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Collaborative Practices of Rural Inclusive Postsecondary Education Program (IPSE) Directors

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ABSTRACT

Collaborative Practices of Rural Inclusive Postsecondary Education Program (IPSE) Directors

by

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Utah State University,

2022

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Inclusive postsecondary education programs (IPSE) for students with intellectual disabilities (ID) are relatively new, having their formal beginning in the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) of 2008. These programs vary greatly and are found in urban, suburban, and rural areas of the United States. Those programs in rural areas face unique barriers and have unique strengths that affect how they collaborate and with whom they collaborate. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to describe the collaborative practices of rural IPSE program directors. This study gathered the lived experiences of rural IPSE program directors collaborating with agencies on- and off-campus through semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom. Data were coded
and analyzed for themes and patterns. These themes and patterns, as well as the essence of their collaborative experiences, are described and related to the Trainor et al. (2020) Framework for Transition.

Keywords: Inclusive Postsecondary Education Programs, Collaboration, Rural Education, Students with Intellectual Disabilities
Inclusive postsecondary education programs (IPSE) for students with intellectual disabilities (ID) are relatively new, having their formal beginning in the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA; P.L. 110-315) of 2008. These programs vary greatly and are found in urban, suburban, and rural areas of the United States. Those programs in rural areas face unique barriers and have unique strengths that affect how they collaborate and with whom they collaborate. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to describe the collaborative practices of rural IPSE program directors. This study gathered the lived experiences of rural IPSE program directors collaborating with agencies on- and off-campus through semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom. Data were coded and analyzed for themes and patterns. These themes and patterns, as well as the essence of their collaborative experiences, are described and related to the Trainor et al. (2020) Framework for Transition.
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Elizabeth Susanne Goode Dimond
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PUBLIC ABSTRACT</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Intellectual Disability</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of life for people with ID</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural disability</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Purpose and Rationale</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter II</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual Disability</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education for Students with ID</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-12</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postsecondary Education for Students with ID</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and Postsecondary Opportunities in Rural School Districts</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration and Students with Disabilities</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilizing Existing Resources and Relationships</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors of Rural Communities</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities to Improve Inclusion Quality</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER V</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DISCUSSION</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application of Transition Framework</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations and Future Research</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendices</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic Survey</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tables</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figures</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

The hard reality is this. Society in every nation is still infected by the ancient assumption that people with disabilities are less than fully human and therefore, are not fully eligible for the opportunities which are available to other people as a matter of right. (Dart, 1992).

There are an estimated 7.4 million people with intellectual disabilities (ID) in the United States (Residential Information Systems Project [RISP], 2020). There are more than 425,000 children (ages 3-21) who have ID and receive special education services in the United States, and approximately 7% of children who receive special education services have some form of ID (Center for Parent Information and Resources [CPIR], 2017). People with ID want the same things that most people want, to live with their families and friends, engage in meaningful work and social activities, and make choices for themselves. However, people with ID face many barriers to achieving education, independence, and autonomy similar to those of their non-disabled peers (Larson et al., 2021).

Years of institutionalization and the prevalence of the medical model of disability isolated people with disabilities within a paternalistic system of “care” (Dart, 1992; Eyer, 2021). Many were taken from their homes and families and placed in large government-run institutions where they were neglected, used for experiments, involuntarily sterilized, denied access to an education, restrained, and forced to provide free labor in the institutions (Karten, 2008; The Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities [GCCD], 2021). The 1960s and 70s brought increasing awareness of the inhumane treatment of people with disabilities and marked the beginning of the civil
rights movement in the United States (Rivera, 1972). These events helped spur a group of disability rights activists to take action to overcome the discrimination that had been the status quo for generations. Culminating in 1977 with protests demanding the passage of 504 regulations and culminating in the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act ([ADA], 1990), disability rights activists set the stage for people with disabilities to have equal access to employment, education, and independent living. While these efforts and other legislation explicitly aimed at education, community living, and employment for people with disabilities have improved the quality of life for many people with disabilities, more needs to be done to achieve the goals of those early activists.

The national unemployment rate for the general US population in 2018 was 3.8%; however, a national survey conducted that same year found that, of the 23,000 adults with disabilities who participated in the survey, only 14.8% were engaged in competitive employment in community settings (Lee et al., 2018). Additionally, a 2017 survey found that 80% of people with ID or developmental disabilities do not work in the community (National Core Indicators, 2019). Employment rates for young adults (ages 21-25) with ID were 1.69 times lower than their same-age peers in the general population (Almalky, 2020). These disparities demonstrate that more needs to be done to improve the employment outcomes of people with disabilities.

Postsecondary education has been identified as an area of emphasis for students with disabilities and has been linked to improved employment, income, job satisfaction, and civic engagement (Grigal et al., 2017; Sanford et al., 2011). Compared with other disability categories, Sanford et al. (2011) found that students with ID had the lowest
levels of participation in postsecondary education (28%), received the lowest average hourly wage ($7.60), and had the lowest overall rankings in financial independence (44.5% with savings accounts, 32.6% with checking accounts, and 87% with an annual income of $25,000 or less). Sanford et al. (2011) also showed students with ID have low levels of community participation (35.1%), independent living (21.2%), and marriage relationships (12.2%). Efforts to increase access to post-secondary education for students with ID is one way to improve their opportunities for employment, which can increase their capacity to live independently and engage in meaningful employment (Grigal et al., 2017; Sanford et al., 2011).

Harley et al. (2018) reported that there are more transition-age youth with disabilities receiving vocational rehabilitation (VR) services in rural areas compared to urban areas; however, these rural transition-age youth have lower rates of employment, limited job opportunities, limited access to VR counselors, lower enrollment in postsecondary education, and fewer social connections (Harley et al., 2018). These poorer outcomes demonstrate the difficulties faced by rural youth with disabilities even when they have been found eligible for VR services. More needs to be done to support people with disabilities in rural settings, including increasing access to postsecondary education for youth in rural areas.

**Definition of Intellectual Disability**

The American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities ([AAIDD], 2021) defines ID as “significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior as expressed in conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills.”
The AAIDD (2021, pp. 14-15) provided five assumptions that are essential to correctly applying the definition of ID. These assumptions are:

1. Limitations in present functioning must be considered within the context of community environments typical of the individual’s age peers and culture.

2. Valid assessment considers cultural and linguistic factors, as well as differences in communication, sensory, motor, and behavioral factors.

3. Within an individual, limitations often coexist with strengths.

4. An important purpose of describing limitations is to develop a profile of needed supports.

5. With appropriate personalized supports over a sustained period, the life functioning of the person with ID generally will improve.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM-5) (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013) groups ID with the neurodevelopmental disorders and defines ID as: “...a disorder with onset during the developmental period that includes both intellectual and adaptive functioning deficits in conceptual, social, and practical domains.” (p.33). Deficits in intellectual functioning must be established by clinical assessment and intelligence testing. These intellectual deficits can be seen in reasoning, problem-solving, planning, abstract thinking, judgment, academic learning, and learning from experience. Deficits in adaptive functioning limit one or more activities of daily living in several environments (i.e., home, work, school, or the community). Activities of daily living include communication, social participation, and independent living. The DSM-5 (APA, 2013) identifies four levels of severity: mild,
moderate, severe, and profound. These levels of severity are determined based on the adaptive functioning of each individual with ID. The level of adaptive functioning determines the type and intensity of supports individuals need and gives a more accurate and complete picture of functioning than an intelligence quotient (IQ) score alone can provide. Individuals with ID have IQ scores approximately two standard deviations below the population average (APA, 2013). A margin of error is also granted when calculating IQ which means people with ID can have IQ scores of 75-65 or lower (APA, 2013).

There are an estimated 7.4 million people with ID in the United States (RISP, 2020). A significant number (more than 425,000) of children receiving special education services have a diagnosis of ID (CPIR, 2017). The Administration for Community Living (Larson et al., 2021) recently released a new book that reviewed 30 years of data from state agencies supporting people with ID. The data was collected through three longitudinal data projects which focus on community living, employment, government expenditures, and technology. The results indicate that while life for people with ID has improved over time, much more is to be done to bring it to the level of those without ID.

**Quality of life for people with ID**

Historically, people with disabilities throughout the world have been marginalized, exploited, and even euthanized. For nearly 100 years, children with ID were placed in institutions on the recommendation of doctors and teachers, many of whom believed institutions were the best place to keep children with ID safe. Many doctors and teachers did not believe that children with ID could learn, work, or
participate in family life (Larson et al., 2021; Smithson, 1993; GCDD, 2021). Institutions were a life sentence for most sent there. Families were encouraged to forget about their children with ID and visits were discouraged. Institutions were overcrowded and dirty places where people with ID and other disabilities either spent their days working without compensation for the institution, such as cleaning and other menial tasks, or were confined to beds, wheelchairs, or cribs (GCDD, 2021; Karten, 2008; Larson et al., 2021). Several national news stories in the late 1960s and early 1970s fueled public outcry over the treatment of people in institutions. Between 1967 and 2017, the number of people with ID and developmental disabilities living in institutions dropped from 194,650 to 18,807 (Larson et al., 2021). Moving people with ID out of institutions and into the community did not automatically equate to improved quality of life for people with ID. In some areas, there were no adequate community placements for all those being displaced from institutions, and there were mixed responses from community members about deinstitutionalization (Baker, 2007; Beadle-Brown et al., 2007; Lemay, 2009). Lemay (2009) explained that the closure of institutions led to costly litigation, job loss for those employed in the institutions, significant financial impacts on local economies, and family concerns about the safety of their formerly institutionalized loved ones. These negative impacts slowed the acceptance of people with disabilities in some communities. Baker (2007) reported that, while there was a significant increase in social and community participation scores for those who left institutions, they were still dismal compared to those without disabilities.
People with ID want to live with their families and friends, engage in meaningful work and social activities, and make choices for themselves just as others do (Larson et al., 2021, GCDDs, 2021). Several vital laws and Supreme Court decisions have improved the quality of life for children and adults with ID. The Developmental Disabilities Act of 1963 provided funding for the establishment of University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, Developmental Disabilities Councils, and protection and advocacy organizations for people with ID in every state (Larson et al., 2021). In 1971, federal Medicaid funds were allocated to improve institutions for people with ID (Larson et al., 2021, GCDD, 2021). A significant law for children with disabilities was initially passed in 1975 and is known today as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA requires that children with disabilities have access to a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment possible (IDEA, 2004). Grigal and Papay (2018) identify students with ID as having the lowest rates of “education, work, or preparation for work after high school of all disability groups” (p. 77). Students with ID (ages 16-21) also experience meager rates of employment (18%), and this lack of access to higher education and employment combine to create inadequate and inequitable education and employment outcomes for this population (Grigal & Papay, 2018).

The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) is a nationally representative survey sent to youth with disabilities over a 10-year period. The NLTS2 gathers data related to several aspects of Albroz’s (2018) quality of life model including employment status, enrollment in postsecondary education, parenting status, marital status, living arrangements, financial independence, community participation,
friendships, and involvement in the criminal justice system (Sanford et al., 2011). The
NLTS2 and other national data sources show that young adults with disabilities are not
achieving the same post-school outcomes as their non-disabled peers (Mazzotti et al.,
2021), which negatively impacts their quality of life.

The US government has recognized the value of postsecondary education for
students with ID and in 2010 authorized the creation of Transition and Postsecondary
Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) and a national coordinating
center (Think College) to provide support, coordination, training, and evaluation of the
new TPSID programs. TPSID programs are federally funded model demonstration sites
that provide postsecondary education opportunities to students with disabilities. They are
Inclusive Postsecondary Education (IPSE) programs that have applied for status as a
model demonstration site. Federal Grants are awarded to programs that will serve
students with ID, provide supports that promote academic and social inclusion of students
with ID at institutions of higher education, focus supports on “(a) academic enrichment,
(b) socialization, (c) independent living skills, including self-advocacy skills, and (d)
integrated work experiences and career skills that lead to gainful employment” (U.S.
Department of Education, 2015), and use person-centered planning to create
individualized courses of study for students with ID.

In their report to the U.S. Department of Education, Lee et al. (2018), who
represents the Inclusive Higher Education Committee, noted that despite the many
regulations that have been passed to clarify how and when funds intended for students
with disabilities may be spent, many students are still being denied services and supports.
“Denying these students the funding and supports intended by Congress is doing real harm to their opportunities to receive an education, become employed, and become as independent as possible.” (Lee et al., 2018, p. 5). Lee et al. (2018) called for an alignment of services and collaboration between agencies and institutions of higher education to ensure that students with ID can have the opportunity to pursue post-secondary education, which will “increase academic learning, independent living, and competitive integrated employment” (p. 5). Access to postsecondary education can increase several factors that influence the quality of life and is an important part of improving the overall quality of life for people with ID (Athamanah et al., 2020). Research indicates that following completion of an IPSE program, individuals with ID were far more likely to be employed than their peers with ID who did not attend an IPSE (Ryan et al., 2019). Additionally, IPSE graduates had much greater rates of independent living. Schillaci et al. (2021) reported that participation in postsecondary education had a significant positive impact on self-determination scores which included measures of autonomy, self-initiation, self-direction, and self-realization. The National Council on Disability (2004) stated, “it should be more apparent than ever before that, wherever possible, higher education is key to the economic prospects and aspirations for independence of youth with disabilities” (p.68).

**Rural disability**

Not only are prevalence rates of people with disabilities significantly higher in rural areas compared to urban and suburban areas (Erickson et al., 2018; Harley et al., 2018, Irvin et al., 2012; Telfer & Howley, 2014, von Reichert, 2014; Zhao et al., 2019),
but people with disabilities in rural areas face unique challenges that their urban and suburban peers may not face or may face to a lesser degree. Zhao et al. (2019) found that people living in rural areas were 7% more likely to report a cognitive disability than those living in large metropolitan areas. The poverty many rural youths experience places them at substantially higher risk of having educational problems (Irvin et al., 2012). von Reichert (2014) reported that the rural counties in their study represented about 15% of the total population of the US but included nearly 20% of all people with disabilities.

Harley et al. (2018) argued that rural and urban areas share common root causes for poverty, but “many causal factors of poverty are worse in remote areas, which lack the diverse human capital, transportation efficiencies, and labor market opportunities of cities.” (p.22). Erickson et al. (2018) documented the same factors and added that there appear to be cultural factors not yet identified that also impact the generational poverty trends seen in rural areas of the US. Harley et al. (2018)’s findings are supported by Irvin et al. (2012), who documented higher dropout rates for impoverished rural youth, two times that of their urban peers. Irvin et al. (2012) also reported that students in low-income rural schools are four times less likely than other rural youth to meet adequate yearly progress standards. Harley et al. (2018) and Erickson et al. (2018) reported that in persistently poor rural counties, less than 25% of people with disabilities are employed compared to nearly 65% of people without disabilities. In addition to the low employment rates, Harley et al. (2018) also reported that people with disabilities earn significantly less than peers without disabilities (approximately 70% of the average amount a person without a disability makes). Erickson et al. (2018) reported that people
with disabilities living in persistently poor rural areas made an average of $5,613 less a year than their non-disabled peers. Erickson et al. (2018) also reported overall low participation in postsecondary education in rural areas for people without disabilities (17.7%) and an even lower rate for people with disabilities (7.1%). The low participation in postsecondary education stands in contrast to the rising interest in obtaining a college degree among rural youth with disabilities (Irvin et al., 2012; Weiss et al., 2012).

Challenges in providing special education and transition services to students with disabilities in rural areas have also been noted. These challenges include a lack of qualified professionals (Barrio & Hollingshead, 2017; Johnson, 2015; Knapczyk et al., 2001; Peacock & Lin, 2012; Telfer & Howley, 2014; Weiss et al., 2012), limited availability of affordable and accessible professional development (Barrio & Hollingshead, 2017; Collier et al., 2017; Johnson, 2015; Telfer & Howley, 2014), unrealistic expectations from the federal government concerning student progress (Abell et al., 2014; Barley & Beesley, 2007; Telfer & Howley, 2014), limited funding sources (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Collier et al., 2017), few employment opportunities in the community (Awsumb et al., 2020; Barley & Beesley, 2007; Wittig et al., 2014), disparities in priorities of parents and community members and educators (Telfer & Howley, 2014), a lack of community resource providers (Awsumb et al., 2020; Butera & Dunn, 2005; Decker et al., 2021; Landon et al., 2019; Lightfoot & LaLiberte, 2006; Reid et al., 2019), lack of transportation (Butera & Dunn, 2005; Decker et al., 2021; Landon et al., 2019; Lightfoot & LaLiberte, 2006; Wittig et al., 2014), limited telecommunication resources (Butera & Dunn, 2005), and community poverty (Abell et al., 2014; Decker et
Harley et al. (2018) reported that there are more transition-age youth with disabilities receiving VR services in rural areas compared to urban areas; however, they also reported that these rural transition-age youth have lower rates of employment, limited job opportunities, limited access to VR counselors, lower enrollment in post-secondary education, and fewer social connections. This disparity in eligibility for VR services and fewer positive employment and independent living outcomes suggests that eligibility for VR services alone does not guarantee access to quality services and supports. Awsumb et al. (2020) reported that rural providers of pre-employment transition services (pre-ETS) felt ill-prepared to connect students to needed job explorations, work-based learning, postsecondary education options, workplace readiness, and self-advocacy instruction. Rural providers also noted limited opportunities for employment in the community and a lack of resources needed to provide services. Additionally, Harley et al. (2018) reported that rural transition-age youth with less significant disabilities experience longer wait times for services like college and career counseling because of “order of selection” (p.169) protocols that prioritize those with more significant disabilities over those with less severe disabilities. This leaves these students who could move on to postsecondary education or participate in workplace activities without the services they need to move forward with their post-school goals.

**Theoretical Framework**

The field of transition for youth with disabilities is still relatively young and in need of a framework that can be used to drive research and practice. Trainor et al. (2020)
presented a framework for research in transition that conceptualized student-level characteristics in the context of development across the lifespan and embedded in cultural and social structures. This study uses the Trainor et al. (2020) framework to support the need for further research regarding collaboration across agencies and individuals who support students with disabilities in inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs. Figure 1 shows a copy of the Trainor et al. (2020) framework. Each factor of the framework has layers that can interact with one another and with other factors. Within the “Services & Supports” factor, four different types of agencies are represented (a) special education, (b) general education, (c) disability-specific, and (d) generally available. These agencies are responsible for conducting assessments, planning supports, providing instruction, activities, supports, and building relationships. Within the “Culture” factor, four elements are included: (a) family, (b) groups, (c) community, and (d) social capital. The levers factor of the framework includes funding, laws, policies, and resources. Effective collaboration between organizations and stakeholders on- and off-campus is vital to providing high-quality, evidence-based transition services to students with disabilities in IPSE programs and ensuring the highest quality of life possible for students with disabilities.

Study Purpose and Rationale

In their 2019-2020 annual report of TPSID model demonstration sites, Think College (Grigal et al., 2021) reported that approximately two-thirds of the TPSID programs collaborated with K-12 local education agencies (LEAs). Grigal et al. (2021) also noted a decline in the use of existing college services and a plateau in the percentage
of TPSID students using services from campus Disability Services Offices (DSOs). The decline in using campus services combined with the lack of information about how, with whom, and to what degree rural IPSE programs collaborate with campus and community resources is concerning. The student researcher could not find any articles or reports that detailed IPSE collaboration practices beyond stating percentages of those who collaborate with other agencies and listing the names of those agencies (Grigal et al., 2021; Grigal et al., 2012). Collaboration is one of the eight standards, or essential practices, established by Think College (2019). Standard 2 reads, “Coordination and collaboration: The postsecondary education program should establish and maintain effective program coordination and internal and external collaboration.” (p. 4). Collaborations with key institutions of higher education partners and “external partners” are given as indicators of program quality (Think College, 2019, pp. 5-6). Interagency collaboration has also been essential for rural areas with lower resources and unique barriers (Carter et al., 2020; Harley et al., 2018; Jacobson, 2017; Kominiak, 2018).

While many studies have looked at the benefits and barriers of collaborations between primary and secondary schools and universities to improve rural teacher preparation and to provide training opportunities for pre-service and in-service teachers (Abell et al., 2014; Babione & Shea, 2005; Collier et al., 2017; Collins et al., 1996; Fishbaugh et al., 1999; Friedland & Walz, 2003; Griffith et al., 2019; Hager & Fiechtl., 2019; Herbert et al., 2010; Johnson 2015; Knapczyk et al., 2001; Leatherman, 2009; Mariage & Garmon, 2003; Mollenkopf, 2009; Scheeler et al., 2010), more research is needed to better understand the collaborative practices of IPSE programs. In this study, I
seek to gain a deeper understanding of the collaborative practices of rural IPSE programs and how these collaborative relationships affect students with ID. Rural programs were selected for two reasons. First, the student researcher will be working in a rural area following graduation, and second, research has shown that rural areas excel at collaboration and can be models for others to follow (Barley, 2007; Friedland & Walz, 2003; Miller-Warren, 2016; Smith & Post, 1937; Williams-Diehm et al., 2014). It is anticipated that the results of the current study may support effective collaboration with existing rural campus service programs and providers and local community agencies; such information can guide new programs in their development of collaborative partnerships and help existing programs improve and expand their collaborative partnerships.

**Research Questions**

1. How do rural IPSE program directors describe their experiences collaborating with organizations and individuals on campus (i.e., admissions, disability resource office, financial aid, mental health care providers, administration, etc.)?
   a. How were these collaborative relationships started?
   b. What barriers do they face in collaborating?
   c. What is their perception of the impact of these collaboration relationships on students with ID?
2. How do rural IPSE program directors describe their experiences collaborating with organizations and individuals off campus (i.e., schools, vocational rehabilitation, parents, community disability providers, etc.),
   a. How were these collaborative relationships initiated?
   b. What barriers do they face in collaborating?
   c. What is their perception of the impact of these collaboration relationships on students with ID?

**Definitions of Key Terms**

**Intellectual Disability**

The American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities ([AAIDD], 2021) defines ID as “significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior as expressed in conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills.” (p. 13). The AAIDD (2021, pp. 14-15) provided five assumptions that are essential to correctly applying the definition of ID. These assumptions are:

1. Limitations in present functioning must be considered within the context of community environments typical of the individual’s age peers and culture.
2. Valid assessment considers cultural and linguistic factors, as well as differences in communication, sensory, motor, and behavioral factors.
3. Within an individual, limitations often coexist with strengths.
4. An important purpose of describing limitations is to develop a profile of needed supports.
5. With appropriate personalized supports over a sustained period, the life
functioning of the person with ID generally will improve.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM-5) (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013) groups ID with the neurodevelopmental disorders and defines ID as: “…a disorder with onset during the developmental period that includes both intellectual and adaptive functioning deficits in conceptual, social, and practical domains.” (p.33).

**Rural**

For this paper, those cities with populations of 49,999 or less will be considered rural. U.S. Census Bureau’s definition of rural will be used.

**Collaboration**

According to the Mirriam-Webster Dictionary (2021) the word collaborate means “to work jointly with others” or “to cooperate with an agency or instrumentality with which one is not immediately connected”. As it applies to students with ID, collaboration has been defined in several ways. Fabian et al. (2016) summarizes several common definitions and operationalizations of the term, noting that many times collaboration is explored as it relates to student outcomes rather than at a systems level.

… Povenmire-Kirk et al. (2015) define system collaboration as “a process through which the whole is greater than the sum of the parts,” (p 52). In secondary school transition, Kochhar-Bryant (2008) defined collaboration as a process of participation through which organizations form together to achieve goals…

[collaboration is] defined by Frey et al. as, “as a variety of parties coming together to achieve a common goal” (p. 386). (Fabian et al., 2016, p.4)
**Postsecondary Education**

The U.S. Department of Education (2011) refers to postsecondary education as places where students continue their education after high school and specifically include “vocational and career schools, two- and four-year colleges, and universities” (p.1).

**Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities**

Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) are federally funded model demonstration sites that provide postsecondary education programs for students with disabilities. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2015) grants are awarded to programs that will serve students with ID, provide supports that promote academic and social inclusion of students with ID at Institutions of Higher Education (IHE), focus supports on “(a) academic enrichment, (b) socialization, (c) independent living skills, including self-advocacy skills, and (d) integrated work experiences and career skills that lead to gainful employment” (“Types of Projects” section), and use person-centered planning to create individualized courses of study for students with ID.

According to HEOA (2010), a comprehensive transition and postsecondary program is

a degree, certificate, nondegree, or noncertificate program that-- (1) Is offered by a participating institution; (2) Is delivered to students physically attending the institution. (3) Is designed to support students with intellectual disabilities who are seeking to continue academic, career and technical, and independent living instruction at an institution of higher education in order to prepare for gainful
employment; (4) Includes an advising and curriculum structure; (5) Requires students with intellectual disabilities to have at least one-half of their participation in the program, as determined by the institution, focus on academic components through one or more of the following activities: (i) Taking credit-bearing courses with students without disabilities. (ii) Auditing or otherwise participating in courses with students without disabilities for which the student does not receive regular academic credit. (iii) Taking non-credit-bearing, nondegree courses with students without disabilities. (iv) Participating in internships or work-based training in settings with individuals without disabilities; and (6) Provides students with intellectual disabilities opportunities to participate in coursework and other activities with students without disabilities. (34 CFR 668.231 (a))

**Inclusive Postsecondary Education**

Inclusive post-secondary education (IPSE) refers to programs at vocational and career schools, two- and four-year colleges, and universities that make post-secondary education available to students with disabilities. Some support students who live on campus, while others support students who live off-campus but attend classes on campus.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe the collaborative practices of rural IPSE program directors. A comprehensive review of the existing literature will focus on several areas. First, legislation regarding education for students with ID, then issues regarding education for students with ID and the importance of postsecondary education for students with ID in rural areas, and finally, the role that collaboration plays in the education of students with ID.

A literature review was completed using EBSCOhost. The following databases were included Academic Search Ultimate, Education Full Text (H.W. Wilson), Education Source, ERIC, APA PsycInfo, OpenDissertations, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, Teacher Reference Center, and Vocational and Career Collection. The keywords used were “collaboration” AND “inclusive postsecondary education OR higher education OR college OR university OR post-secondary education” AND “rural” AND “disability OR intellectual disability”. With duplicates removed, there were 177 publications identified in the initial EBSCOhost search. Peer-reviewed publications, policy briefs, reports, and dissertations were all included in the initial review. Titles and abstracts were reviewed for relevance and organized by topic. Those publications that discussed studies outside the US were excluded (n = 71) because of the significant variation in laws and policies from country to country. Publications that considered collaboration or rural disability only within the context of hospitals or medical caregiving were also excluded (n = 30) because they did not include school or community
partnerships. An additional 15 studies were removed because they did not relate to either disability or collaboration. A total of 61 publications from the EBSCOhost search were reviewed for this dissertation. The Google Scholar website was used to locate ancestral and descendant publications of interest from those 61 publications. Books, journal articles, and reports known to the student researcher were also included in this literature review.

**Intellectual Disability**

The American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) (2021) defines ID as “significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior as expressed in conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills.” (p. 13). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM-5) (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013) groups ID with the neurodevelopmental disorders and defines ID as: “…a disorder with onset during the developmental period that includes both intellectual and adaptive functioning deficits in conceptual, social, and practical domains.” (p.33). Intellectual deficits can be seen in reasoning, problem-solving, planning, abstract thinking, judgment, academic learning, and learning from experiences. Deficits in adaptive functioning limit one or more activities of daily living in several environments (i.e., home, work, school, or the community). The DSM-5 (APA, 2013) identifies four levels of severity: mild, moderate, severe, and profound.

There are approximately 7.4 million people in the United States who have ID (Residential Information Systems Project, 2020). More than 425,000 children (ages 3-21) receive special education services and approximately 7% of those children have some
form of ID (Center for Parent Information and Resources, 2017). People with ID have significantly lower rates of employment, postsecondary education attainment, independent living, and overall quality of life (Albroz, 2018; Athamanah et al., 2020; Baker et al., 2018). Albroz (2018) conducted a study that sought to build a model of quality of life that could be used to inform policy creation for people with ID. Albroz’s (2018) quality of life model included individual aspects and contextual aspects which were organized into four categories: (a) Autonomy, (b) Status, (c) Psychosocial well-being, and (d) Foundational well-being. Table 1 is a copy of Albroz’s (2018, p. 25) quality of life model. The AAIDD (2021) also recognizes that human functioning is dynamic and requires reciprocal engagement with others, including various systems of support.

Historically, people with disabilities have been killed, shunned, used as entertainment for nobility, used for experiments, involuntarily sterilized, excluded from schools, isolated from society, imprisoned, denied choices, abused, neglected, and otherwise treated as subhuman (Karten, 2008; Marini, 2017). Justin Dart was part of the group of disability rights activists who worked to ensure legislation was passed and enacted to protect the rights of people with disabilities in the US. The passage of legislation and the implementation of rules and regulations associated with approved legislation required decades of hard work by many activists and allies. In his address to the International Conference on Equality for People with Disabilities, American disability rights activist and chairman of the President’s Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, Justin Dart said,
The hard reality is this. Society in every nation is still infected by the ancient assumption that people with disabilities are less than fully human, and therefore are not fully eligible for the opportunities which are available to other people as a matter of right. (Dart, 1992).

Segregation was the norm for many people with disabilities in work settings, with sheltered workshops growing in popularity in the 1950s and 1960s (Novak, 2015). Novak (2015) describes these sheltered workshops as part of a “readiness model” (p. 95) where people with disabilities were protected from public ridicule and judgment while they rehabilitated and gained the skills they needed to be competitive in the traditional job market. The “readiness model” combined with the medical model of disability to further the idea that disability needed to be fixed or cured before people with disabilities could be fully accepted in society (Novak, 2015).

Beginning in the 1960s and 70s, people with disabilities, including many veterans wounded in war, recognized the limitations placed on them by an inaccessible society (Drimmer, 1993). Institutions for people with mental illness and various other disabilities also began to be exposed by news reporters like Geraldo Rivera (1972) and politicians like Senator Robert Kennedy (Disability Justice, 2021), who each documented the atrocities of the Willowbrook Institution in Staten Island, New York. Public outcry and tireless work by disability rights advocates like Ed Roberts, Judy Heumann, Pat Wright, Justin Dart, Evan Kemp, and many others, along with advocates like Senator Robert Kennedy, President John F. Kennedy, Senator Tom Harkin, Senator Ted Kennedy, Senator Al D’Amato, Senator Lowell Weicker, and countless parents of children with

It was not until 2011 that segregated workshops and the “readiness model” of rehabilitation began to be seriously questioned and addressed in legislation (Novak, 2015). The National Disability Rights Network created a report in 2011 called “Segregated and exploited: The failure of the disability service system to provide quality work”. This report was published in Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation in 2012 and declared “Workers with disabilities can be employed and be paid equally with the appropriate job development, training, work support, and assistive technology” (Bates-Harris, 2012, p. 34) The call was for integrated employment with appropriate and individualized supports.

Individuals with disabilities should have the opportunity to be employed in non-segregated, regular workplaces. Virtually all individuals with disabilities can be employed and earn the same wages as people without disabilities. When needed
for such employment, they should have access to supported or customized employment. They should be afforded options other than sheltered work, day treatment, clubhouses, and other segregated programs. (U.S. Senate, 2013, p. 14)

**Legislation and Students with Disabilities**

The first federal legislation specific to the education of individuals with disabilities was The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EHA, P. L. 94-142). The EHA required schools to provide a free and appropriate education to all students with disabilities. Additionally, the EHA required that students with disabilities be educated in the least restrictive setting possible. In 1983, the EHA was expanded to include preschool programs, early intervention, and transition programs. Then, in 1986, amendments to EHA mandated early intervention services start at birth (Karten, 2008). In 1990, the EHA became the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and marked the beginning of people-first language in policy and services to students with autism and traumatic brain injuries (Karten, 2008). Amendments to the IDEA were made in 1998, requiring transition services to be provided for students with disabilities beginning at the age of 14 (Karten, 2008).

The next evolution of IDEA was its 2004 reauthorization as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), where it expanded on the requirement to provide a free and appropriate education by ensuring that all children with disabilities have access to “special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living” (IDEIA, 2004, (d)(1)(A)). The IDEIA shifted focus beyond the classroom to the real
world and required more reporting and greater parent involvement in Individual Education Program (IEP) meetings (Karten, 2008). Along with the reauthorization and name change came No Child Left Behind (NCLB, P. L. 107-110), which allowed more parental choice in where their student went to school and mandated that special education teachers be “highly qualified in the core subjects they teach” (Karten, 2008, p.26).

The most recent adjustment in education policy for students with disabilities was the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014, which amended the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. WIOA requires that special education professionals and vocational rehabilitation counselors collaborate to provide transition services for students with disabilities (Oertle et al., 2021). In the latest transition publication from the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services ([OSERS], 2020), transition services are identified as being essential to providing a free and appropriate education for students with disabilities and specifies that “Both the school system and VR program provide opportunities designed to prepare students and youth with disabilities for postsecondary education and careers in the workforce.” (p.8). The policy emphasis on preparing students with disabilities for postsecondary education and independent living is also seen in the changes made in the Higher Education Opportunity Act (2008), which allow students with disabilities to access federal financial aid. The work done by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Postsecondary Education to fund several model TPSID projects which provide access to “academically inclusive college courses, enhancing participation in internships and competitive integrated employment, and encouraging engagement in social and personal development activities.” (OSERS, 2020,
In her review of policy regarding integrated employment for youth with disabilities, Novak (2015) called for developing a national policy framework that would support integrated employment and result in the redirection of state funds to those services that would promote integrated employment options for youth with disabilities.

**Education for Students with ID**

*K-12*

While not ratified by the United States, The United Nations (2006) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities provides the following set of definitions that help clarify a few key terms related to inclusive education.

*Exclusion* occurs when students are directly or indirectly prevented from or denied access to education in any form. *Segregation* occurs when the education of students with disabilities is provided in separate environments designed or used to respond to a particular or various impairment, in isolation from students without disabilities. *Integration* is a process of placing persons with disabilities in existing mainstream educational institutions, as long as the former can adjust to the standardized requirements of such institutions. *Inclusion* involves a process of systemic reform embodying changes and modifications in content, teaching methods, approaches, structures and strategies in education to overcome barriers with a vision serving to provide all students of the relevant age range with an equitable and participatory learning experience and environment that best corresponds to their requirements and preferences. (United Nations, 2006, (24) 4)
Special education classrooms have historically followed the “separate but equal” mindset most closely matching the definition of segregation while attempting to meet the requirements of several pieces of legislation (e.g., IDEA, 2004; No Child Left Behind, 2001). These pieces of legislation required schools to provide free and appropriate education for all students, including students with ID, in the least restrictive environment possible while maintaining acceptable test scores for all students. One manifestation of the “separate but equal” approach was the creation of self-contained classrooms and self-contained schools (Lane et al., 2005). Self-contained classrooms are generally led by a single teacher and a few aids who are responsible for teaching all subjects to a group of students with various disabilities who spend the majority if not entirety of their school day in that one classroom (Chen, 2009). While class sizes tend to be small and student-teacher ratios higher, Karten (2008) described self-contained classrooms as places with limited peer interactions, diluted or fragmented curriculums, and denied opportunities for students with disabilities to make friendships with students without disabilities.

For generations, the education of secondary students with ID focused almost exclusively on functional and life skills programs, recreation, daily living skills, community-based job skills training, and accessing/navigating the community. Over time, opportunities for inclusive academic and social engagement increased and work-based learning options expanded for students with ID (Karten, 2008). Despite these improvements, the number of students with ID graduating with high school diplomas, adequate work experience, and independent living options remained low (Grigal & Papay, 2018; Ryan et al., 2019; Schillaci et al., 2021; Voermans et al., 2021). Prior to the
passage of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) of 2008, post-secondary education for students with ID was minimal. Indeed, it is not acceptable for qualitative differences in post-secondary education options for students with disabilities or their primary and secondary education teachers.

Postsecondary Education for Students with ID

IPSE programs first began in Canadian universities in the late 1980s and then expanded to the United States in the 1990s (Vinoski Thomas et al., 2020). The HEOA (2008) marked the government’s first effort to increase access to higher education for students with ID and removed two significant barriers to access to higher education for students with disabilities. Part of the requirements to access Title IV student aid for post-secondary education was to have a high school diploma and to be matriculating toward a degree. These barriers were removed with the creation of Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary (CTP) programs (Grigal & Papay, 2018). CTP programs are designed to support students with ID at Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) with academic, career and technical, and independent living curriculum with preparation for competitive employment for those who complete the programs being the expected outcome (Grigal & Papay, 2018). In addition to the creation of CTP programs, HEOA (2008) also authorized the creation of model demonstration programs that would be funded through grants and authorized the creation of a National Coordinating Center (NCC) to provide technical assistance to and evaluation of the model demonstration sites (Grigal & Papay, 2018). The first cohort of TPSID grants was implemented between 2010 and 2015. The second cohort of grants was implemented between 2015 and 2020. The third cohort of grantees
was recently awarded, and implementation will occur from 2020 and 2025. Due to the federal funding and interest in postsecondary education for individuals with ID, there has been an enormous increase in the number of college programs serving students with ID.

According to Think College (2021), there are 309 college programs for young adults with ID. Several of these TPSID programs and other IPSE programs (n = 53) are housed at IHE in rural communities (Think College, 2021). IPSE programs are designed to provide academic and social growth opportunities for students with ID as they learn alongside their peers without ID. IPSE programs also focus heavily on skills needed for employment and independent living (Grigal et al., 2022; Vinoski Thomas et al., 2020).

Programs vary in how they approach academics and the level of social engagement they support. Some programs offer specialized and general education courses for credit, while others only offer courses for audit (Grigal et al., 2022; Vinoski Thomas et al., 2020). Vinoski Thomas et al. (2020) identified three models of practice employed by IPSE programs:

(a) inclusive individual support programs, which focus on providing each student with a “typical” college experience by promoting activities that meet the individual student’s needs and providing no instruction within separate settings; (b) hybrid programs, which provide opportunities for IPSE students to engage in activities alongside traditional college students and also provide specific instruction (e.g., life-skills or vocational training) within separate settings; or (c) substantially separate programs, which focus on providing instruction and socialization in courses and activities attended only by students.
with disabilities. (pp. 57-58)

IPSE programs provide support through program staff, peer mentors, and existing university programs (Grigal et al., 2022; Vinoski Thomas et al., 2020). Grigal et al. (2022) reported that about a third of IPSE programs offer residential services which could be on- or off-campus. With the variety in program structure and service delivery, costs associated with IPSE programs also vary greatly with an average annual cost of $13,938 for in-state enrollment and $33,951 for out-of-state enrollment (Vinoski Thomas et al., 2020). Those students attending an IPSE program that is a CTP may apply for Federal Work-Study, Pell Grants, and Supplemental Education Opportunity Grants (Vinoski Thomas et al., 2020).

Integrated employment is a key indicator of the quality of life for people with ID (Almalky, 2020) and a primary goal of postsecondary education for students in TPSID programs (Ryan et al., 2019). Voermans et al. (2021) argued that people with ID consider employment as a “critical element” (p.239) of their participation in their communities and an important source of social inclusion. Three laws related to employment for people with disabilities have increased opportunities for work. The Rehabilitation Act of 1986 provided funding for supported employment for people with disabilities and included supported employment as a service of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) offices (Larson et al., 2021). The Americans with Disabilities Act ([ADA], 1990) was a historic civil rights bill that prohibited discrimination against people with disabilities by any organization receiving federal funding. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act ([WIOA], 2014) was the most recent employment-related law to impact people with disabilities.
WIOA defined a new standard of work for people with disabilities (competitive integrated employment), mandated pre-employment transition services for students with disabilities starting at age 14, and limited access to sub-minimum wage jobs (Larson et al., 2021). Despite these crucial laws, employment rates for people with disabilities continue to be much lower than the national average. In 2018 the national unemployment rate was 3.8% (Lee et al., 2018). A national survey conducted that same year found that of the 23,000 adults with disabilities that participated in the survey, only 14.8% were in competitive employment (Lee et al., 2018). A 2017 survey found that 80% of people with ID or developmental disabilities do not work in the community (National Core Indicators, 2019). Employment rates for young adults (ages 21-25) with ID were found to be 39% compared to 66% for their same-age peers in the general population (Almalky, 2020).

Lee et al. (2018) noted that the chronically low employment rates for people with disabilities have contributed to poverty and social isolation that often lasts a lifetime. Lee et al. (2018) also noted that segregated sheltered workshops where individuals with disabilities often make sub-minimum wage and day programs where individuals with disabilities do not engage in paid work need to be replaced with options that promote competitive employment and independence. Vinoski Thomas et al. (2020) reported that students who participate in IPSE programs have higher employment rates (48%) than their peers who have VR services but do not attend an IPSE program and they make more (73%) per hour than those who do not participate in an IPSE program. Hiersteiner et al. (2018) reported that the majority (80.2%) of the 20,868 adults surveyed were not living in an independent home or apartment. Additionally, the Hiersteiner et al. (2018) report
showed that those living in their own home or apartment were the most likely to have paid jobs in the community. Low levels of employment and limitations in independent living have been noted to contribute to lower quality of life for people with ID (Friedman & Rizzolo, 2018).

**Education and Postsecondary Opportunities in Rural School Districts**

In their policy brief, the American Council on Rural Special Education ([ACRES], n.d.) reported that the percentage of students with disabilities in rural areas is higher than the national average due to several factors (higher poverty rates, larger minority populations, etc.). Erickson et al. (2018) also note the impact of a rapidly aging rural population, limited access to health care, limited access to employer-provided health care, less access to reproductive health services and mental health services, and limited access to affordable housing. Harley et al. (2018) reported that more than 8.8 million people with disabilities live in rural America. Erickson et al. (2018) described rural areas in the US as places of “persistent poverty” (p.22), which is caused by the lack of diverse human capital, social isolation, transportation issues, and limited job opportunities combined with cultural factors not yet fully understood. One study (Baer et al., 2003) found that rural special education students had significantly more jobs in school, were more involved in extracurricular activities, had more job shadowing experiences, and had more training in technology than urban or suburban students. Baer et al. (2003) considered being from a rural school district a positive predictor of employment. These results are to be interpreted with caution, however, due to the small and disproportionate sample of just 4 school districts, 1 urban, 1 suburban, and 2 rural. ACRES (n.d.) further
noted that only a fraction (about 6%) of Office of Special Education Programs grants for research, personnel preparation, or model projects have a distinctly rural focus and stated, “Research designs and program models developed for and implemented in urban and suburban areas may not be applicable to rural settings, and little research is available on what works in rural schools.” (p. 2).

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) (Marré, 2017) reported that the college completion gap between urban and rural communities is growing (up three percentage points between 2000 and 2015). Byun et al. (2015) looked in more depth at the college attendance patterns of rural youth compared to urban youth and noted several important differences between rural and urban attendance in postsecondary education beyond just the fact that fewer rural youth attend postsecondary institutions. Rural students have been found to be more likely to delay entry to postsecondary education and were less likely than their urban peers to be continuously enrolled in college (Byun et al., 2015). The gap in postsecondary completion is linked to higher poverty and child poverty rates and higher unemployment rates in rural areas (Marre 2017, p. 1).

Harley et al. (2018) reported that rural communities and schools are “distinct from suburban and urban schools, as well as from one another in population composition, level of income, and level of poverty, and more students are eligible for free or reduced lunch.” (p. 171). Students living in rural areas face many barriers in their access to educational opportunities and in their transition to postsecondary life. Some of these barriers are: (a) limited offerings in academic coursework and extracurricular activities (Sheehay & Black, 2003), (b) limited vocational opportunities (Carter et al., 2020; Sheehay & Black,
2003), (c) inadequate transportation (Carter et al., 2020; Harley et al., 2008; Sheehay & Black, 2003, Showalter, et al., 2019), (d) lack of access to supports that would facilitate independent living options (Sheehay & Black, 2003), (e) high rates of poverty and associated food insecurity (Kominiak, 2018, Showalter et al., 2019), (f) limited access to developmental screenings and nutrition programs (Harley et al., 2018; Showalter et al., 2019), (g) greater prevalence of childhood trauma, abuse, neglect, and parental opioid abuse (Showalter, et al., 2019), (h) difficulties with recruiting and retaining qualified teachers (Carter et al., 2020; Harley et al., 2018; Kominiak, 2018, Landon et al., 2019; Showalter et al., 2019), and (i) low expectations (Carter et al., 2020; Harley et al., 2018).

To overcome these barriers, rural schools have often turned to collaboration with other agencies to provide needed services and supports (Harley et al., 2018; Jacobson, 2017; Kominiak, 2018; Landon et al., 2019).

Students with disabilities in rural areas often do not receive transition services that meet federal and state quality standards, leaving these students without the skills they need to be successful in postsecondary education or employment (Harley et al., 2018). Miller-Warren (2016) surveyed parents of students with disabilities in rural areas to evaluate the effectiveness of transition IEPs in preparing rural students for postsecondary outcomes. Of the 24 parents who responded, half reported that their students were employed, very few reported that their students were in postsecondary education programs (37.5%). The majority reported that their students lived at home with them (58.3%). Most parents also reported no collaboration with local postsecondary community agencies (62.5%). Rural areas struggle to recruit and retain special education
teachers, and community and family expectations for academic achievement are often lower in rural areas compared to urban areas (Harley et al., 2018). The low expectations of parents carryover into the areas of employment and independent living as well (Harley et al., 2018). A barrier to parental support of postsecondary education, employment, and independent living is the fear that their children will have to move away from home to access these opportunities (Harley et al., 2018). Additionally, Bouck et al. (2020) hypothesized that parents of youth with ID in rural areas may have less “exposure, knowledge, and access” (p.20) to postsecondary education opportunities. In their study of rural Wisconsin school districts, Collet-Klingenberg and Kolb (2011) found that postsecondary education was rated the least important of the eight components identified as part of transition planning for students with disabilities. The districts who provided additional information about why they rated postsecondary education so low reported the proximity to postsecondary education options played a large part in their rating. Chezan et al. (2018) found fewer post-secondary education opportunities in rural areas compared to urban and suburban areas. It is, therefore important that postsecondary programs for youth with disabilities continue to be developed in rural areas so students can access these critical education opportunities while remaining close to family and community supports.

Collaboration and Students with Disabilities

Special Education and Transition Planning

WIOA contains specific provisions that require VR agencies to allocate 15% of each state’s funding for transition services for students and youth between the ages of 14
and 24 (WIOA, 2014). These services are known as Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) and are a new category of VR funding. Pre-ETS include five types of services. One of the five required services is counseling on opportunities for enrollment in comprehensive transition or postsecondary education programs at institutions of higher learning (Lee et al., 2018). The HEOA added collaboration with VR to the requirements of TPSID grantees (Lee et al., 2018).

**Collaborative Practices in Rural School Districts**

Rural school districts face unique geographic and demographic situations that make “Collaborative partnerships…essential in rural service delivery.” (Harley et al., 2018, p.666). In a special issue of The Rural Educator journal focused on collaboration, Harmon (2017) identified collaboration as “a key for increasing the limited school improvement capacity of rural school districts.” (p. 1). Harmon (2017) also tied collaboration to improved and sustained achievement for students in rural high schools. Collaborative partnerships with government and community partners have the potential to improve post-school outcomes for rural students with disabilities. Harley et al. (2018) identified several agencies that can pool “knowledge, ideas, and workloads” (p. 666) to support students in achieving goals that they could not achieve with support from any single agency: (a) state VR agencies, (b) Centers for Independent Living, (c) public health departments, (d) community mental health centers, (d) social services, (e) school districts, (f) local colleges or technical schools, (g) community leaders, (h) church leaders, and (i) community members connected to individuals with disabilities. Ryan (2019) also recommended working with colleges, technical schools, and other institutions
of higher education, VR agencies, schools, advocacy groups, and social service agencies when building collaborative relationships to support IPSE programs in rural areas. Landon et al. (2019) interviewed VR counselors in rural areas and found that collaboration with other professionals and networking with community partners was an essential element of providing quality services in a rural setting. Additionally, Ryan (2019) recommended working with legislators and state Departments of Education as well as offering training and technical assistance to faculty at local institutions of higher education.

Carter et al. (2020) conducted a study with five rural communities regarding transition supports for students with disabilities and found that developing partnerships was the most common recommendation of the “community conversations” that they hosted. While the options for discussion included preparation for college, career, and community life, Carter et al. (2020) found that employment was the area discussed the most frequently. Carter et al. (2020) also found that postsecondary education received much less attention than employment despite the potential that IPSE programs have to improve employment outcomes. Carter et al. (2020) called for further research regarding the barriers to developing IPSE programs in rural areas and regarding the establishment of strong collaborative partnerships.

**Collaborative Practices in IPSE Programs**

Bumble et al. (2019) conducted a study that used community conversations with various stakeholders to explore the way several IPSE programs viewed the inclusion of students with ID. Five overarching domains emerged from the question: “What
individuals, resources, and supports do stakeholders identify as integral to developing inclusive higher education programs?”. These domains were campus community, surrounding community, disability providers and organizations, school systems, and student networks (Bumble et al., 2019). Campus community supports were the domain most emphasized by stakeholders; however, off-campus supports also received a significant amount of attention from stakeholders, indicating that collaborations must extend beyond campus services.

In their scoping review, Lee and Taylor (2021) identified two persistent barriers to establishing and accessing IPSE: a lack of collaboration and limited funding. Lee and Taylor (2021) found that collaborations with IPSE staff, high schools, IHE instructors, community agencies, and families have been noted in existing literature. An absence of effective collaboration between IPSE staff and high school staff results in a lack of understanding about the expectations of IPSE programs and leaves students without the practical skills they need to participate in such programs after graduation. Additionally, Lee and Taylor (2021) found that the ineffective IPSE and high school collaborations lead to less interest from both parents and students. Making connections with high school teachers, parents, IPSE staff, and IHE instructors early in the development of IPSE programs was identified as necessary to ensure that students with ID are prepared for IPSE program courses and have a positive campus experience (Lee & Taylor, 2021). Collaboration barriers persist after program completion as well. Lee and Taylor (2021) reported that their students lacked the supports they needed in employment and independent living after graduation. Building collaborative relationships with community
agencies was noted as essential to ensuring students have the supports they need to maintain employment and higher levels of independent living (Lee & Taylor, 2021)

Despite the importance of interagency collaboration, Lee and Taylor (2021) pointed out that, “there are no standards or guidelines for how to implement interagency collaboration in [IPSE]s.” (p. 10)

Lee et al. (2018) showed how this lack of standards or guidelines is impacting students with disabilities

Despite Congress’ clear intent to focus on interagency collaboration in WIOA and HEOA, a lack of alignment in the implementation of WIOA, HEOA, and IDEA is causing students with intellectual disability in postsecondary programs in some states to be denied the VR and IDEA funded-services needed to access IPSE as a pathway to achieving competitive integrated employment. (p.15)

The National Coordinating Center (Think College, 2019) has identified collaboration as a standard practice and an indicator of program quality, but little specific direction about how to build and maintain collaborative relationships is offered. Several studies (Carter et al., 2010; Fabian et al., 2016; Flowers et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2003; Noonan et al., 2012; Oertle & Seander, 2015; Taylor et al., 2016; Test et al., 2009) have shown that effective collaboration is a predictor of improved post school outcomes for students with disabilities but little is known about the impact collaborative relationships have on IPSE students or how collaboration practices may differ in rural, urban, and suburban settings.

Noonan et al. (2012) modeled a six-stage continuum for measuring collaboration created by Frey et al. (2006) to measure collaboration at the state-level. The continuum consists of the following scale: (0) No integration, (1) Networking, (2) Cooperation, (3)
Coordination, (4) Coalition, and (5) Collaboration. Each level on the continuum has descriptions of what might occur if a relationship is at that level. Table 2 illustrates the various levels. Noonan et al. (2012) found that participation in a state transition team increased the quality of collaboration taking place, and through focus group discussions, were able to identify five collaborative capacities and four collaborative strategies that were associated with the increase in collaboration quality. The five capacities include: (a) variety of partnerships, (b) relationships, (c) time together, (d) shared vision, and (e) shared leadership. The four strategies were: (a) site visits, (b) joint planning, (c) joint training, and (d) sharing information.

Test et al. (2009) conducted a literature review of evidence-based practices in secondary transition and found no evidence-based practices related to interagency collaboration despite it being one of the five areas of the Taxonomy for Transition Programming (Kohler, 1996). This indicated a need for more research regarding interagency collaboration in transition. Carter et al. (2010) conducted a study of how youth with severe disabilities spend their summer and found that teacher perceptions can influence the collaborative efforts of transition teams.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe the collaborative practices of rural IPSE program directors. A comprehensive review of the literature detailing the importance of postsecondary education for students with ID in rural areas and the important role that collaboration plays in improving post high school outcomes for students with ID was provided in Chapter 2. While other studies have considered collaboration in IPSE programs generally, as of this writing none were found to detail the experiences of IPSE program directors or any other stakeholders. Rural areas have unique needs that can be met through collaborative partnerships (Harley et al., 2018; Harmon, 2017; Landon et al., 2019). This study aims to gather the experiences that rural IPSE program directors have had collaborating with agencies on- and off- campus.

Research Questions

The research questions of interest in this study are:

1. How do rural IPSE program directors describe their experiences collaborating with organizations and individuals on campus (i.e., admissions, disability resource office, financial aid, mental health care providers, administration, etc.)?
   a. How were these collaborative relationships started?
   b. What barriers do they face in collaborating?
c. What is their perception of the impact of these collaboration relationships on students?

2. How do rural IPSE program directors describe their experiences collaborating with organizations and individuals off campus (i.e., schools, vocational rehabilitation, parents, community disability providers, etc.),
   a. How were these collaborative relationships initiated?
   b. What barriers do they face in collaborating?
   c. What is their perception of the impact of these collaboration relationships on students?

These research questions will be addressed using semi-structured interviews, field notes, and information provided in a pre-interview survey.

Study Design

Qualitative research designs are used to explore and gain an understanding of the meaning that individuals or groups give to social or human problems (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). There are several forms of qualitative research (narrative research, phenomenology, case studies, grounded theory, etc.), but all involve identifying a research question, gathering data created by people (interviews, documents, artwork, etc.), analyzing the data (both inductive and deductive methods can be used), and then interpreting the meaning of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research methods focus on individuals and the complexities that influence their experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The strength of this design is not generalizability, instead the rich descriptions provide opportunities for transferability.
Other IPSE directors reading this study may be able to find elements of participants’ experiences that relate to their own experiences in meaningful ways. Qualitative research designs have historically been part of the fields of “anthropology, sociology, the humanities, and evaluation” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 13). Over time, more fields have adopted qualitative methods to help answer difficult and complex social and human problems. The fields of education, nursing, and psychology are just a few examples of the expansion of qualitative research designs (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The qualitative research design selected for this study is a transcendental phenomenological design (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). This design allowed the researcher to gather detailed information about the formation and impact of collaborative practices from the perspective of rural IPSE program directors. Phenomenology was first developed by the German philosopher Edmond Husserl who believed that experimental scientific research did not have the ability to study all human phenomena and had set aside important parts of the human experience (Mapp, 2008). Creswell and Poth (2018) define phenomenology as a way to describe the common meaning of an experience that several individuals have lived. Mapp (2008) explains that phenomenology seeks the meaning and essences of lived experiences from the people who lived them. Interviews are the most common form of data collection in phenomenology as they provide the rich detailed descriptions needed to understand the phenomena (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). Phenomenological researchers transcribe the interviews and then analyses them for themes and meanings that describe the essence of the shared experience of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Eddles-Hirsch, 2015;
Mapp, 2008). Husserl believed “that by using the transcendental reduction process one could delve deeply into consciousness and uncover the underlying structures of a phenomenon” (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015, p. 252). Phenomenology considers both what individuals have experienced (noema) and how they have experienced it (noesis; Eddles-Hirsch, 2015; Jackson et al., 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Eddles-Hirsch (2015) gives the following example:

…if all research students attended a research lecture once a week, the noema would constitute the ‘what’ of the lecture, whereas the noesis would relate to how the different students perceived and experienced the lecture. In phenomenological research, one, therefore, has to consider both the noema and the noesis in order to understand the experiences described by the participants. (p.253)

Transcendental phenomenology is also known as descriptive phenomenology and differs from Hermeneutics in the relationship of the researcher and the data. Hermeneutics relies on the researcher’s own understanding and experiences to analyze the data while transcendental phenomenology attempts to “ bracket” out the researcher’s preconceptions, beliefs, and prejudices in order to see the phenomena for what it really is (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015; Laverty, 2003; Mapp, 2008). Creswell and Poth (2018) identify phenomenology as an appropriate research method when understanding the common experiences of several individuals is needed to develop practices or policies. This study seeks to understand the common collaborative experiences of rural IPSE directors in order to inform policy and practice in the field. Transcendental phenomenology is therefore an appropriate method for the aims of this study.
Participants

Directors of rural IPSE programs across the United States were recruited to participate in the proposed study because they are the people primarily responsible for establishing and maintaining collaborative relationships with on-campus and off-campus resources. To be included in the study a participant must be a director of an IPSE program in a rural area, have been in that role for at least one year, and complete the informed consent documents. Of the 53 email addresses provided on the Think College website, six were invalid. Ten of those contacted via email began the survey and seven completed it. An invitation to participate was also shared on the Think College Facebook page, which resulted in 69 more people starting the survey. A total of 79 individuals began the survey, 60 of those completed the survey, and 28 indicated that they would be willing to participate in an interview. Of those 28 potential participants only 12 provided contact information. A total of 10 rural IPSE directors scheduled and participated in an interview.

Recruitment Procedures

Following approval by Utah State University's (USU) Institutional Review Board (IRB), recruitment of study participants began. Rural IPSE program directors were identified through the Think College’s college search website (https://thinkcollege.net/college-search) and through the Think College Facebook page. Each of the 309 IPSE programs listed on the college search website were reviewed to determine if they meet the requirements of a rural program. This was done by putting the name of each program’s city into a website (https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/am-i-rural)
created to “help determine whether a specific location is considered rural based on various definitions of rural, including definitions that are used as eligibility criteria for federal programs.” (Rural Health Information Hub, 2021). Those programs located in cities meeting the U.S. Census Bureau’s definition of rural (less than 50,000 people), as indicated on the Rural Health Information Hub website, will be considered rural for this study. This site was selected because it provided comprehensive and up-to-date information that was easy to access and allowed for replication of searches (Longnecker, 2017, Wheeler & Davis, 2017).

**Data Collection Procedures**

Following university IRB approval, eligible program directors were contacted via email and through the Think College Facebook page regarding participation and asked to complete a demographic survey to verify eligibility. The demographic survey was created in Qualtrics and asked participants to indicate how long they have held the position of director. Informed consent information was provided at the beginning of the Qualtrics survey and those rural IPSE directors who were interested in participating in an interview indicated their interest at the end of the survey and included a phone number or email that could be used to schedule a date and time for the interview (see appendix A). Participants were also asked on the survey to identify the organizations they collaborate with both on- and off-campus According to Creswell and Poth (2018), between three and ten participants are recommended for a phenomenological.

Only those directors who had been in that role one year or longer, completed the survey, and included a means of contacting them were included in the study. The time as
director requirement was selected to ensure that the directors would have enough experience to provide detailed responses to the interview questions. A total of 79 individuals began the survey with either a direct link from an email or through an anonymous link on the Think College Facebook page. 60 of those completed the survey and 28 indicated that they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview. Of those 28 potential participants, 12 provided contact information. Each of the 12 eligible rural IPSE program directors were contacted via phone or email to schedule a date and time for the formal Zoom interview. A total of 10 rural IPSE directors responded, scheduled, and participated in an interview.

A pre-interview packet was sent via email to each of these participants. This pre-interview packet included the informed consent documents and a copy of the interview questions. Participants were given the interview questions ahead of time to allow them to think about the collaborations they have identified in the initial survey and gather any information they might need to answer the questions. Participants were allowed to bring any notes or resources they might want for reference to the interview. Each interview consisted of nine open-ended questions and lasted between 12 – 44 minutes with the average interview time being 26.7 minutes. All interviews were recorded on Zoom, and a transcript was generated from within the Zoom software.

Transcripts generated by the Zoom software were reviewed by the student researcher who listened to each interview and made any needed corrections to the Zoom transcripts (Vanover et al., 2021). Final transcripts were sent to participants for validation (Creswell & Poth, 2018, pp. 261-262). Each participant was asked to review the
transcript from their interview and make corrections, add to their responses, or clarify information. Member checked transcripts were then uploaded to the secure Box.com folder and imported into NVivo for analysis.

In addition to the interview transcripts, the student researcher kept a field journal while conducting the interviews to record insights, thoughts, and notes. These field notes along with all memos created during the data analysis phase were used to synthesize the interview data and record questions and thoughts regarding participant responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018, p. 188) describe memos as “short phrases, ideas, or key concepts” identified by the researcher. Memos were recorded during the coding process as well to allow those coding to share ideas, note deviant cases, and store example quotes from themes (Richards & Hemphill, 2018). These analytic memos were recorded immediately while reading the transcripts and provided a place to converse about the data, pose questions, and think critically about the participant’s experience (Saldana, 2016). All field notes and memos must be “organized, categorized, and accessible throughout the qualitative phase” (Yin, 2017, p. 132). An NVivo report was created to show each coded section of text and who coded it. This report was exported as a PDF file, and memos were made on the document as the two coders discussed the coded sections and came to a consensus on the meanings and key concepts represented in each coded section.

**Instrumentation**

The interview guide was created using recommendations from the existing literature on interagency collaboration in rural settings and by consulting with experts in
the field of disability services. The individuals, agencies, and departments included in the pre-interview Qualtrics survey were selected from the Carter et al. (2020) community conversations study, where IPSE programs listed the people and groups that they collaborated with, and from the Harley et al. (2018) study. The interview protocol was piloted with an IPSE program director known to the student researcher. Piloting the interview protocol allowed for the refinement of the protocol and interview techniques of the student researcher (Majid et al., 2017).

**Ethical Considerations**

Creswell and Poth (2018) identify ethical concerns at six stages of qualitative research. The proposed study addresses these issues by seeking approval from USU’s IRB prior to conducting the study, disclosing the study purpose to participants and providing them with IRB approved informed consent documents, allowing participants the option of having only audio recorded, using secure software for the interview and for storing all data collected, double coding a portion of interview data, using pseudonyms, having participants read their transcripts, and providing a final copy of the report to participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018, pp. 23-56). The student researcher has also completed the requirements needed to get the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) certification in ethical research practices. There is minimal risk associated with participating in a study that uses interview protocol and asks about professional collaboration practices. Participation is completely voluntary, and each participant will be provided IRB approved informed consent documents to sign prior to beginning the study.
Participants had full control over whether they opened the email or clicked on the link to participate. Participants could choose to fill out the survey in full or only answer the question they would like to complete. Participants were not required to fill out all questions on the survey or answer all questions in the interview. Participants had full control over what they shared and were made aware that their participation was voluntary. Interviews took place via Zoom and verbal consent was obtained prior to beginning the recording. The interviewer conducted interviews in a fully private location with no other persons present. Data was de-identified prior to data analysis. The main ethical consideration in this study was participant privacy. Participant confidentiality will be maintained by assigning each participant a numeric identifier prior to data analysis and by replacing all names used in the interviews with pseudonyms. Additionally, a secure password-protected file on Box.com will be created to store all interview recordings, transcriptions, student researcher notes, and other study-related documents that may be produced (i.e., thematic maps, NVivo files, etc.).

**Researcher Reflexivity**

I approached this study with the ontological belief that reality is a complex social construct that is in constant flux (Glesne, 2016) and hold a constructivist worldview in which I believe that knowledge about effective collaboration can be constructed through understanding the experiences and perceptions of those doing the collaborating. I have lived in a rural part of the country for approximately 8 years and have worked as a support coordinator for people with disabilities most of that time. My work gave me experience working on interdisciplinary teams to support people with disabilities. I am
also the future director of a rural IPSE program and am seeking to learn from my colleagues’ experiences. I believe that collaborations are essential to providing quality supports to students with ID, that rural communities have unique attributes that facilitate collaborations, and that IPSE programs are beneficial to students with ID, their families, and society at large. These life and work experiences and beliefs led to my interest in this topic.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

De-identified interview data were analyzed using the NVivo software, which helped with organizing, coding, identifying themes, and interpreting and representing the meaning of themes. NVivo also has features that allow the merging of work done by multiple researchers (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and supports hand-coding methods (Bernauer et al., 2013; Maher et al., 2018). Demographic survey data was downloaded from the USU-based Qualtrics account to the folder in Box. The demographic information was assigned a participant ID and matched to the corresponding participant. After this match occurred, any other identifying information was removed. Interview transcripts were stored in a restricted-access Box folder. Data were analyzed in NVivo, and all NVivo files were also saved in the restricted-access Box folder. All member-checked interview data were uploaded to NVivo and were coded for significant statements (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These significant statements were organized into “clusters of meaning” or themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 79). Textural descriptions of what the participants experienced were generated, along with a structural description of the context or settings that influenced the way participants experienced the phenomenon.
Figure 2 is a recreation of Creswell & Poth’s (2018) template for coding a phenomenological study and illustrates the process visually. The two coders randomly selected one interview to code together to establish the initial codebook. This interview was coded by each coder separately, and then the coders met via Zoom to review each of the coded text sections. The initial intercoder agreement was 98%. After codes were condensed and discussed, 100% agreement was reached on each code. A PDF of the NVivo report used for this process was used to document the process and record notes and memos regarding the process. Each coder then coded the remaining nine interviews independently. The same NVivo report was generated and exported as a PDF. The two coders again met via Zoom to review the coding report, and notes regarding the consolidation of codes and consensus discussion were recorded as notes and memos within the PDF. Once consensus was reached on the codes, the PDF document was sent to the outside coder for validation of the codes. Further reduction and once all the data was coded and analyzed and results written, the student researcher emailed the results section of the dissertation to each participant for one last member check. Any additions, clarifications, and edits requested were made.

Validity

Creswell & Poth (2018) offered eleven different perspectives and definitions of validity within the context of qualitative inquiry. The approach used for this study defines the process of validating data to be “an attempt to assess the accuracy of the findings” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 259). It will use the strategies from the researcher’s lens, the participant’s lens, and the reader’s lens (Creswell & Poth, 2018). From the researcher’s
lens, triangulation was achieved through the use of multiple coders (the student researcher, another doctoral student, and a third external evaluator who reviewed the themes and findings) and through researcher reflexivity (an open acknowledgement of the student researcher’s biases, values, and experiences) (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Member checking or gathering participant feedback was used to include the participant lens (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The reader’s lens was addressed using an external auditor (Dr. Michelle McKnight-Lizotte) who examined the data and findings to ensure that the findings, interpretations, and conclusions reached were supported by the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, the reader’s lens was considered by eliciting rich and thick descriptions from participants in the interviews and providing sufficient detail to the readers concerning both the participants themselves and the descriptions they offer of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell & Poth (2018) recommend that all qualitative studies engage in at least two validation strategies; this study will use five.

**Reliability**

Reliability is the consistency or stability of a study and requires qualitative researchers to take steps to ensure that each step of the study is well documented and followed exactly for each participant (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The following procedures were used in this study to achieve the highest degree of reliability possible. First, all interviews used the same protocol and will be recorded and transcribed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Second, intercoder agreement was supported through the use of a common coding platform (NVivo), the development and sharing of a codebook, the use of multiple coders for 100% of the transcripts, and the assessment and reporting of
intercoder agreement (Creswell & Poth, 2018).
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe the collaborative practices of rural IPSE program directors. A comprehensive review of the literature detailing the importance of postsecondary education for students with ID in rural areas and the critical role that collaboration plays in improving post-high school outcomes for students with ID was provided in Chapter 2. The methodology was detailed in Chapter 3. This chapter will present the results of the interviews conducted with 10 rural IPSE program directors regarding their collaborative experiences. It should be noted that the occurrences of themes can exceed the number of participants because participants gave responses regarding multiple types of collaborations.

Participants were asked on the pre-interview survey to identify those organizations that they collaborate with on- and off-campus. Tables 4 and 5 show the results of the survey responses. Four main themes were identified in the data (a) motivation for collaborating, (b) keys to successful collaboration, (c) factors of rural communities, and (e) opportunities to improve inclusion quality. Figure 3 is a map of the themes and their accompanying sub-themes which will be discussed. Illustrative interview excerpts are provided for each theme.

Motivation for Collaborating

The primary motivation for collaborating given by the rural IPSE program directors in this study was the inclusion of their students with ID both on campus and in their communities. When asked which collaborations were most beneficial to students
and why; respondents often identified those collaborations that promoted inclusion and reported that inclusion was the greatest benefit to their students. Of the 58 occurrences of the motivation for collaborating, 41% identified inclusion as the motivating factor for or the main advantage of collaborating. There were several motivating factors that led rural IPSE program directors to start and maintain collaborations, but the underlying elements to them all were the inclusion of their students and the continuation or expansion of their IPSE programs.

One participant described her motivation for starting a new collaboration this way: “I would say that we started the collaboration … with the homecoming parade [because] our instructor [asked] why can’t we do this? …there's a lot of community groups that do this …”. The instructor at this program saw an event that other students and community members participated in and asked, “why can’t we do this?” then made it happen so their students could be included in something that their campus deemed necessary to students and members of the community. Another participant described why their program collaborated with campus departments like this: “… to be a part of the campus the best way they can, so I think that helps to build the social side of things, those social skills, with our students and then having to communicate with different people on campus.” Collaborations that provided opportunities for building and practicing social skills with peers were identified as particularly beneficial for students and were sought by program directors and staff. One participant talked about a student who was able to successfully advocate for a pay raise at her job after attending a course taught by graduate students in Communication Disorders. The participant described it like this:
… we had one student that was working at an amusement park and just on her own without any of [us], not her parents, not the teacher, not me, went up to her boss and said “I’ve been working here X number of years”, I think, was two years, and “I think I deserve a raise.”. And we're [look of surprise on face]. When she was telling us the story, we just gasped [we] said “Wow you did that?” … She [said] “Yeah and they gave me a raise.” So, it’s stuff like that that they're picking up with those students who are their age, your peers that I think is invaluable.

Building a sense of belonging and ownership of the campus was also a motivating factor for one participant who said,

I really pushed for inclusion, so I think that we're being asked to be key stakeholders in a lot of the decision-making processes, so we are asked to be at the table when they're making those decisions, so I think that now there's a lot more information and education about our program before I think it was kind of secluded and not really integrated with the main campus. But as we all know, I think it's best practice and our students will learn more things from their typically developing students, as well as feeling that sense of belonging and sense of you know, [of] having an investment into the campus. … I mean they're with their peers; they felt that sense of belonging … and … we're integrating with … different types of students and they can relate.

There were two participants who referred to “student life” organizations when discussing who they collaborated with. These organizations were student-led associations and the administrators who oversee them. They included those responsible for student housing,
student government, and student-led clubs. Collaborations with student life organizations were mentioned as key for supporting inclusion on campus.

… that student life connection is huge. Our students are all involved in at least one club or activity on campus. So, I think that's their connection point of finding their place of belonging, we really talk about belonging and what does it mean to belong to a college campus? Who are your people?

Another put it this way:

Student life is the key to being able to really make it work. …we believe in that idea of belonging, the academic component is great, and it's important and we value it, but we are really looking at the whole college experience and what it means to be part of an inclusive setting. And that means belonging to a place right and having your place where you thrive. … which is a lot more than academics, which is what a lot of people experience at college or what we hope people will experience at college, so we want to provide those opportunities for our students as well.

Living in the dorms among peers was also identified as an essential element of inclusion that required collaboration. One participant talked about the difficulties of partnering with student life and dorm staff but emphasized that the benefits to the students are what motivates her to keep going with the collaborations.

… the dorm living piece has been huge for this progress and I mean, it's hurdles all over the place and it's challenging, but the gains are so worth it, right? You see the growth and you see the change in them in even such a short amount of time...
they've only been in the dorms for seven weeks right now and they have built so
many friendships and have come so far when it comes to roommate conflict and
just the basics of living in a dorm setting.

One participant described how the goal of inclusion was vital to the success of programs
and that it needed to go beyond the campus:

… for a program like this to be successful, there has to be that idea of inclusion
and understanding what inclusion is across, not just the campus but the entire
community because it's going to help, the trickle effect should be it spreads out
into the community.

The next most frequent reason for collaborating was to build partnerships that
would provide experiences for future professionals who will work with people with
disabilities post-graduation. These collaborations included undergraduate and graduate
students in Communication Disorders, Physical Education, Occupational Therapy,
Special Education, Kinesiology, and Art. One participant explained that these students
get the opportunity to “learn a new skill set that they maybe wouldn't have been able to
learn otherwise ...”. This type of collaboration allows programs to use existing resources
(undergraduate and graduate students in other departments) to teach courses to their
students and act as peer mentors to their students while providing future professionals
with experience engaging with students with ID.

Collaborating with employers and community members to find employment and
internship sites was noted by participants as well. Several participants discussed how
meaningful work experiences are for their students and described several different
employment and internship options available to their students on-campus and in the community. One participant emphasized the importance of collaborating to locate employment sites in this way:

Getting out in the community into a real work situation is the most beneficial. I mean we could practice all day in [a] controlled settings … but until things actually come up [in] a real worksite, … there's not really a good way to practice for everything, and so in the moment in learning things in real-life settings is, going to end up being most beneficial.

Another participant highlighted the importance of collaborating with employers to make sure their students get authentic experiences in the hiring process.

He went through the entire required application process, which is a really great experience. Sometimes employers [say], ‘oh no don't fill out an application just come on in.’ But [this employer] really had a lot of boundaries, [the student] had to kind of get through, and so that experience is invaluable to [the student].

Efforts to gain funding was reported as motivation for collaboration seven times. One participant described the need for collaboration to secure funding to sustain her program after the initial grant funds ran out.

…it was a lot of work, a lot of having to get creative with how we did funding [we] still do creative funding to this day, obviously, the grant eventually ran out but by then, we were able to prove to our superintendents in the area that it was worth keeping. So, they all agreed to continue to fund the program it's based on their funding [and] will change year to year, based on how many students from
their school corporation attend, so we divide up that way...

Other participants described collaborating with providers of Home and Community Based Services, local VR offices, and community mental health providers to obtain supports that their programs could not afford to provide and to secure funding for students to participate in the program (i.e., tuition payments, books, etc.). One participant also mentioned the work done to solicit financial donations from local businesses and charities.

Two IPSE program directors noted that individual student interests were the motivation to begin specific collaborations. One participant said their relationship with a particular student organization started when one of her students asked if they could be a part of the group that cares for their school mascot. That collaboration was successful and led to others. The other participant described how two of her students built one of their most important collaborations. These two students were interested in basketball and reached out to ask about supporting the team. The results are described by the participant:

…we've got a couple guys that are participating with the basketball team and the friendships that they've gained from that, and the confidence they gained from that, and the independence because they’re traveling with the team. It's doing all these things where they've really paved the way for themselves, [using] skill sets that weren't necessarily built into the program…

**Keys to Successful Collaboration**

Rural IPSE program directors identified two primary keys to successful collaboration (a) an organizational commitment to a shared mission and (b) utilizing
Organizational Commitment to a Shared Mission

In order to achieve successful collaboration on- and off-campus, participants identified four factors associated with having an organizational commitment to a shared mission; these were (a) administrative support, (b) organizational messaging, (c) persistence, and (d) relationship building.

Administrative Support

Support from the Dean, Chancellor, or President of the participants’ universities and colleges were identified as particularly important for building and maintaining programs. When members of administration believe in the program and value it, collaborations are easier and more impactful. Table 6 shows the quotes from interviews regarding administrative support. One participant explained that when building her program, she needed to help her administration see how her program supported the university’s mission to promote diversity.

…for a program like this to be successful, there has to be that idea of inclusion and understanding of what inclusion is across, not just the campus but the entire community because it's going to help... The trickle effect should be it spreads out into the community, we talk a lot at the university level… [to the] administration because there's a huge focus on any college campus right now on diversity and they use the word inclusion [when] speaking about diversity.... I am so glad that
you have an initiative of diversity because…look at what this area of diversity is that we can bring to your campus. …they all look at me like, ’Oh my gosh, I never thought about disability diversity’…

**Organizational Messaging**

Participants reported spending a significant amount of time-sharing information about their programs and educating others about the program. This required clear and frequent communication and a major goal of these efforts was to help others see and embrace the program’s mission. One participant described the need to educate VR staff regarding her program.

…just educating and building awareness, because they were feeling like they were just wasting their money. So, we just had to build the case for why… help them understand that there's more to work than just going to work. There's a lot of other skills that go with that so that we're teaching.

Another participant explained that when changes occur in administration, they have to “start over and educate them.” When reaching out to new departments or individuals, one participant reported that a lack of knowledge might be the only thing preventing the partnership. “I think it's just a matter of helping them understand what we're doing, and then I mean it's only a matter of time and they get on board with that.”

Several participants talked about the importance of helping those you want to collaborate with see how the partnership can also benefit them and clearly explaining the type of support you offer to your students. In describing how they initiate collaborations with employers, one participant said:
… [it’s] basically us going out and saying, “hey, what can we do for you...” I’m speaking at [the] Chamber of Commerce trying to get on listservs with those employers. Business cards, anything where we can say, “hey, this is who we are.” And even if they say no...leaving your information and saying, “If something changes or something you know opens up...please contact us.” I’m working on trying to find ways that we can help you, and I think just making sure that they understand that we are there to support them and we want it to be a good fit.

Another participant talked about assisting others in understanding how education and employment for their students will benefit society.

…help them see it and help them be vested in it as well, because it's not just us or it's not just the students who are going to benefit, it's society because we're putting out independent individuals who will likely go into competitive employment and they're going to be taxpaying citizens.

Having a clear vision for the program was identified as important by three participants.

The following quote is illustrative of what these participants said:

…part of our mission is to make sure that our program values continue, no matter what the funding...we have a fully inclusive program; our students are not in separate settings unless they decide they want to be together. We keep that value no matter what funding streams try to tell us...Put yourself out there, but also be ready for some opposition, no matter how good the program, and know that you can get through it when you realize, here's my common goals, here's my values, here's my mission. I’m sticking to this and if it honors what you've set out to do,
then you're going to have a good program too.

**Persistence**

Half of the participants talked about the need to be persistent when developing and maintaining an IPSE program in a rural area. Persistence included sticking to the mission of the IPSE, continuing to approach potential employers even if they have not been receptive in the past or had a negative experience, and asking questions as many times as needed to find solutions to problems. One participant described the need for persistence in this way:

… there's been many years that you get to the point you [feel like] like this is not going to work and we were [going to have to] shut down… [we were] about ready to give up, but then things improve[d], and we figure[d] out a way. …sometimes you have to roll with things and change the direction, but remember the main goal was to give a new opportunity to students… keep [your mission] in the back of your head…the purpose [you had] in the beginning and everything's not going to go as expected and we've had to…make many turns along the way, and change our focus or the way we thought we were going to do things. So [you] have to be flexible.

Others described their persistence in terms of breaking down barriers and being assertive when defending the program mission. One participant explained, “…we have some teachers are really persistent and they'll be like okay ‘why what can we do to break down this barrier”. Another said, “Be consistent. Be…a go-getter, and I mean…I don't accept no as an answer…you have to be not aggressive but determined and [get] what
you want to see as the vision for the program.”

One participant shared an experience where a job placement did not go well because of poor communication between the program and the employer. The student ended up being removed from the internship site. After some time had passed, another student was interested in doing an internship there. The participant explained how persistence applied to her situation in this way.

I would say, don't be afraid to…re-reach out with some of the advancements potentially that the program has made because sometimes when you're in a rural community there's only X number of places, you can go. You know it's not like you have infinite places like you would in a large city or town.

**Relationship Building**

In order to collaborate effectively with people and organizations on- and off-campus, participants emphasized the importance of building good relationships. One participant said, “relationship building is the best thing to work on. …trying to find those supports around you and people who are wanting to be a part of things and want to help your program.” This skill of relationship-building was identified as necessary when working with potential employers, VR, faculty, and community members. Specific skills required to build relationships were identified: a) flexibility, b) give and take, c) trust, and d) aligning students interests and abilities with employers’ needs.

When talking about the skill of being flexible, one participant said: “…we’re just learning as we go on how to make those connections on campus.” Two others stated it simply as, “Be flexible.” Another participant described the need to change the location of
their program due to COVID restrictions. The skill of give-and-take is related to flexibility as it requires program directors to make compromises and be flexible about when and how they do things. Some participants reported difficulties establishing give-and-take relationships with campus groups. One participant described his failed attempts to develop a connection with the student government on his campus. He said, “I would say the main reason is they feel that since they’re not going to be benefiting from it that they wouldn’t like to help.” Another participant described her efforts to convince the education department at her school to collaborate with her program.

[The education department said] we don’t need this extra component, because we’re getting what we need everywhere else. I think [there are] two [instructors] that are specifically special education [that] really like this program and [they] think it’s a great idea and support it verbally, but I think it’s just they have what they need.

Another participant cautioned: “…[we] don’t bombard our faculty or employers with too much, because if we’re too much work they’re going to run, and so we take the burden of some things in our office more than other people.” A different participant said it this way, “…sometimes you don’t want to [ask for things]. I feel like [we are] constantly asking people for help…” In contrast, one participant explained how she serves on boards and attends political events to initiate relationships and new collaborations that have benefited her program.

…you know I put my feet under the table sometimes and I think why in the world am I here. That circles back around usually…it makes me a busier person, but
then, when I need something or we need to collaborate on something it’s a lot easier because I’ve been under the same tables, trying to figure out what I can do to help them. So, you have to have a reciprocal relationship to it can’t just be all give and no take or [all take and no give]. A little balance there. I’ve been known to make brownies and call people and to say I appreciate you. We deliver stuff like apple cakes and baskets of things to our employers, just to say thanks... we celebrate a lot of little things with our mentors, with their employers, with our partners, and sometimes it’s a small token of something to show our appreciation to say we wouldn’t be here without all of your efforts and willingness to partner [with us].

The skill of give and take helps build trust which was identified by four participants as important for building relationships that led to successful collaboration. One participant said: “…you have to make sure they actually trust you. And making sure you’re always available.” Another participant described it this way:

…having trust with those agencies and transparency. I don’t like to have surprises they don’t either. And so, a lot of our partnerships are very transparent and trusting so if there’s an issue, especially with our employers or any of our faculty…they know they can come to us and we’re going to tackle it.

Working to align student interests and abilities with the needs of employers helps build trust. One participant reported that potential employers often want to know what skills the students are learning, and another reported that her program spends a significant amount of time working on skills that are specific to job sites to ensure successful placements and
to ease the stress of training her students when they arrive on-site. This process was described as labor-intensive and challenging. One participant said: “Trying to find the right setting for students, where they can be successful so it's a lot of trial and error sometimes…it takes longer than you think it will.”

**Utilizing Existing Resources and Relationships**

Participants identified several resources and relationships that can facilitate successful collaborations on- and off-campus. These existing resources included State and Federal programs like Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) providers and Medicaid waiver services. Also described were local-level resources like special education directors, local education agencies, campus disability resources, and local government and civic leaders. Additionally, family members of people with disabilities and advocates outside of the program were mentioned as key advocates in several different settings.

When describing working with State VR offices, three participants talked about the difficulties with policies at State and Federal levels. They reported working with staff from the National Coordinating Center, individual caseworkers in their counties, and State VR representatives to overcome the misunderstandings about what can be billed and how services need to be delivered for VR to pay for a certain part of the participants’ programs. One participant discussed how her initial experience with VR was positive, then turned into what she called a “policy tangle” which left her students without VR support for six years.

…recently we restarted our partnership [with VR] after six years, which has been great…we started out with vocational rehabilitation helping us with tuition fees,
meal plans, room and board, everything, and then they re-evaluated all of the people in [our state] for programs, and said: “Oh, we can only fund the last semester of your last work-related classes.” …we had written grants and we weren't getting them because we didn't meet their definition of [an approved program] and I was thinking, why are you interpreting it this way…. All our counselors interpret things very differently.

This participant was able to renew her program’s relationship with their State VR offices with support from advocates at Think College and other national disability policy agencies. She reported that it required “a lot of educating and talking” to the various staff at local and State VR offices before her program was accepted as eligible for funds and required the State VR agency to re-interpret federal policies regarding Comprehensive Transition Programs. Another participant described her students’ struggles to get VR funding for certain classes offered in their program. She reported that after their parents’ efforts to advocate for them, two students could secure VR funding for their employment class which requires an internship. These parents had to prove to their local VR counselors that the courses met the requirements for Pre-ETS funding. This participant expressed her frustration with the inconsistency of access to VR services.

…it is extremely hit or miss; we've had two students from the same county and one student received [support] from [VR] and not the other. [It] goes caseworker by caseworker. …the students’ cases are so similar [but it comes down to caseworkers and] how they interpret the rules.

Despite not always having success with local VR agencies, participants continue to
establish relationships with them in the hopes that clarification of policy implementation will come, and greater support will be available to their students. Other participants reported having strong relationships with their local VR agencies and have been able to transition the Pre-ETS services their students were getting in high school over to their IPSE programs, sometimes even keeping the same staff.

Community mental health providers and Medicaid waiver service providers were two local resources that participants reported being beneficial for their rural IPSE students. These agencies have supported rural IPSE program directors in finding “creative” ways to provide support to their students. One participant talked about how a home health care agency found a way to approve Medicaid services to students when they are in the program and then have those services transition with them after the program. This allows the students to have continuity of care as they move from college to living and working in their communities. Another participant explained how her program was able to become a community living support provider and then partner with the local community mental health provider to secure funding for the independent living supports they provide to their students.

Another participant explained how she could negotiate with several school districts in her area to design a creative funding stream to support students from the various school districts. This funding was “fluid” and varied based on the number of students from each district attending the program. Additionally, one participant spoke of her partnership with the State Director of Special Education Services as a key partner in recruiting for the program and opening doors to provide education about IPSE programs
Parents and other family members were described as key advocates who established foundations, funded programs and pressed local agencies into action. The work of one parent of a child with ID provided the funding for creating one participant’s program. She explained how this parent started a foundation in honor of their child, and with the part of the money he raised, he started a rural IPSE. This parent continues to be an active part in building collaborations between the program and the community. One of the participants, who was also a parent of a child with a disability, talked about how watching her child grow up inspired her to ask questions, return to school, and then work to get agencies collaborating in her area.

Another participant described how the questions asked by concerned parents started a multi-county collaboration with school districts. One collaboration was reportedly started when the director of a community organization, who was the grandparent of a child with ID, reached out to their local rural IPSE to see how they could support the program and help with recruiting. The participant who reported this collaboration explained, “…people who have family members with disabilities are probably going to be a little more open to helping support them…”.

In addition to families of people with disabilities, advocates in the community and on campus were reported to have helped initiate and maintain collaborations with rural IPSE programs. These program proponents included administrators (in one case, the wife of an administrator), students outside the program, political leaders, religious leaders, and community and civic organizations. Some examples include: (a) an administrator who
connected the philanthropy department with the IPSE program on his campus to help raise funding, (b) the wife of a university president who had relationships with a local employer and was able to facilitate an internship agreement for IPSE students, (c) students in sororities and fraternities who worked with national representatives to get rules changed to allow IPSE students to join their local chapters, (d) a local religious leader opened the church building up for an IPSE program to use while COVID had closed their campus, and (e) on local Chamber of Commerce partnered with the director of one IPSE program to support networking with potential employers in the community.

Factors of Rural Communities

Participants described a unique community character in their rural settings as well as three limitations they face. These limitations included (a) limited resources, (b) staff turnover, and (c) transportation. Participants described their rural community character as open, welcoming, supportive, creative, and close-knit. The open, welcoming, and supportive elements of the rural community character were described be several different participants. One participant said it this way, “I feel like my community…is very inclusive and friendly for individuals with disabilities…” Another said, “…people [here] are super nice and they'll step up [to help].

The close-knit element of rural settings was identified as an important strength in building collaborative relationships and getting needed information.

[In a] rural settings I can pick up the phone, call and say, “Hey, I got a question,” [because] I know who this person is, I think there are many benefits to having that kind of mentality and that kind of setting for a postsecondary ed program.
One participant explained that trust within his rural community comes from people knowing you and your “family background”. Having family-owned businesses was an element of the rural community character the one participant identified as an essential strength.

I personally think our employers are a lot more willing to have our students, as far as hiring them or talking to us, because [they] are smaller, some family-owned businesses…I do feel like that's a benefit of being more in a rural setting.

One participant said that these family-owned businesses were places that provided consistent opportunities for IPSE students to work and intern but expressed concern that the ease of placement with these businesses made it less likely that students would reach out to other places that might better fit their goals and interests. Another participant explained how anytime they did fundraising events, local businesses would come to donate items, time, and money and said, “I don't know if it's a small-town type thing, but [businesses are] very active [in supporting us].”

The creative element of the rural community character was seen in how participants reported collaborating to use funding and existing resources in ways that maximized the services they could offer and provided support through channels not traditionally used. One participant explained a possible reason for this creativity, “Well, I think it's interesting that in rural areas, we don't always have the extra funding, so we tend to try those sort of things first, run with what we have.” This comment alludes to limited resources as both a limitation but also the impetus for a great strength and key element of rural community character; creativity and a commitment to make things
Limited Resources. Limited resources were noted as a significant barrier to collaboration in rural areas by half of the study participants (k = 5). Participants identified several ways that resources are limited in their rural areas, (a) limited professional staff, (b) caseworkers with extremely high caseloads, (c) a lack of financial resources, and (d) difficulties finding direct care staff. One participant explained how the lack of professional staff impacts her area;

…it's hard, because in our rural school district, we have two "big" [districts] and...all the other ones share people, so there may be three school high schools, but they share one special ed person, so it makes it hard to get that person because they're driving around everywhere.

One participant explained her difficulties in collaborating with her campus disability resource center. She said that her disability resource center did not have enough resources to support non-matriculated students. Another participant described her local employment specialists’ caseloads like this, “[We have two] in our area that have hundreds on their caseload.” Limited funding of State-run programs for people with disabilities was identified as a significant barrier by one participant.

I hate to say this because I don't want it ever to be all about money, but I think it's funding, I really do. I think if [our State VR] had more funding, they would be more likely to partner. [Right now] it usually does come down to [they] can do it cheaper.

Programs reported difficulties finding student workers and noted that community service
providers were also struggling to find workers. One participant explained that, “The hardest thing that we're struggling with…is finding student workers that that's our biggest struggle.”

In addition to the difficulty programs face in hiring staff they also reported high rates of turnover. One participant explained:

I’ve gone through different [program] staff through the years. …we have a brand new…assistant teacher this year too. It seems like every couple [of] years as new staff come in, we have to start over in different ways and build relationships over again…

Staff turnover that the university and within community service providers was also mentioned. One participant explained her need to keep re-educating those at the administrative level of her campus, “…we've had a lot of changes in administration so it's starting over and educating them [again].” Another participant explained that turnover with their community mental health provider might be explained by low pay and the position being seen as a “steppingstone” job. These high turnover rates mean her IPSE students are required to change workers every few years.

The last limitation of a rural setting addressed by participants was transportation. One participant explained how a lack of transportation limits students’ ability to participate in certain programs. She explained that career tech centers are only located at a few schools in the area, and the school her students partner with does not have one. She further explained that most students who attend these other career tech centers drive themselves there, and her students generally do not have that option, nor do they have
public transportation available. “…we have no public transit in our community at all, none, so we have to rely on our Independent Living Center. They have a little bus.”

Another participant reported having public transportation but explained that the bus stops running at 5:00 pm and does not run on the weekends, significantly limiting the places and times that their students could work. However, this participant was able to find a creative solution with some community resource providers and noted it only as a “potential barrier” for her students. Another participant explained that their public transportation only served a portion of their area and often did not go to the places her students needed to access.

**Opportunities to Improve Inclusion Quality**

The rural IPSE program directors in this study highlighted three main areas that could be targeted to improve the quality of inclusion experienced by their students. These include (a) resolving family concerns, (b) preparation for IPSE Programs, and (c) avoiding separate processes when possible. Participants reported that inclusion was their primary motivation for collaboration and an important benefit of collaboration, they also gave recommendations and observations about how to improve collaborative practice to achieve their goal of inclusion.

**Resolving Family Concerns.** Resolving family concerns and explaining how their programs function was noted by four participants as necessary for improving inclusion quality. One participant explained that during the applicant interview process, her program interviews parents and students and makes sure that the expectations parents have to match the goals and supports of their program. This participant warned that when
expectations are not in line, “you can get parents who destroy relationships that you’re trying to build.” Another participant reported that she worked with parents on how employment during and after the program may impact their Social Security Disability Insurance and helped them connect with benefit counselors who could help them.

Two participants talked about parent concerns regarding their student’s level of independence in the program and if they were really ready for those changes. They reported that parents are often concerned about the level of support available to their student and what that will look like when they graduate. Participants described the process of helping parents and students connect with adult services in their areas and making sure the student's independence and student safety are supported. One of these participants described one way her program has tried to educate parents and resolve some of these concerns. “We’re trying to educate our families. We have family meetings each semester to navigate them through the adult service world, and I think that’s helped a lot.”

**Preparation for IPSE Programs.** One area of improvement identified by four participants related to the preparation of secondary students with ID for life after high school. One participant put it this way, “the school has to produce students who are competent. Students with skills, like technology. Students who are also trained and they love what they do. …that will make it easier when they go out there to the employers.” Another participant lamented that unlike their same-age peers, students in special education are often not offered Career and Technical Education courses and felt that students with ID are missing out on opportunities to participate in internships and build
the needed technical and social skills to be successful in college and the workforce.

Two other participants noted that sexual education is often either not presented at all to students in special education or it is presented in a general education setting where the vocabulary and speed of presentation make the information basically inaccessible to students with ID. Additionally, many of the students that come to their programs from their local school districts lack basic independent living skills. One participant put it this way

… [we need to] promote skills being developed so that students are prepared for our postsecondary education program… Often times…we have students, who may not have ever received sexual education, because they’ve been in a self-contained classroom and they’re often forgotten about. Or they haven’t ridden the local or public transportation system. They don’t know how to mail an envelope or buy a stamp… Some of those basic life skills that our students need to have in order to be successful, to be independent, and be members of society.

Another issue raised by one participant is that of graduating students with diplomas instead of alternate diplomas or certificates of completion. When a student does not graduate with a diploma there are complications for some programs when it comes to fully including their students on campus. One participant explained:

…they don’t meet entry requirements for the university so they’re auditing courses and so their audit doesn’t really calculate a GPA, formally, we have a way to do GPA through our program, but we don’t have a formal GPA on record, so that makes it really hard for them to really access every service on campus.
One participant offered a recommendation for improving student readiness. She has worked with her school districts to encourage parents to get Pre-ETS started in high school to help students access existing resources and expand opportunities for them to develop the work skills and independent living skills they will need to be successful in a postsecondary education program and employment.

**Shared Processes.** The most frequently identified recommendation for the improvement of student inclusion was related to created shared processes. Many of the barriers to collaboration mentioned by participants came from working alongside rather than within other programs and systems. This was seen in discussions of conflicting policies, in the need to continually re-educate administrators and other staff, and in the difficulties with securing funding. The only time having a separate process was identified as positive was when it came to the admission of students into the program. One participant reported that their separate admissions process was essential to ensuring a good fit with students, parents, and the program. This participant did however stress the importance of having key stakeholders from campus be a part of that process to it became a shared process in some important ways. She explained:

…we make that decision [applicant admission] from the very beginning together.

So, they know who the applicants are, and they know kind of who they’re vetting through the lens of their own eyes, like for the residence halls, so we don’t actually make the decisions internally in our program. Which is good in a way, because then we can go back to those people and kind of have a common ground because you’ve involved them from the very beginning.
The admissions process was identified as an area of confusion by two other participants. They explained that their students sometimes use the wrong links to register, and they have to collaborate with the admission office to make sure their students get in the system correctly.

Two other programs talked about the challenges that having non-matriculated students cause. One of these participants said, “…we haven’t had access to disability services because [our students] don’t pay [any student] fees. …With the title nine thing we’re trying to figure out where some boundaries are since they are matriculated.” There are legal and ethical concerns about how much students who are not matriculated can be included in campus activities and what services they should be afforded. This same participant referenced several court cases related to these issues being considered at the time of our interview.

Another issue that one participant brought up regarding those students who are non-matriculated related to working with professors and administrators to allow their students to audit courses from the general catalog. This participant explained that their students had, with permission from individual professors, been “sitting in” on some classes and participating to the degree they could, but when administrators found out what they were doing, they were told that they could no longer do that. This participant also reported that because her students were not getting credit for their classes, they were not able to generate a GPA within the college system with made it difficult for them to access some services on campus. Another participant explained that because her IPSE students are non-matriculated the administration has concerns about allowing them to
participate in campus activities due to liability, they are not technically “students” and therefore are not covered by the college insurance policy. The administration was also concerned about asking their staff and faculty to support IPSE students when they have not been trained to do so.

Federal, State, and institutional rules, regulations, and policies were identified as barriers to creating shared processes. As noted in the Using Existing Resources section of this paper, several participants experienced difficulties working with their local and State VR agencies because the individual counselors interpreted Federal policies differently. Campus policies were also proven to be barriers for some of the participants in this study. One participant explained that she received pushback from her college’s central campus administration, who told her that her program did not meet policy requirements. When asked about barriers to collaboration on campus, one participant said, “…rules and regulations, some barriers that you hit that are really ridiculous.”

One participant raised another issue with having separate processes related to collaborating with on-campus services and programs. She explained that a “weird overlap” exists between the program’s services and what their disability resource center can provide. This is related in part to her students being non-matriculated but also to her desire not to “overburden” campus employees with her students’ needs. This harkens back to the give-and-take relationship discussed previously in the Keys to Successful Collaboration section of this paper. Another participant spoke of the “red tape” and lack of control that can come with using separate processes. She explained that part of her difficulty in hiring and keeping staff is that the funding for her staff comes through a
community mental health provider and they require all of those being paid through their funding to undergo a rigorous training program. The training includes several modules and is laborious to complete. Many who apply, start the training, but “bail out” before completing it.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to describe the collaborative practices of rural IPSE program directors. A comprehensive review of the literature detailing the importance of postsecondary education for students with ID in rural areas and the critical role that collaboration plays in improving post-high school outcomes for students with ID was provided in Chapter 2, and the methodology was detailed in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 presented the results of the analysis of ten interviews conducted with rural IPSE program directors regarding their collaborative experiences. This chapter will apply the results of the analysis to the transition framework presented by Trainor et al. (2020), link the findings to the literature, discuss implications for practice, and outline the limitations of the study.

Application of Transition Framework

Culture

This study addresses the culture layer of the transition framework (Trainor et al., 2020) by targeting rural IPSE program directors. The findings of this study support the work done by Erickson et al. (2018), who described rural areas in the US as places of “persistent poverty” (p.22) where a lack of diverse human capital, social isolation, transportation issues, and limited job opportunities combined with cultural factors not yet fully understood to create barriers unique to rural areas. The community character described by participants in this study showed the impact of social capital, community resources, and employment opportunities on IPSE students. Some of the impacts were
positive, such as the willingness of family-owned businesses to employ or support internships for students with disabilities. This element could partly explain the finding by Baer et al. (2003) that being from a rural school district was a positive predictor of employment. One of the negative impacts identified in this study and supported in the existing literature (Carter et al., 2020; Sheehay & Black, 2003) was the reality of having fewer opportunities for employment-related to the career goals of students with disabilities, which could indicate that, while jobs are available, they may not be the jobs IPSE students want after graduation.

Additionally, the lack of qualified professionals and direct care staff both on campuses and within local community service providers showed the impact of lower social capital in the rural areas in which these participants live. The lack of qualified staff in rural areas has been well established in existing literature (Carter et al., 2020; Harley et al., 2018; Kominiak, 2018; Landon et al., 2019; Showalter et al., 2019). While some of the difficulties of programs in rural areas may mimic the issues experienced by program directors in urban/suburban areas, since this study focused on rural programs, it is impossible to tease out the cultural differences that are truly unique to rural programs.

Family influences were likewise seen as both positive and negative. Family concerns about losing important benefits and fears about letting their children leave home hindered efforts to expand IPSE programs and impacted recruitment. On the other hand, those employers, political leaders, and community members who have family members with disabilities were more likely to support IPSE programs financially and with their time and services. The element of time was not directly discussed by participants in
relation to culture.

**Services and Supports**

The services and supports layer of this transition framework (Trainor et al., 2020) was addressed by participant responses related to relationship building, working with school districts, and using existing resources. For the rural IPSE program directors in this study, a combination of services and supports that can move across the developmental course of a student’s life was the recommended best practice. Building and maintaining relationships both on- and off-campus was identified as a key to having collaborations that promote inclusion. This recommendation seems to support and expand the findings of Harley et al. (2018), Jacobson (2017), Kominiak (2018), and Landon et al. (2019) who found that rural schools have often turned to collaboration with other agencies to provide needed services and supports. These results expand this finding by adding the element of time and the goal of inclusion, collaborations should be based not only on immediate needs but should consider the lifespan of each student and promote the highest level of inclusion possible. A recommendation made by participants that was not previously identified in the literature review of this paper was the reduction of separate processes in application procedures and service delivery to maximize the impact of services offered and reduce overlaps and gaps in service provision.

Study participants also spoke of the need to improve the preparation of secondary special education students for participation in higher education and the workforce. This recommendation supports the findings of Harley et al. (2018) who found that students with disabilities in rural areas often do not receive transition services that meet federal
and state quality standards, which leaves these students without the skills they need to be successful in postsecondary education or employment. Similarly, Lee and Taylor (2021) found that an absence of effective collaboration between IPSE staff and high school staff led to a lack of understanding about the expectations of IPSE programs and left potential IPSE students without the practical skills they need to participate in such programs. Additionally, participants in this study reported limited offerings in academic coursework and extracurricular activities and a lack of access to supports that would facilitate independent living options which were findings reported by Sheehay and Black (2003).

All of the agencies that Harley et al. (2018) and Ryan (2019) identified as potential partners in pooling “knowledge, ideas, and workloads” (Harley et al., 2018, p. 666) were also identified by the participants in this study: (a) state VR agencies, (b) Centers for Independent Living, (c) public health departments, (d) community mental health centers, (d) social services, (e) school districts, (f) local colleges or technical schools and other institutions of higher education, (g) community leaders, (h) church leaders, (i) advocacy groups, and (h) community members connected to individuals with disabilities. The findings of this study add to the literature by detailing which individuals and groups rural IPSE program directors are collaborating with on-campus and providing insight into what makes those collaborations successful.

Participants in this study described collaboration similarly to Noonan et al. (2012), where relationships between all parties (a) belong to one system, (b) engage in frequent communication characterized by mutual trust, and (c) consensus is reached on all decisions. Additionally, all of Noonan et al.’s (2012) capacities and two of the four
strategies were seen in the actions and recommendations of study participants. The capacities seen were: (a) variety of partnerships, (b) relationships, (c) time together, (d) shared vision, and (e) shared leadership. The strategies seen were joint planning and sharing information.

Levers

Participant responses show that the levers layer of the transition framework (Trainor et al., 2020) can be a powerful one. Limited resources, lack of funding, and complicated laws and policies were all discussed by the participants in this study. Limited resources and a lack of funding were previously identified as necessary in rural areas by Erickson et al. (2018), Harmon (2017), and Sheehay & Black (2003). One of the most significant issues raised by the rural IPSE program directors in this study was their relationship with VR offices. The ambiguity of Federal policies relating to both Pre-ETS and CTPs resulted in highly variable experiences with students accessing funding for IPSE programs. Given the link to poverty and disability (Erickson et al., 2018), it is essential that Federal policies regarding services for students with disabilities be clear enough to be applied consistently across all regions of the nation so that as many students as possible have access to these critical services. Gou et al. (2019) recommended embedding alerts into state administrative processes and service systems would ensure a greater continuity of supports for young adults with disabilities, the findings of this study support this recommendation. As Lee et al. (2018) explained:

Despite Congress’ clear intent to focus on interagency collaboration in WIOA and HEOA, a lack of alignment in the implementation of WIOA, HEOA, and IDEA is
causing students with intellectual disability in postsecondary programs in some states to be denied the VR and IDEA funded services needed to access IPSE as a pathway to achieving competitive integrated employment. (p.15)

This layer suggested a connection to the time element of the transition framework with participant responses showing how accessing Pre-ETS services as secondary students positively impacted the preparation and success of those students in IPSE programs which in turn impacted the level of independence they experienced as college students and graduates.

Existing literature (Lee & Taylor, 2021; Noonan et al., 2012) and the results of this study support the development of programs from within the system of higher education and promote the use of existing resources as well as the aligning of policies and procedures early in the development of programs to ensure services are provided consistently and efficiently to as many students with disabilities as possible. Novak (2015) called for developing a national policy framework that would support integrated employment and the redirection of state funds to promote those opportunities for youth with disabilities. The results of this study would expand this call to include options for postsecondary education for youth with disabilities in that national policy framework and the use of state funding.

The findings of this study also support the Think College standards-based conceptual framework for inclusive higher education presented by Grigal et al. (2018). This framework calls for alignment with college systems and practices as well as coordination and collaboration with key stakeholders and providers, with two of the
ultimate outcomes being campus membership and academic access, which are elements of inclusion identified by participants in this study. This framework also incorporates sustainability and ongoing evaluation as cornerstone elements. The participants in this study demonstrated how sustainability was made possible in some cases by integrating their programs into the existing college systems and how outcome data was needed to build relationships with key partners.

**Quality of Life**

The quality-of-life layer of the transition framework (Trainor et al., 2020) was addressed by the participants’ focus on inclusion and independence. The main goal for the majority of the rural IPSE program directors in this study was to promote the inclusion of their students both on-campus and in their communities at large. This required the directors’ focus on the development of independent living skills and on collaborating with partners who could create opportunities for the practice of these skills in real-world settings. This layer showed the most vital connection to the time element of the transition framework with the focus on preparation and practice for the future.

**Implications**

The results of this study can be applied to the development of new rural IPSE programs and the improvement of collaborative practices in existing rural IPSE programs. The rural IPSE program directors in this study identified several keys to establishing and maintaining collaborative relationships on- and off-campus. Findings suggest that rural communities have strong local networks that can provide support for the creation of new programs and for establishing relationships with local employers for
internships and job placements. Rural IPSE directors may find serving on community councils and being involved in local advocacy agencies will provide them with connections to key stakeholders and facilitate collaboration that can benefit their students.

One promising area to focus collaboration efforts with is local school districts. Rural IPSE program directors may find that partnering with their local school districts opens access to funding and allows them to educate their secondary schools about how best to prepare students for their IPSE program. With resources limited in many rural secondary schools, a partnership with a rural IPSE program may be mutually beneficial. Secondary schools could access IPSE course materials and staff while IPSE programs increase their recruitment efforts and explore potential braided funding streams for post-high students. Additionally, findings suggest that, while it may be difficult, establishing a relationship with local VR offices may provide needed funding for some students. While working with local and state VR offices, rural IPSE directors may find ways to navigate Federal and State policies and find creative funding sources or find ways to use other community service providers in their area to support their students during internships, in the dorms, and during social and independent living activities.

For those rural IPSE program directors looking to start a new rural IPSE program, the findings of this study suggest that working with university administrators and other key stakeholders (admissions, student organizations, resident life, etc.) early in the process of building the program may be beneficial. Developing a strong mission statement and making sure it aligns with the mission of the IHE you are hoping to work with may also be helpful in gaining administrative support and securing funding. When
hiring staff and student workers, it may be beneficial to consider those candidates who understand and embrace the program mission and are committed to putting it into action as they work with students and those they interact with both in the community and on campus.

Additionally, creating an education program about what your program does, why it is important, and how it benefits the campus community and the larger community may help ease concerns and open doors for students to participate more fully on campus and in the community. Having an existing education program will allow the IPSE director or program staff to educate faculty, staff, potential employers, parents, and other stakeholders about the program.

Limitations and Future Research

There are a few limitations of this study that should be acknowledged. All of the participants in this study were from rural areas, so it was not possible to make any comparisons about similarities or differences in urban, suburban, and rural areas. It is possible that the results of this study are transferable to other settings and that specific experiences are common across all settings. Still, the scope of this study did not allow the researcher to explore those possibilities. Another limitation relates to the sampling method used. A convenience sample that relied on participants making time to reply to emails or engage with a social media post may have excluded potential participants who were too busy to participate. Those who engaged with the social media post used an anonymous link which meant if they did not provide contact information, there was no way for the researcher to follow up with them.
Additionally, a few interviews garnered sub-optimal responses to the interview questions (i.e., the interview that lasted 12 minutes). Another limitation was that some of the participants reported having a large number of students in their programs (three participants reported that their programs had 1000+ students which were spread across various campuses) and while their experiences may have been unique in some ways from the other seven participants exploring those differences was outside the scope of this study. Finally, this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have impacted the response rate.

Future research is needed to investigate the differences and similarities in needs and practices across urban, suburban, and rural areas and consider how demographic characteristics of students, directors, and campuses may impact those needs and practices. Additionally, more needs to be done to understand how policy is being interpreted and implemented with respect to IPSE programs and transition-aged students in general so areas of disparity can be addressed and clarified. Finally, larger-scale studies need to be done to allow for representative samples and longitudinal investigations of program outcomes and the impact of the practices recommended by the literature and supported by this study.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe the collaborative practices of rural IPSE program directors. The findings support the existing literature related to effective collaborative practices, the needs and strengths of rural communities, and the growing body of literature regarding IPSE program development.
The findings of this study also support the use of the Trainor et al. (2020) Transition Framework and the Think College standards-based conceptual framework for inclusive higher education presented by Grigal et al. (2018). These frameworks appear to provide the complexity needed to explore many of the relationships and factors that interact during an individual’s life and create and evaluate policies and practices that can impact the effectiveness of IPSE programs and other programs, such as VR, that support people with disabilities.

The participants in this study described their experiences collaborating with individuals and organizations on- and off-campus as mostly positive but did identify several barriers related to their rural settings and the complexities of working within several policy settings (i.e., institution-specific, federal, state, and local agencies, etc.). The primary motivation for their efforts to build collaborative relationships was to improve the quality of inclusion that their students experienced on campus, in work settings, and their communities at large. Study participants offered several recommendations for strengthening collaborative practices and removing barriers specific to their rural settings.

Overall, the current data on the impact of IPSE programs on students with ID is positive; not only are graduates experiencing higher competitive employment rates, but they are also experiencing higher levels of independent living and social engagement (Grigal, 2019; Grigal & Papay, 2018; Schillaci et al., 2021; Vinoski Thomas et al., 2020). As IPSE programs increase and more of their graduates enter the workforce, the impact on the quality of life for graduates should be studied in greater detail. It will be necessary
for federal research funding to continue as IPSE programs begin to establish credentialing requirements and standards for measuring outcomes.

While there is still work to do at the Federal and State level regarding the alignment of policies and procedures to better support students as they transition from secondary education to postsecondary education and employment, there have been many important accomplishments over the last several years in IPSE program funding and growth. The passage of HEOA (2008) and the changes made to secondary education for students with disabilities by WIOA (2014), combined with the work done by Think College, has led to the expansion of IPSE programs from just 27 TPSID programs in the first round of federal funding to over 300 total IPSE program as of 2021 (Think College, 2021). Additionally, the creation of the CTP credential has opened doors for students to access federal financial aid. Some states have been able to secure VR funding for their students, which further offsets program costs (Grigal et al., 2021). As opportunities for students with ID to participate in postsecondary education continue to expand and access in rural areas increase, more people with ID will be able to access competitive employment, independent living, and social inclusion, which may have the potential to positively impact their overall quality of life.
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https://www2.ed.gov/programs/tpsid/index.html


APPENDICES

Appendix A

Demographic Survey

1. I have reviewed the informed consent document and agree to participate in the current study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw my participation at any time.

2. Are you an Inclusive Postsecondary Education Program (IPSE) Director in an area with less than 50,000 people? (Qualtrics ended the survey if a respondent marked no.)

3. How long have you been the director of your inclusive postsecondary education program? (Must be at least one year, Qualtrics ended the survey if a respondent entered a number less than one year).
   a. >1 year
   b. 1-3 years
   c. 4-6 years
   d. <6 years.

4. How old are you?

5. Please select your gender identity.
   a. Male
   b. Female
   c. Non-binary/third gender
   d. Prefer not to say
e. Other, please specify

6. Please select your race.
   a. Hispanic or Latino
   b. Black or African American
   c. White or Caucasian
   d. Asian
   e. American Indian or Alaska Native
   f. Other, please specify

7. Please select your ethnicity.
   a. Hispanic/Latino
   b. Not Hispanic/Latino

8. What is your highest level of education?
   a. Bachelor’s Degree
   b. Master’s Degree
   c. Doctorate Degree

9. What is your degree in (e.g., special education, rehabilitation counseling, etc.)?

10. How long have you worked with students with intellectual disabilities?

11. How long have you been involved with IPSE programs?

12. Have you had any other roles besides director?
   a. Please list your other roles and how long you were in them.

13. How long has your program existed?
   a. How many students are currently enrolled in your program?
14. Are you currently funded by a TPSID grant?

15. Which organizations, departments, or service providers do you collaborate with on campus? **Set of checkboxes**
   a. Disability Resource Center
   b. Student Mental Health Providers
   c. Housing
   d. Academic Counseling
   e. Scholarships Office
   f. Administration
   g. University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities
   h. Admissions Office
   i. Specific Academic Departments, please specify
   j. Campus Recruiters
   k. Other, please specify

16. Which organizations, departments, or service providers do you collaborate with in the community? **Set of checkboxes**
   a. State VR agencies
   b. Workforce services
   c. Centers for Independent Living
   d. Public health departments
   e. Community mental health centers
   f. Social services
g. School districts
h. Local colleges or technical schools
i. Community leaders
j. Church leaders
k. Community members connected to individuals with disabilities
l. Others, please specify

17. Would you like an opportunity to engage in an interview based on your experiences collaborating as a rural IPSE director?
Interview Protocol

1. How did you first become involved with your current program?

2. Which of the organizations, departments, or service providers that support your rural IPSE students with intellectual disabilities on campus do you collaborate with most frequently?
   a. How were these collaborative relationships established?

3. Please tell me about a collaborative relationship on campus that you feel has been beneficial to your students with intellectual disabilities. Why was it beneficial to them?

4. Please tell me about a collaborative relationship on campus that has been difficult to establish or maintain.
   a. What are the main barriers you have faced in trying to collaborate with organizations, departments, or service providers on campus?

5. Please name for me each of the organizations and individuals you collaborate with in the community to support your students with intellectual disabilities and run your program.

6. Which of the organizations, departments, or service providers that support your rural IPSE students with intellectual disabilities on campus do you collaborate with most frequently?
   a. How were these collaborative relationships established?
7. Please tell me about a collaborative relationship in the community that you feel has been beneficial to your students with intellectual disabilities. Why was it beneficial to them?

8. Please tell me about a collaborative relationship in the community that has been difficult to establish or maintain.
   a. What are the main barriers you have faced in trying to collaborate with organizations, departments, or service providers in the community?

9. What do you think is needed to have collaborative relationships with organizations, departments, or services providers that benefit students with intellectual disabilities in rural IPSE programs?

10. What advice about establishing collaborative relationships would you give to someone starting a new rural IPSE program?
Appendix B

Tables

Table 1

*Quality of life model from Albroz (2018)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual aspect</th>
<th>Contextual aspect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy: Self-actualization</td>
<td>Education/Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspiration/personal development</td>
<td>- Freedom to investigate/research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-actualization</td>
<td>- Access to “education”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Employing personal talents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Following own interests</td>
<td>Employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-realization</td>
<td>- Access to fulfilling occupation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Having self-awareness/self-knowledge</td>
<td>Personal Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self determination</td>
<td>- Support to pursue aspirations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Pursuing own choices/goals/aspirations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-regulation</td>
<td>- Maintaining efforts to</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
reach goals

Environmental “ease”

- Gaining

pleasure/comfort from

one’s surroundings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status: Esteem</th>
<th>Self esteem</th>
<th>Rights/norms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stable positive evaluation of self/competence</td>
<td>Freedom to:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perceived high reputation/prestige</td>
<td>-Speak/act/defend oneself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-respect</td>
<td>Perception personal adequacy/competence</td>
<td>Access to:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-worth/perceived usefulness in the world</td>
<td>-Justice/Fairness/Honesty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Status</td>
<td>Accepted community member</td>
<td>Social facilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Valued community member</td>
<td>Action groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Based on common pursuits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychosocial well-being: Love and</td>
<td>“Roots”/cultural/ethnic/social</td>
<td>Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communality</td>
<td></td>
<td>Interpersonal Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>belonging</strong></td>
<td>group</td>
<td>facilities/opportunities/freedoms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Shared identity**
for social interaction

**Companionship**
Positive (mutually beneficial)

**Shared life experience**
supportive interactions with/in:

**Intimacy**
- Personally defined

**Attachment [to**
“nuclear family”

**caregiver(s)—child]**
- Extended family

**Partnership Sexual**
- Friends/Acquaintances

**relationship**
- Neighborhood

**Procreation**
- Nation/state (recognized member vs. outcast)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Foundational well-being: Safety and Survival</strong></th>
<th><strong>Physiological well-being</strong></th>
<th><strong>Material well-being</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nutrition</strong></td>
<td><strong>Food, water, other essential consumables</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rest</strong></td>
<td><strong>Shelter</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hygiene</strong></td>
<td><strong>Facilities: cooking/hygiene</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Activity</strong></td>
<td><strong>rest/travel</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Safety well-being**
Financial
- Access to sufficient funds

**Protection (from harm)**
- Opportunity to earn

**Predictability/dependability**

**Reserves (insure against unknown)**

**Familiar environments**
**Personal Safety and Well-being**
Guidance/moral code (e.g., religious/spiritual philosophy)  

Home  
- Stable/Secure  

Community  
- Law and order  
- Opportunities for activity/health support  

Environment  
- Benign
Table 2

Noonan et al. (2012) Levels of Collaboration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No Integration</th>
<th>Networking</th>
<th>Cooperation</th>
<th>Coordination</th>
<th>Coalition</th>
<th>Collaboration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No activity</td>
<td>Parties were aware of the other organization(s), had loosely defined roles, little communication, and all decisions were made independently by the separate parties.</td>
<td>Parties provide information to each other, have somewhat defined roles, have formal communication, and all decisions are made independently by the separate parties.</td>
<td>Parties share information and resources, have defined roles, engage in frequent communication, and have some shared decision making.</td>
<td>Parties share ideas, share resources, engage in frequent and prioritized communication, all members have a vote in decision making.</td>
<td>Parties belong to one system, engage in frequent communication characterized by mutual trust, and consensus is reached on all decisions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 3

**Demographics of Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>$n$</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White of Caucasian</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level of Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate Degree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Time as Program Director</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-3 years</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-6 years</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 6 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4

*Program Characteristics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Program Existence</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-4 years</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-10 years</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 10 years</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Students</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-20</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-40</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000+</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TPSID Program</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability Resource Center</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Mental Health Providers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholarship’s office</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Academic Departments</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admissions office</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus Recruiters</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University Centers for Excellence in Developmental</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Counseling</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek Life</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Organizations</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Center for Service Learning and Community Engagement</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Center for Career Development</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintenance Staff</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Librarian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6

Off-Campus Collaborations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State Vocational Rehabilitation</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Health Departments</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centers for Independent Living</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Districts</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Leaders</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Services</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Members Connected to Specific Students w/Disabilities</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Mental Health Providers/Centers</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church Leaders</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Colleges or Technical Schools</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative Support Type</td>
<td>Example quotes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions with students</td>
<td>“I will say our President is a huge fan of this whole initiative, so he did welcome videos for every single freshman coming in this semester. And he ended up, including any of our program freshmen too, got their own specialized video, and so, and then he found room on his floor of the administrative building for [our]classrooms. He's making philanthropy do a lot of work for us, so I should mention he is an amazing advocate and wow what a blessing.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“And our students were given our Chancellor, the new Chancellor brochures, like the first day she was there, so you kind of got to build it up and that way it we were putting students in the provost office to work like as part of their work experience so they wouldn't forget about us so it's good that it's small but you also kind of strategically plan, some of those things when you came.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First point of contact</td>
<td>“The Dean, you know, obviously, that was the first person we had to go to, and we were writing the grant…”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“[The university] came in committed to making it happen no matter what. The president…reached out to our organization, he heard about what we're doing at [another campus] and felt like it was, it really fit with the mission at [his campus] and so then he connected me with the provost.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative Support Type</td>
<td>Example quotes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part of a team</td>
<td>“We built it from inside the university and so everybody came to the table to talk about it to figure out what they wanted to say what they wanted to do. And so, I feel like ours was built within the actual university so anytime we need something we just kind of call on those key stakeholders that we collaborated with at the very beginning and said hey let's try this program and so you know we meet with them every year to review applicants because they're part of our Admissions Steering Committee. And so, we have about 40, 40 key stakeholders throughout our university from the registrar to the director of disability or office of accessibility resources a financial aid director, we have a lot of administrators faculty that have taught our students graduates of the program their parents some family members. We have graduate assistants, we have people from our support centers on campus so are writing and learning Center and academic Tutoring. We have our people from our advising Center we have people from educational outreach who come in and come together, because they award our certificate at the end of the Program.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common vision with the program</td>
<td>“…our president of the Community College he really has an inclusive vision, and you know, he really makes us feel that we are important.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C

Figures

Figure 1. Trainor et al. (2020) Framework to guide future research in transition.
Figure 2. Creswell & Poth’s (2018, p. 217) template for coding a phenomenological study.
Figure 3. Map of Themes

**Keys to Successful Collaboration**
- Organizational Commitment to Mission
- Utilizing Existing Resources and Relationships

**Motivation for Collaborating**
- Inclusion
- Building Partnerships to Develop Future Professionals
- Finding Employment and Internship Sites
- Funding
- Individual Student Interests

**Opportunities to Improve Quality of Inclusion**
- Resolve Family Concerns
- Secondary Education Preparation
- Focus on Shared Processes

**Factors of Rural Communities**
- Community Character
- Rural Limitations

**Collaboration in Rural IPSE Programs**
CURRICULUM VITA

Elizabeth Dimond

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Utah State University Eastern
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Current Employment: Graduate Assistant, Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation, Utah State University.
Director of Aggies Elevated Eastern at Utah State University Eastern

EDUCATION-

Ph.D. 2022 Utah State University, Logan, UT. Ph.D. in Disability Studies. Department of Special Education & Rehabilitation.

Specialty: Transition

Dissertation: Collaborative practices of rural inclusive postsecondary education program (IPSE) directors.

M.S. 2009 University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT.

Major: Family Ecology
Thesis: A cross-national comparison of policies and attitudes toward the disabled: The effects of deinstitutionalization.

B.S. 2005 University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT.

Major: Human Development & Family Studies

**Endorsements/Certifications:**

Qualified Intellectual Disabilities Professional (QIDP)

Acquired Brain Injury Support Coordinator (ABISC)

**DISTINCTIONS/HONORS**

Omicron Nu Honor Society
Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society

**TEACHING**

Teacher of Record:

Fall 2020 - REH 6260 Human Growth and Development

Fall 2021 – REH 6260 Human Growth and Development

Teaching Assistant:

Summer 2020- REH 6130 Counseling Skills

**PUBLICATIONS**

**Peer Reviewed Publications**


**Manuscripts in Review**

Dimond, E. (In Review). Preparing Inclusive Postsecondary Education Programs to Meet the Mental Health Needs of Students Through Evidence-Based Practice: A review of the literature.

**CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS**


**FUNDED GRANT ACTIVITIES**


$1,883,310.00 I worked on the program description for Eagles Elevated and provided edits of other sections of the document as asked.
**UN-FUNDED GRANT ACTIVITIES**

McKnight-Lizotte, M. (PI), Landon, T. J. (Co-PI), & Gerald, M. (Co-PI). (2020-2025). Rehabilitation Training: Rehabilitation Long-Term Training Grant. U.S. Department of Education. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services Administration. $1,000,000.00. I worked on the literature review for the grant application.

**EMPLOYMENT HISTORY**

**Support Coordinator, Support Coordination Services of Utah**

**September 2014 – August 2019**

Responsibilities: Monthly on-site visits, monthly quality service checks, monthly report logs, phone calls from providers, individuals and parents. Responsible for follow-up with medical, dental and financial issues for clients. Advocacy and linking to community resource, problem-solving, mediation, and creation of individualized service plans to address current needs and abilities.

**Support Coordinator, State of Utah Division of Services For People With Disabilities**

**May 2006 – April 2007**

Supports Intensity Scale (SIS) manager

Responsibilities: Monthly on-site visits, monthly quality service checks, monthly report logs, phone calls from providers, individuals and parents. Responsible for follow-up with medical, dental and financial issues for each client. Advocacy and linking to community resource, problem-solving, mediation, and creation of individualized service plans to address current needs and abilities. As SIS manager I received special training on the
administration of the main assessment used to determine eligibility for waiver supports
and was available to help others administer it successfully.

Teaching Assistant/Research Assistant, University of Utah

August 2005– May 2006

Responsibilities: Finding funding sources for research, direct data collection, data entry,
proofreading scholarly journal articles before submission, organizing references in
EndNote software. Grading and proctoring exams, answering student emails and
questions, proofreading assignments and exams, presenting exam results graphically,
tracking attendance and grades in Excel.

Consultant/Advocate, Tri-Connections


Awards: Tri-excellence Award

Responsibilities: Assisted adults with disabilities in daily living skills, job skill
development, job placement, community access, transporting clients, etc. Assisted
children with disabilities and their families in life skills, play therapy, reading and math
skills, behavior program creation and implantation, policies and procedures for reaching
behavior plan goals, supervise and train new employees, etc. Approached HR
departments about possible job placements for clients emphasizing how employing our
clients will benefit the company, our client and the community. All responsibilities
required extensive documentation, record keeping and reporting, including risk
assessments and family/environmental dynamics assessments
**PROFESSIONAL SERVICE**

**University Service**

2019-2020 – Internship to review and improve the application and admission processes of an Inclusive Higher Education Program (Aggies Elevated, Utah State University)

**Local Professional Organization Service**

Member of the Utah Transition Action Team (since 2019)

Board Member for Active Re-Entry in Price (since 2021)

Board Member for Utah Statewide Independent Living Council (since 2021) – Serve as secretary, a member of the executive committee, finance committee, and the marketing committee.

Reviewer for the Developmental Disabilities Network Journal – One article reviewed in 2022

Reviewer for the Journal of Inclusive Postsecondary Education – One article reviewed in 2022

**Consultation and Community Service**

2021 – Collaboration with Utah State Board of Education and Utah Brain Injury Council to update resources for transition teams and university disability resource centers.

**COMMUNITY SERVICE/ VOLUNTEERING**

June 2006 – January 2020

Volunteer Teacher and Aid

I have served as a parent volunteer in the Carbon School District and Logan School District helping students with reading, math, handwriting and other skills. I taught the
“Meet the Masters” art curriculum for four years in K-4th grade classrooms in Creekview Elementary. I also serve as a volunteer teacher in my church and have taught every age group from toddlers to adults.

June 2017 – June 2019 and June 2021 - Current

Community Cares

I serve on the board of the Community Cares Committee. We provide a free Christmas dinner to every resident of Carbon County who would otherwise not have a meal that day. We do fundraising, advertising, and of course the organizing of the event. My responsibility on the day of the dinner was the activities for the children.

December 2002– July 2004

Volunteer, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints - Singapore Mission

Responsibilities: Worked teaching sign language to a local congregation to accommodate two deaf members, provided service at a leper colony and other varied service activities among diverse populations.

Spring 2001

Volunteer, University of Utah

Responsibilities: Study abroad service project designed to help students understand the culture, religion, politics and lifestyle of India’s varied population. Worked in a very small rural village to build a school. Taught sign language to a deaf student while there. Observed the great needs of individuals with disabilities in the poorest parts of India.