RESEARCHBRIEF

An update on HDI's research in the field of developmental disabilities

Learning, Independence, and Relationships

The impact of supported higher education on students with intellectual disabilities

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The Higher Education Opportunities Act of 2008 endorsed the participation of students with intellectual disabilities in postsecondary education by authorizing Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary Programs which allow students with intellectual disabilities (ID) to access Pell Grants, Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants, and Work Study funds (Grigal, Hart, & Weir, 2013). At the same time, HEOA called for the creation of model demonstration sites. Thus, in the fall of 2010 the Office on Postsecondary Education awarded five-year grants to 27 postsecondary Transition Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) at institutes for higher education (IHE) across the country (Kleinert et al., 2012).

The Supported Higher Education Program (SHEP), administered by the Human Development Institute at the University of Kentucky, was one of the funded TPSIDs. SHEP's central goal was to support students with intellectual disabilities toward a meaningful post-secondary education credential that would result in employment or a career of the student's choosing. As of January 2014, SHEP had supported thirty-four students with intellectual disabilities, enrolled primarily at Bluegrass Community and Technical College and Northern Kentucky University.

Methodology and Research Purpose

To answer the research question "How do students with intellectual disabilities supported by SHEP experience higher education from personal and academic perspectives?", a three-year longitudinal qualitative case study was conducted. This research design was selected for several reasons. First, longitudinal research helps identify the occurrence of a change over time, while qualitative case studies enable the collection of participant meanings, bringing subjects' personal values to the study, and examining the context of participants' perceptions (Creswell, 1994; Johnson, 2014; Merriam, 2009). Additionally, a case study research design aims to engage and explore matters unique to specific social groups. As a result, it can potentially shed more light on understudied social justice issues (Creswell, 2009).

Participants

A total of twenty-eight interviews were conducted across three academic years. Seventeen individuals took part in these interviews. Three of them were interviewed in each year of the study, and seven were interviewed twice (Table 1). Individuals' ages ranged from 18 to 24 years old.

YEAR	PARTICIPANTS		
	Total	**Female**	**Male**
2011-2012	12	6	6
2012-2013	8	4	4
2013-2014	8	4	4

Research participants were selected on the following criteria: a) participation in person-centered planning with SHEP; b) academic enrollment in one of the two primary post-secondary institutions partnered with SHEP; and c) willingness to volunteer as a study participant.

Data Collection

The Evaluation Team at the University of Kentucky Human Development Institute collected data on SHEP

students' perceptions through semi-structured face-to-face interviews, which allowed researchers to address the significance of students' personal experiences and gather contextually rich data as well as clarify meanings of interviewees' responses and relevant ideas. Interviews aimed to identify students' attitudes towards support provided by SHEP, their motivation in joining the program and continuing their education, their experiences in a post-secondary environment, and future career plans. The conversations were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The quality of transcriptions was then verified by listening to the recordings a second time. Emergent theme analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data. Since the purpose of the emergent coding is to find consistent themes and patterns, the emergent themes were continually compared to the raw data. This process was repeated until no more themes were discovered. Emergent themes from the interviews were entered into a Microsoft Excel matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1992). The matrix allowed for comparisons across interviews.

To establish the validity of the collected data, member checking was used by providing preliminary findings to the project staff for their feedback. This process helped evaluators to verify their interpretation of the data as well as confirm the research conclusions and implications from the findings with the interviewees. It also assured the accuracy of preliminary findings (Creswell, 2007; Johnson, 2014).

Data Results and Findings

Students' feedback on their experiences in a post-secondary educational environment was summarized by two major themes: "Academic Experiences" and "Personal Experiences".

Throughout the study, students' **experiences in academia** varied. Some of them expressed concerns about their transition to a new post-secondary learning environment with comments like, "*it's harder than high school... I try to focus and force myself to do well*" and "*[it] was hard and scary at first. I didn't know anybody. I didn't know the teachers.*" However, interviewees emphasized

their positive experiences in the new learning settings. Students stressed that college was an enjoyable and welcoming place, describing it with words like "*really fun*", "*I just enjoy it*", and "*(I) had fun in class.*" They were also enthusiastic about their learning and college life which gave them the opportunity to "*do my own schedule*", "*[make] good grades*", learn "*about new stuff... I wanted to learn about*", "*explain what I had trouble with and have professors help me*", "*not give up and keep trying*" and "*learn to communicate better*". In addition, several students emphasized that college was a safe place. One student reported that "*people in college treat you nicer (than high school)...(I) can feel like myself and be safe.*" Another stated "*in high school I was bullied and taunted and got in trouble...(college) is easier...there are no bullies.*" For students who had experienced difficulty in high school with peer relationships or who had often gotten "*in a ton of trouble*" there, the transition to college had been a liberating and affirming opportunity.

SHEP students' **personal experiences** included reflections on their career and employment advancement, independence, and social relationships. Most students believed SHEP and their college experience provided benefits for their *economic future*. Several said they were going to college to prepare for a specific career; often this employment goal had been identified during the planning of their course of study. One student felt sure of his choice saying, "*I want to be working either in a library or a bookstore because I like books and I'm a bibliophile*". Another student changed her mind after taking a few classes, deciding that she wanted "*to be a dance instructor because I love to dance so much*". Additionally, more than half of the students interviewed throughout the

Academic Experiences	Personal Experiences
"Gives me a head start" "[Classes] are very beneficial" "Learning... I wanted to learn about"	"I make new friends" "I want to be a dance instructor" "I like being independent"
"I was here to learn not to talk" "Helped me to improve my skills" "I am proud of my grades"	"Prepare for a specific career" "Be patient and ask people to be friends" "Make my own choices" "Be my own advocate"
"Enjoyed the 'challenge'" "I improved my skills" "I was afraid to fail"	"Opportunity to exercise my independence" "Didn't have to borrow the money or bother parents" "I became less shy"
Year 1	Year 2	Year 3

study had worked in either paid employment or volunteer positions during college.

Students were also very enthusiastic in interviews about the chance SHEP provided them to become more independent. College had provided them with a chance to "*make my own choices*," "*to be my own advocate*," "*to be more independent.*" One student who had moved into an apartment said she could "*do what I want to do, eat what I want to cook, go where I want to go.*" Students expressed great pride at learning to accomplish tasks for themselves like setting up appointments with advisors, managing their own behavior in classes, and even walking across a graduation stage in front of a crowd of strangers. One student shared that he liked to make his own "*decisions… as far as how many classes you want to take and stuff, which ones… [are] suitable for you*", while another loved that "*there's no one telling you 'Oh, you have to do this math class. Oh, you have to do this boring US History class. Like you get to decide what classes you want to take and I really like that.*" College also provided "*a lot more freedom.*" One student remarked, "*I feel even more that I'm an adult because I know where I'm going, I'm independent. And I like being independent.*"

Students greatly appreciated the positive impact SHEP had on their *social relationships*. Many expressed that meeting new people was one of the things they liked best about college. In addition, being in SHEP had opened up numerous opportunities for social interaction that students had not experienced before. One student had been asked to be the manager of the men's basketball team. Another had been invited to join the dance team. Students reported that attending college had allowed them "*to become less shy*", "*be more patient*", and "*[make] new friends*". They believed that SHEP helped them improve their social skills, and now they had gotten "*better at asking people to be friends*" and at "*working with people [they] don't like*". One of the interviewees expressed pride concerning his new skill at "*asking people to hang out instead of just waiting for them to ask me to hang out*". Another student appreciated the opportunity of "*being able to talk to people close to my age*", and still another was simply grateful for "*meeting new people… friends*".

Finally, students were also asked about their **attitudes towards SHEP**; interview content analysis signified that their positive perceptions of the program were connected to their independence, the extent of support and encouragement they received, and socialization within a post-secondary educational environment. Students reported comments like they "*really like [staff]*

a lot and they make me work very hard". They articulated how important SHEP was in their lives from determining personal goals and career plans to finding employment opportunities and growing personally and professionally. As one student said, "*[they] encourage students to do the best they can*". As shown in Figure 2 below, there are many connections between SHEP initiatives and important aspects of the students' lives. The lines in the figure indicate the relationships between categories voiced by the interviewees, while line thickness signifies the strength (frequency) of the relationship.
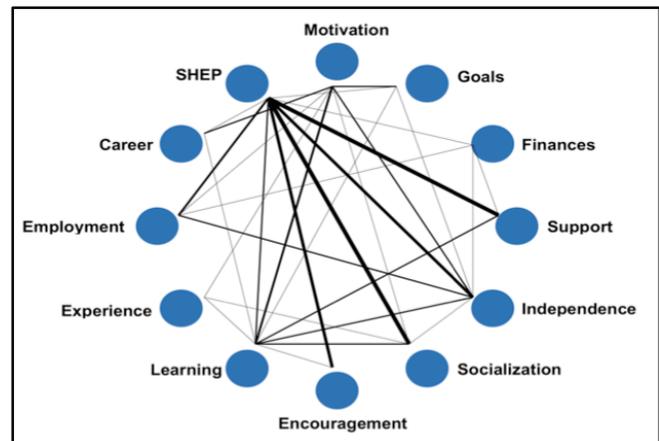

Figure 2. SHEP's Contribution to Students' Experiences

According to study participants, the program has been a great help in providing academic and personal support. Their overall experiences in academics and SHEP had led to greater social independence, knowledge increases, and career opportunities. As students emphasized, support provided by the program had strengthened their motivation to pursue their dreams and accomplish academic and career goals.

Key Findings

· **Students had positive views of SHEP and believed it to be beneficial.**

· **Students greatly valued the support they received from SHEP and peer mentors.**

· **Students agreed that SHEP had a positive impact on their social skills.**

· **Students found the independence of college particularly valuable.**

· **Students emphasized that college was a "safe place." Additional research would be valuable to determine if the "safety" of college makes it a particularly beneficial forum for learning the skills crucial for the successful transition to adult life.**

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About HDI Research Briefs

HDI Research Briefs were initiated to highlight the research activities at HDI. Projects at HDI focus on individuals with disabilities and include projects with emphases in early childhood, school age persons, adults, and issues across the lifespan.

You can find more examples of our research on our website at www.hdi.uky.edu.