3. How do parent perceptions compare to their young adult's perceptions?

## **Method**

### **Participants and Setting**

Participants were the parents of six students with ID and five of their young adult children who agreed to participate and were attending an inclusive PSE program on a college campus in the western U.S. Demographic data on parents are shown in Table 1. Parent participants were purposefully selected based on program admission decisions regarding their young adults. Parents ranged in age from 42 to 56 years and represented

various socioeconomic strata. All parents were Caucasian. The PSE program director contacted parents regarding the researcher’s intent. Interested parents were asked to voluntarily contact the researcher to announce their interest in an interview. Only parents who contacted the researcher participated. Similar communications were initiated by the postsecondary program director regarding young adult participants. Only young adults who contacted the researcher participated.

Table 1

*Parent Demographic Data*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Education Level</b>	<b>Other Young Adults Attending College</b>	<b>Annual Household income Range</b>
Mother 1	Bachelor’s Degree	Not yet	Above \$150,000
Father 1	Graduate Degree		
Mother 2	Three years college	Yes	Above \$150,000
Father 2	MD		
Mother 3	HS Diploma Technical education	N/A	\$25,000- \$49,000
Mother 4	Two years college	Yes	Above \$150,000
Father 4	Master’s Degree		
Mother 5	Master’s Degree	Yes	Above \$150,000
Father 5	Bachelor’s Degree		
<b>Mother 6</b>	<i>Associate’s Degree</i>	Yes	\$50,000- \$99,999

<b>Father 6</b>	Associate Degree
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Three females and two males who attended the PSE program, ranging in age from 19 to 22 years, participated in the study. All five young adults had received special education services through high school and had been classified as ID, autism spectrum disorder, or both. Each young adult used verbal English for expressive language, responded to verbal questions and conversation using the same modality, and exhibited visual and hearing acuity in the normal range. Four young adults were Caucasian and one was Asian. One young adult had Down Syndrome. Young adults entered the college program with a certificate of completion or diploma from high school. Prior to college, all young adults resided with their families and had moved to the university campus from residences located 90 to 130 miles away, with the exception of one young adult who lived in another state (830 miles). At the time of the interviews, all six young adults had participated in the college program for 28 to 30 weeks (i.e., nearly two complete semesters plus finals week).

### **Program Description**

The PSE program was located on a college campus of a state-supported university. The program consisted of seven students, a program director, a part-time rehabilitation-counseling intern, and mentors who provided individualized academic and independent living skill support. Admission of students was based on criteria of (a) high levels of motivation to attend college; (b) high levels of parent support; (c) history of receiving special education services based on classifications of IDD; (d) reports from teachers of independent performance in most functional skills, directionality, and ability

to navigate complex environments; and (e) reports of absence of problem behavior. Students were selected for the program based on scrutiny of application materials (e.g., transcripts, letters of recommendation, summaries of performance, psychological evaluation, etc.). After initial review of applications and elimination of those young adults not meeting criteria, program staff held Skype interviews of applicants and their parents. The final list of admitted students were eligible for participation in this study.

Admitted students carried course loads of 9-11 semester credits, attended inclusive classes, and lived in campus housing. Their classes included an initial campus orientation (taken by all students), study skills, career awareness and exploration, health and wellness, self-determination, economic and consumer issues, and vocational electives. Course credit was received for individual courses at the end of the semester; however, credits did not apply towards majors until students met general admission requirements for the university (e.g., ACT score of 14 or higher, high school GPA of 2.5 or higher). All students paid the standard rate for college tuition, room, and meals. One student received a partial scholarship from a local sponsor to offset costs.

### **Interview Development**

The researcher developed all interview questions based on conversations with committee members and a review of PSE literature. Questions were based on research by Lindstrom et al. (2007) on family process variables and addressed the topics of parent involvement, college preparation activities, and college experience. (Similar questions were used for parent and young adult interviews except that wording was changed as appropriate.

Examples:

Parent: What do you want for your child's future?

Young adults: What do you want for your future?

Parent: What have you learned about your child in terms of living on his/her own?

Young adults: What have you learned about living on your own?

Questions were drafted and submitted to the committee chairperson for editing.

The final list of questions was administered to all interviewees in a semi-structured format.

### **Design**

A qualitative research design based on transcribed interviews (Martella, Nelson, Morgan, & Marchand-Martella, 2012) was used in this study. This design was chosen because it allowed the researcher to address the research questions.

### **Procedures**

**Parent interviews.** Individual interviews were conducted with two mothers and fathers as pairs. Another three interviews were conducted with mothers only. One parent was interviewed whose young adult did not consent to participate.

**Young adult interviews.** Young adults were interviewed separately from parents in individual interviews. Only the young adult and researcher were present for each interview.

**Interview locations.** Four young adult interviews were conducted on the college campus (three in a classroom, one at the dorm) and one was conducted over the phone. Eleven interviews were conducted. Three parent interviews were conducted in the participants' homes, two were conducted over the phone, and one was conducted in a

private room in a public library. All appointment times and locations were prearranged and agreed upon by the researcher and participants.

A list of questions appears in Table 2. These questions were selected because they related closely to the research questions of the study.

Table 2

*Questions for parent and young adult participants*

Parent Participants	Young Adult Participants
Parent Involvement Questions	
<p>What were the influences on you or your spouse that led you to think about college for your child and how old was your child?</p>	<p>What made you decide to go to college and How old were you when you thought that you wanted to go to college? Were there people or experiences that influenced your decision to go to college, if so, how did they?</p>
<p>There is some research that suggests that parents might be characterized as advocates, protectors, or removed in terms of how they relate to their children. Which would you consider yourself and why?</p>	<p>How were your parents involved in your high school education?</p>
<p>Describe how your involvement in your child’s college education compares to your</p>	<p>How is college different from high school? How have your parents been involved in</p>

<p>involvement in his/her high school education. Is your involvement now different than you expected? How does family involvement impact success in higher education?</p>	<p>your college education so far?</p>
<p>College Preparation Questions</p>	
<p>In what ways, if any, did you prepare your child to go to college? What classes did your child take in high school that helped prepare him/her for the college experience?</p>	<p>What activities, high school classes, and/or supports helped you to prepare to go to college?</p>
<p>Are there activities, classes or supports that you think might have helped your child better prepare for college?</p>	<p>Are there activities, classes, or supports that you think might have helped you better prepare for college?</p>
<p>Did you encourage your child to have a job or do volunteer work during high school? If so, in what ways, if at all, do you think that the job/volunteer experience helped prepare your child for college?</p>	<p>Have you ever had a job? Describe it. In what ways, if any, did your job help prepare you for college?  What, if any, volunteer work have you done? In what ways, if any, did the volunteer work help prepare you for college?</p>
<p>College Experience Questions</p>	
<p>What have you learned about your child in terms of living on his/her own? About</p>	<p>What have you learned about living on your own? About college coursework?</p>



college coursework?	
What has been the most positive aspect of your child going to college?	What has been the most positive surprise since starting college? How did you handle it?
What has been the biggest challenge for you in sending your child to college? What do you think has been your child's biggest challenge?	What has been your biggest challenge in college so far?
What do you want for your child's future? Has the college experience changed your aspirations for your child's future? Is there anything else you want to share about the college experience?	What do you want for your future? Has your college experience changed your idea for your future? Is there anything else you want to share about your college experience?

**Conducting of interviews.** Prior to the interview, the parents were emailed a questionnaire which included questions about their level of education, occupation, number of children and college attendance of those children, and annual household income range (see Appendix). Those were either filled out beforehand by the parents and given to the researcher at the time of the interview or emailed to the researcher. The interview questions were not given to participants ahead of time in order to elicit spontaneous answers and not prepared statements. Upon arrival, the researcher expressed appreciation to the participants for their participation and explained that the research being conducted was about perceptions of parents of young adult children with disabilities regarding PSE or perceptions of young adults with disabilities regarding PSE.

The interview process was explained, i.e., the researcher would ask questions and the participant would answer while the interview was being recorded. The parent interviews lasted approximately 27 to 54 min and the young adult interviews lasted approximately 18 to 29 min. The researcher proceeded with the interview using the questions listed in Table 2. In addition to these questions, probe questions were used when needed to clarify and gain additional information. At times, questions were restated in a simplified manner to help the participants understand the question. The researcher recorded each interview using a digital audio recorder. The researcher was the primary data collector.

### **Data Analysis**

Analysis consisted of multiple steps. First, the interviews were transcribed from the digital audio recordings. The parent transcripts totaled approximately 44 pages, single spaced, with size 12 font. The young adult transcripts totaled approximately 25 pages, single spaced, with size 12 font. Second, summaries of the interviews were created and sent to the person interviewed with a request for verification of content. Third, the researcher read and then re-read the transcripts and identified common themes, perceptions, and factors (Bogdan & Biklin, 1992). Fourth, the researcher wrote notes to identify themes from the transcripts, as well as processes, activities, and strategy codes. Fifth, the researcher compared transcripts of parent responses to their young adult's responses to similar questions to identify similarities and differences. Particular statements that represented an interviewee's themes were highlighted. Sixth, the research chairperson performed steps 3 to 5 above to assure triangulation of data (Bogdan & Biklin, 1992).

### **Results**

The results were organized by the three research questions for the study: parent perceptions, young adult perceptions, and comparison of perceptions between the two.

### **Parent Perceptions**

Themes that emerged from the interview data for parents included (a) college as an expectation for the young adult, (b) high levels of support coupled with high expectations, (c) college preparation, (d) job/volunteer experiences as preparatory activities, (e) desire for the young adults to live independently, and (f) advocacy. These themes are described below.

**College was an expectation.** Four of the six parents reported investigating college programs with the expectation that their young adult could participate in some type of college experience. One parent stated, “We never put any real boundaries on [our child]...our thought was that she would go to college.” Another parent said that she and her young adult had visited one college program a couple of times but that the program was not appropriate. Although these four families expected their young adult with ID to go to college, each of them conceptualized PSE as a multi-faceted system with various options and entry points. For example, one parent stated that she did not expect her young adult to go to college in the traditional sense, “Not college in the standard sense of the word college... [our child’s] capabilities or abilities really would not have lended him to do even a standard community college or a 2-year college because his reading, math, and writing skills are not on level.” These parents made statements suggesting that some sort of college program might accommodate their young adult despite unique performance characteristics.

The other two parents reported thinking about college for their young adult, but dismissed the idea until they heard about the college program that their young adult was now attending. One parent said, "We'd thought about it [college] but we knew she probably wouldn't be able to live on her own so we didn't think that would realistically be a possibility." The other parent stated that her young adult was the one who first brought up the idea of going to college and said, "I really thought with [my child's] disabilities that he wouldn't be able to go and do anything...he would never be able to attend college." After those two parents heard about the college program for students with ID within their state, they viewed college as a possibility and pursued it for their young adult.

**High expectations; high support.** All parents made statements to indicate they recognized that high expectations, such as attendance at a specialized college experience program, must be accompanied by high levels of support. The parents acknowledged that in order for their young adult to do well in a college program, they must have high levels of support. One parent stated, "...she wouldn't be there basically without the support group she has...the entire support center. I mean, it just goes on forever." Another parent stated, "There needs to be a lot of academic support if she's going to take an academic class at the university." Sources of support included not only college program mentors and staff, but family members. All of the parents shared similar perceptions about family support and success in college. Family support was important in helping their young adult be more successful in college.

**College preparation.** The parents shared common ideas about college preparation in terms of activities and/or high school academics. Inclusion was an

important factor that emerged from the data. Four of the six parents stated that their young adults were in general education classes. One parent stated, "...she always took all the college prep classes. If you were to look at her transcripts, she would have everything she needed to go to a 4-year school." Another parent said that her young adult took academic classes in high school and that she was only in special education classes about 1 ½ hr per day.

It should be noted that parents in two interviews stated that secondary special education did not prepare their young adults for college. They reported that the high expectations were in conflict with low expectations and support they perceived from secondary educators. One parent commented on her young adult's secondary special education experience: "There were just so many things I thought they could have done better but they just didn't seem to do a whole lot." Another parent stated, "... in special education they don't teach him how to prepare for college...He wasn't really prepared. He didn't know how to study." A college preparation activity that all the parents reported that they emphasized with their young adult and considered important preparation for college was independent living skills. Parents taught their young adults to do household chores, time management techniques, manage medication schedules, and transportation skills.

**Job/volunteer experiences.** All six parents reported that their young adults had some type of job or volunteer experience and that those experiences were important preparation for college. One young adult had been working since she was 16 years of age at the family-owned restaurant. Her mother stated, "...she was expected to do certain things and do them well... I am not sure you can really prepare totally [for college] but I

think it helps.” Another parent stated of her young adult’s internship, “It taught him about jobs, it taught him how to be somewhere on time.” Another parent said of her young adult’s volunteer experience, “...just knowing people and working with people and helping and all those skills are important in college.” Another parent said that her son’s volunteer experience helped his communication skills, “It got him out learning how to communicate with different people in different settings...”

**Desire for child to live independently.** All six parents expressed the same desire for their young adult’s future: to live as independently as possible and have a fulfilling, productive, and self-determined life. One parent stated, “I just want her to be able to be independent and do whatever she wants to do.” Another parent stated, “...for her to be able to live independently because I think that’s what she wants.” Based on the college program experience, some parents learned that their young adults were more capable than they expected. One parent stated, “I think I definitely have realized that he is more capable than I gave him credit for.” Another parent stated, “...she’s very capable of things that I never thought that she could be capable of.” Another parent said, “I like seeing a light at the end of the tunnel knowing that she can actually live on her own.”

**Advocacy.** Terms used in previous research to characterize the styles of parents of young adults in PSE included *advocates*, *protectors*, or *parents who were more removed* (Lindstrom et al., 2007). The parents in this study were asked if they considered themselves to be advocates, protectors, or removed. These terms were defined for parents consistent with definitions used in the previous research. In all six interviews, parents labeled themselves as advocates. Three of the parents felt like they were protectors to some degree but considered themselves to be mostly advocates. Five of the parents

considered themselves to be highly involved with their young adults throughout their education experience. One of the young adult's parents considered their level of involvement relatively low, yet they put into place many supports to help their young adult be successful. For example, they advocated for general education classes for as much as possible, obtained a tutor, and taught their young adult independent living skills with the expectation of the young adult contributing at home. They also supported their young adult in volunteer activities. Therefore, although the parents may not have been personally doing the daily homework and school tutoring, they made sure that supports were in place for their young adult's success. Because of these circumstances, the researcher considered parents' educational involvement high even though they themselves considered it low.

### **Young Adult Perceptions**

The researcher found two contextual factors that the young adults with ID identified from their experience. First, all five young adults reported some type of employment or volunteer experience. Second, all young adults reported that parents had high involvement in their education.

Table 2

*Young Adult Contextual Factors Related to PSE*

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Employment or Volunteer Experience</i>	<i>Level of Parental Involvement in Education</i>
Young adult 1	Yes	High
Young adult 2	Yes	High
Young adult 3	Yes	High
Young adult 4	Yes	High

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Young adult 5	Yes	High
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Themes that emerged from the interview data for young adults included (a) college as an expectation, (b) job/volunteer experience, (c) independent living experiences and future plans, (d) freedom and responsibility, (e) formidable challenge of college coursework, and (f) social aspects of the college experience.

**College was an expectation.** All five of the young adults reported that they wanted to attend college to improve themselves and that it was their expectation. One young adult gave the following reason why he wanted to attend college:

I wanted to do something else with my life... I used to stay at home and play [video] games. I'd go home from high school and just play [video] games. I wanted to do something besides sitting at home and doing nothing."

Another young adult stated, "...I wanted to learn how to be more independent and learn how to do my own things..."

Three of the young adults said that college was also family expectation. One young adult said, "My mom and dad wanted me to go to college. It was really important to them that I went to college." Another young adult said, "... my parents want to support me in this [college] and the rest of my family members who do not have a disability, they all went to college." Two of the five young adults said that it was an expectation among their peer group. One young adults said, "I wanted to have that awesome college experience everyone was talking about...Everyone was talking about schools and I'm like 'I should really look into this.'" The other young adult who mentioned that it was a peer expectation said, "A lot of my high school friends were wanting to go to college and



I wanted to be like them and have that college experience as well.” Another young adult stated that his wood shop teacher encouraged him to go to college. He said, “He told me that I should go and further my education and do what I want to do.” The confidence and support of one teacher can be enough to provide one with motivation.

**Job/volunteer experiences.** When asked about their job or volunteer experiences, all of the young adults reported that they had either had a job or done volunteer work and that those experiences helped them in different ways to prepare for college. One young adult said that his job experience taught him how to advocate for himself. He said, “Another thing that might have helped me was learning to stand up for myself and ask for help when I need it...” Another young adult reported that her internship helped her to learn to work with other people. She said, “I had to work with different people, how to work with my coworkers, how to be patient...”

**Independent living experiences and future plans.** The young adults shared perceptions about living on their own and becoming independent. One of the young adults said, “I guess I just really like to live on my own. It’s been a good experience.” One young adult summed up her experience:

Living on my own has taught me a lot. It’s taught me to really make sure I do my laundry, make sure I clean the apartment. It’s helped me learn how to cook, how to budget my money, how to not spend or to go blow all my money and really realize that you’re only here for a short amount of time so you’d better learn how to budget your money. I’ve really tried to hit home and really work on that while I’ve been living independently.

All of the young adults expressed a desire to live independently and have a job for their future. The college experience was associated with increased optimism about being able to achieve independence. One said that she wanted to work with special needs children in a day care after college. Another wanted to be a writer after he finished college. And another wanted to be an elementary school teacher after college. Two of the young adults talked about having a family. One of the young adults expressed her desire for the future, "I want to be able to live independently, get a job, have a license for something that I want to be able to work in. I've always wanted to be married and have a family." Another young adult said, "...I want to go to college for 4 years...I want to start getting a family and stuff. I want to go into photography."

**Freedom and responsibility.** An unanticipated theme that surfaced was that the young adults valued freedom and the responsibility associated with it. One reported, "You just have more freedom from your parents and stuff because it's all on you." Another said, "I've gotten a lot more freedom, but still keep on top of my schoolwork." One of the young adults explained what he learned about responsibility, "Another hard part of college is that it's not your parents who are responsible. You're also responsible for getting to class on time, getting your homework done, and doing other assignments that have to be done."

**Formidable challenge of college coursework.** Even though three out of the five young adults reported involvement in general education classes in high school helped them prepare for college, all five young adults reported that college course work was challenging for them. One stated, "The tests up here seem like they are a lot harder..." Another said when asked about college classes, "The college classes are teaching you to

be prepared for your future goals. They're a little more tough because it's what you expect, I mean, it is college...a lot of assignments non-stop." One of the young adults talked about taking college math. "Math has been one of my biggest challenges. I have a hard time stepping out of my comfort zone. I've done that a few times this year so I'm really proud of myself for that."

**Social aspects of college experience.** Four young adults talked about the social aspects of living on a college campus. The young adults shared perceptions on making friends and getting along with roommates. One of the young adults said that making new friends was a positive aspect of college. She stated, "in the beginning...I was too shy so, I was trying to branch out." She also said, "My roommate is wonderful, grateful, nice-ful [sic], and thoughtful." Another young adult talked about her roommates. "My roommates...have been really hard, fun, and exciting. We have a lot of roommate meetings...I've learned that living with roommates is a big part of college as a freshman." The young adults learned about the difficulty of getting along with others. One young adult got a new roommate and was a bit apprehensive about meeting her. "This [getting a new roommate] is a little scary but let me see how I do this. As time went on we did get along. We get along really well. We're not best friends but we are friends." She also talked about the social aspect of college:

I thought that when I first started college that it would be all work...College is a lot of work but there's also much more social things to do. Things that you never thought of but that you really enjoy doing.

### **Comparison of Parent and Child Perceptions**

The researcher compared perceptions of PSE of the parents to those of their young adults. Table 4 presents sample statements from the parents and their young adults that show the similarities in their perceptions. There were five topics for which parents' and their young adults' perceptions aligned: (a) college was an expectation, (b) desire to live independently in the future, (c) the value of job/volunteer experiences, (d) college coursework, and (e) independent living experiences. All of the young adults and their parents expressed that a college experience was an expectation either of the family, peers, or child. All of the young adults reported that they wanted to live independently and have a job or career which is what the parents reported as well. All of the parents and their young adults reported that they believed that job and/or volunteer experiences contributed to college preparation and/or success. When asked about college coursework, all the parents and their young adults agreed that it was challenging. The parents and their young adults reported that through the college experience the young adults learned and their parents learned that the young adults were capable and could live independently.

Table 4

*Similar statements made by parents and their young adults (P=parent, YA=Young Adult)*

Parent Statements	Child Statements
P1 "She wanted to [go to college]... She always thought she'll go to college just like everyone else... She is able to say to all her friends, "Yeah, I'm in college."	YA1 "I decided I wanted to go to college because I wanted to continue my education and I wanted to have that awesome college experience everyone was talking about..."
P5 "I want her to work and...to get	YA5 "I want to be able to live

married... and to be happy and live independently.”	independently, get a job... I’ve always wanted to be married and have a family.”
P2 “It [volunteer experience] got him out learning how to communicate with different people in different settings... It helped him manage his time.”	YA2 “Another thing that might have helped me was learning how to stand [up] for myself and ask for help when I need it...learning how to actually work and stay on top of things...”
P3 “He has struggled [with college coursework] but the struggling through it has taught him that he can do it.”	YA3 “I find the [college] class to be harder... The tests up here seem like they are a lot harder.”
P4 “It [living independently] truly is amazing. It’s wonderful and she does it...she’s just done really really well – less contact with us than expected.”	YA4 “I learned that I am independent.”

### Discussion

This study presents an examination of PSE perceptions of parents and their young adults with ID. High expectations and independence were the two main themes that emerged from analysis of the interview transcripts. High expectations manifested throughout different topics in the study. One expectation that parents and their children held was that the secondary school experience should prepare students for college. Although two of the young adults’ parents and one of the young adults did not feel that the secondary experience was adequate as preparatory for college, they still held the

expectation. All of the young adults had job or volunteer experiences, which raised expectations as valuable preparation for college. There was an expectation of college attendance within the family, within the young adults' peer groups, or of the young adults themselves. All of the young adults' parents and their siblings (if they had siblings) had attended college or other PSE training or were planning to attend college. Inclusion within the young adults' peer groups and being able to do the same things that their peers of the same age were doing was expected and desired by some of the young adults as well as their parents. Some of the young adults expressed that they wanted to go to college because they expected it of themselves. Another factor that supported the theme of high expectation that all the young adults and their parents had in common was that all of the parents considered themselves advocates and were highly involved in their young adults' education and lives prior to college. Due to the high expectations of the parents, they taught their young adults independent living skills such as household chores and transportation skills which contributed to college success.

Independence was the other main theme that emerged in this study. The young adults wanted to go to college because of the expectations of their families, peers, or themselves and they had a desire for independence. Their jobs or volunteer experiences contributed to their level of independence which helped them prepare for a college experience. The young adults recognized that their parents were less involved in their college education and that they were responsible for themselves and their success or failure which increased their independence. Possibly the most important data that emerged came from the experience of living on campus. That experience increased the

young adults' independence and gave them and their parents more confidence in their ability to have a job and to live independently in the future.

Results of this study demonstrated that supportive parents were instrumental in their young adult's participation in PSE. Some parents seem to look beyond the disability label or academic or functional limitations of the young adult and offered support as the parents had offered to other children desirous of achieving college or career aspirations. The combination of support and the presence of the PSE program produced the opportunity. These findings are consistent with those of Test et al. (2009) who found that parent support was a predictor of successful post-school outcomes for youth with disabilities in transition. Similarly, the job or volunteer experiences reported by some parents in this study were preparatory to college, which is a finding consistent with Test et al.

Student reports of the challenges of college academic work were entirely expected. However, these findings may speak to the importance of maintaining high expectations for academic performance by students with disabilities throughout secondary education leading to college preparation. Had the young adults in this study had more experience with assignments, test taking, and rigorous academic standards prior to college, the transition may have been a bit more manageable.

There are limitations to this study. Students may not have understood questions due to receptive language limitations. In future research, perhaps questions should be sent out to participants before the interview to ensure comprehension, especially for those with reading limitations. Prior to the interviews, the researcher revised content of questions in effort to eliminate bias and ensure openness and objectivity. However, the

semi-structured nature of the interview may have had the effect of restricting or otherwise influencing the responses of parents or young adults which may contribute to the reason that the themes mirrored the questions asked of the parents and young adults. It is possible that the questions may have prompted the answers that were obtained. As is the case with qualitative research, the sample size was limited and the participants were only from one college program for students with ID. Future research is needed to explore a larger sample across more PSE programs for students with ID in order to produce generalizable results. Future research should focus on perceptions of parents of children with ID or the children's perceptions who were in high school or junior high settings and explore their perceptions to see whether they believe college is a possibility and what activities they are engaged in to support PSE. These areas of focus will provide valuable information contributing to the knowledge base about perceptions and expectations, as well as offer assistance to curriculum developers and parent trainers preparing young adults for PSE. One of the parents expressed this about PSE for young adults with ID, "...I think that young adults need to have the opportunity. It's not right for every young adult with an intellectual disability, but the door needs to be open for those young people who want that opportunity..."



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## Appendix A

### Parent Demographic Questions

What is your occupation?

What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed?

How many children do you have?

Have any of your other children attended college?

What range best describes your household annual income?

- Less than \$24,999
- \$25,000 - \$49,999
- \$50,000- \$99,999
- \$100,000- \$150,000
- \$150,000 or more