

Exploring Parents' Views on Supporting Their College Student With an Intellectual Disability to Develop Agency

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Abstract

College opportunities now exist for young adults with intellectual disability. Because of this, it is common for these individuals' parents to express a desire for increased student agency (Miller et al., 2018). Yet, little is known about how parents feel about how to best support agency development for their young adult child. In the current study, authors surveyed 64 parents with a student attending an inclusive postsecondary education program to examine their perceived level of confidence related to supporting their student in developing agency. Further, we looked at parents' responses to their perception of the most important skills related to supporting agency development. Findings showed that parents felt least confident in supporting students' financial independence and felt supporting navigation of intimate relationships to be least important. Implications for practice and directions for future research are presented.

Key Words: self-determination, agency development, intellectual disability, parental engagement, transition

Introduction

The transition from high school to adult life can be challenging for students with disabilities (Newman et al., 2011; Shogren & Wittenberg, 2020). This

transition can be even more challenging for students with intellectual disability (ID; Osgood et al., 2005). In fact, the postschool outcomes for students with ID are of drastic contrast compared to their peers without disabilities. Specifically, students with ID lag in almost every postschool area: employment, community participation, and college access and completion (Newman et al., 2011). As a result of the dismal outcomes, there have been many efforts aimed at improving postschool outcomes. One effort that has gained momentum over the last decade has been inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs on college campuses, with 332 programs in existence nationwide (Think College, 2024). The passage of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) in 2008 has propelled this movement by providing federal money to support the development of more IPSE programs across the country.

Transition to adulthood can be a stressful time of life for families of students with disabilities, particularly those with ID (Bianco et al., 2009; Bouck & Joshi, 2016; Gauthier-Boudreault et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2011; Shogren & Wittenberg, 2020). Parents of students with disabilities often express a less optimistic vision for the future and greater discomfort with the transition process than parents of children without disabilities (Blustein et al., 2016; Martinez et al., 2012). Transition-age students with ID face unique challenges during this period. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition-Text Revision* (DSM-5-TR) classified ID as a deficit in intellectual abilities (e.g., abstract thinking, learning, understanding cause and effect, problem solving) that results in impaired functioning to meet independence and social responsibility in one or more areas of the individual's daily life (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Individuals with ID may require support with self-care, social communication and relationships, understanding and reciprocating or responding to social cues, and independently understanding risks and consequences (Zisman-Ilani, 2022). Compounding the extra support that may be needed during the transition to adulthood and the common stress that is associated with this stage is the fact that outcomes for adults with ID continue to fall short compared to those without disabilities.

Parents desire the smoothest transition possible for their child with a disability as they enter adult life environments (Bianco et al. 2009; Blustein et al., 2016; Grigal & Neubert, 2004). This includes working competitively, living independently, achieving meaningful social relationships, and living a life of autonomy. The literature is replete with studies conveying the desire of parents of students entering IPSE to receive more support during this time. Specifically, parents with a child transitioning into an IPSE program report that they need more information and/or support in the following areas: (a) how to "let go"; (b) how to allow their young adult child to experience risk; (c) emotional support;

(d) family-to-family networks; (e) information about the adult services available to their child; (f) information about the laws pertaining to their young adult child (e.g., FERPA, ADA), and (g) how to shift from caregiver to advisor for their young adult (Bianco et al., 2009; Bumble et al., 2021; Francis et al., 2019; Francis et al., 2016; Gauthier-Boudreault, 2017; Thorin et al., 1996).

Research has shown that parent involvement is crucial to student success (Jones, 2022; Kohler, 1996; Test et al., 2009; Wagner et al., 2012), yet parents of students with ID often report not knowing how to best support their child as they transition into college and adulthood (Francis et al., 2018; Francis et al., 2016). The evolution of a parent–child relationship as the child approaches young adulthood can be fraught with dilemmas and conflict for any family, particularly for families of children with disabilities. Instead of growing more independent of their families as typical young adults may do, young adults with disabilities may find themselves more dependent on parents for support in navigating adulthood and postsecondary options (Bianco et al., 2009).

New Possibilities: IPSE Programs

IPSE programs are housed at a variety of institutions of higher education, from trade and technical schools (3.7%) to two-year community/junior colleges (33.4%) to four-year colleges and universities (59.8%; 2.9% classified as “other”). Most programs (82.4%) are at public institutions, and almost 40% of IPSE programs offer housing for students. In order for students to access federal financial aid, despite not taking coursework for credit or maintaining full-time status, programs must meet certain requirements around degree of inclusivity, satisfactory academic progress, and clock/credit hours (among others) to receive designation from the U.S. Department of Education as a Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary Program (CTP). At the time of writing, 46.1% of the IPSE programs listed on thinkcollege.net have CTP status (Think College, 2024).

IPSE programs nationwide provide students with ID access to academic courses, employment preparation, and campus membership including social access typical of college students without ID (Think College, 2024). The practice and purpose of IPSE programs includes five contexts of authentic student experience that help support belonging, learning, identity, and contribution (Uditsky & Hughson, 2012). These five contexts include: academic, social, associational, employment, and family. Although there is some level of inclusion afforded across most recognized programs, this is based on a continuum, as some programs are completely inclusive across all domains, and some may only have inclusive opportunities in one or two domains (e.g., social and academic; Hart et al., 2006). There is variability across IPSE programs in many

areas including the degree of inclusivity, autonomy given to students, residential options (i.e., college dorm or apartment), overall student population, and programmatic policies to promote personal and professional growth (Plotner & Marshall, 2015).

While many IPSE leaders strive for typicality in all program aspects including the frequency and intensity of parent involvement (Grigal et al., 2012; Think College, 2024), the need to balance truly inclusive opportunities and the most appropriate and effective supports can create a paradox. While many IPSE programs strive to reflect what is typical for college students in their interactions and relationships with parents, research indicates that a parent support component to IPSE programming could better prepare parents to positively support their student's evolution into an agentic individual (Bianco et al., 2009; Francis et al., 2016; Francis et al., 2018; Francis et al., 2019; Graff et al., 2019; Grigal & Neubert, 2004; Henninger & Taylor, 2014; Martinez et al., 2012).

The paradox in supporting their student's autonomy and independence while simultaneously balancing the role of advocate was described by parents in Bianco et al.'s (2009) phenomenological study of nine families of young adults with ID. Parents in the study described wanting to support their child in developing self-determination and self-advocacy skills, but also feeling those desires were mediated by their children's ongoing needs for assistance (Bianco et al., 2009). Parents of young adults with disabilities transitioning to adulthood are engaged in a balancing act rather than automatically assuming a less active parenting role (Thorin et al., 1996). This dilemma includes elements of risk and "letting go." Parents of students attending an IPSE program may understand the importance of independence for their young adult child but could be unaware of their child's capabilities or are unwilling to allow them to take risk (Bumble et al., 2021; Graff et al., 2019; Thorin et al., 1996). This acknowledgement of parents' desire for their student with ID to assume more autonomy yet inability to support student risk-taking indicates that parents may require support to allow for dignity of risk in college and to help create opportunities to enhance their child's self-determination. As autonomy is cultivated for students, it is natural to assume that parents need new skills and supports to aid the transition and appropriately encourage newfound agency for their child. Building on research that shows the importance of the family-school-community partnership to enhance transition outcomes, parental engagement can be a facilitator of self-determined behavior in educational and community settings (Chatenoud & Odier-Guedj, 2022).

Self-Determination and Agency for Young Adults With Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

Wehmeyer (2004) defines self-determination as “acting as the primary causal agent in one’s life and making choices and decisions regarding one’s quality of life free from undue external influences or interference” (p. 351). Self-determination is recognized in the field of special education as a skill that is highly important and to be encouraged throughout the lifespan but particularly during the transition process (Field et al., 1998; Wehmeyer, 2004). In fact, self-determination has been shown to be an important predictor of post-school success and enhanced quality of life for youth with disabilities (LaChapelle et al., 2005; Mazzotti et al., 2016; Mazzotti et al., 2021; Test et al., 2009). There is a changing and complex interrelationship between the individual, family, and community factors that have a major impact on independence for young people with disabilities, particularly during the time of transition from high school. A key component of self-determination involves making one’s own decisions, and for all individuals this can involve some level of risk. There is well-documented value in risk for gaining independence and new skills on the path to adulthood (Bumble et al., 2021; Dubberly, 2011). Indeed, the term “dignity of risk,” coined by Perske (1972), identifies the vital connection between choice, risk, and human dignity. Perske posits that people without disabilities are faced with decisions that involve a degree of physical or emotional risk, and to deny these choices and risk to people with disabilities is to diminish their human dignity.

This difficulty in transitioning to adulthood for young adults with disabilities may be compounded by the families’ dilemma in deciding what is acceptable risk. Stokes et al. (2013) propose that young people with disabilities, like their peers without disabilities, need the opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them. Research also shows that it can be challenging for parents to foster independence, self-determination, and agency for their child with a disability. Parents want their child to become an independent adult, but they also must consider the realities of adult life: less reliable and consistent services, real-world dangers, and the potential lifespan of their child (outliving parents; Hirano & Rowe, 2016). Research with adults with disabilities indicates that participation in more inclusive living environments correlates with higher levels of self-determination (Shogren et al., 2007). Participation in an IPSE provides the contextual opportunity for agency development while also lending the supports students with ID may need during this time of transition.

If self-determination is the ability to make one’s own choices and decisions free from the influence of others, then agency is the volitional action and the

environmental and contextual opportunities to achieve goals related to those choices and decisions (Shogren et al., 2015). The development of agency and agentic action in students with disabilities involves supporting students in developing “skills necessary to advocate on their own behalf. The focus should be on supporting students how to be assertive, how to effectively communicate their perspective, how to negotiate, how to compromise, and how to deal with systems and bureaucracies” (Wehmeyer et al., 2018, p. 58). These skills, coupled with volitional action and opportunities for skill expression, are at the heart of agency. “The agentic self has a sense of personal empowerment, which involves both knowing and having what it takes to achieve one’s goals” (Little et al., 2002, p. 390).

The skills necessary to enable the growth in self-determination and agency, including allowing for reasonable risk-taking, are a very real set of skills that parents need in order to realize their desired outcomes for their children as they transition to adulthood. This study seeks to determine parent perceptions of their own support needs as their young adult child transitions into and through an IPSE program. IPSE programs are uniquely situated to foster agency-building for students with disabilities, yet parents remain a key stakeholder in ensuring that students remain the primary agent in their post-school lives. To date, several studies have examined the roles and expectations that parents have as their students attend an IPSE (Francis et al., 2016; Graff et al., 2019; Griffin et al., 2010; Grigal & Neubert, 2004), yet none have identified the supports that parents may need to assist their child in establishing and sustaining agency while in college and beyond. The purpose of this study is to examine parents’ perceived levels of confidence and perceptions of importance of supporting their college student with ID in developing agency in multiple domains of life. Specifically, two research questions guided this study:

1. What are parents’ levels of confidence in supporting their college student with ID in becoming an agentic adult, and how important do parents believe these domains to be?
2. What are parents’ levels of confidence in supporting their own development as the parent of an independent adult with ID, and how important do parents believe these supports to be?

Method

Participants and Procedures

An online survey, the *Inclusive Postsecondary Education Parent Supports Survey (IPSE-PS)* was disseminated to IPSE programs nationwide from email addresses retrieved from the Think College database. One programmatic point

of contact was asked to send the survey out to parents of current students in each respective program. Eight IPSE programs reported sending the survey via email to the parents of students currently enrolled in their program. The average enrollment for the eight programs involved in the study is less than 20 students. A total of 64 parents completed the survey. The 64 retained surveys were not missing any data on the Likert-response items.

Table 1. IPSE-PS Survey Respondent Demographics ($n = 64$)

Category	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Relationship to Student</i>		
Mother	50	78.1
Father	13	20.3
Grandmother	1	1.6
<i>Respondent's Highest Level of Education</i>		
High school diploma	4	6.3
Associate's degree	3	51.6
Bachelor's degree	33	32.8
Master's degree	21	3.1
Doctorate	2	3.1
Other	1	1.6
<i>Student's Current Year in College</i>		
Freshman	38	59.4
Sophomore	11	17.2
Junior	13	20.3
Senior	2	3.1
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>		
Hispanic or Latino/a	0	0.0
Black or African American	7	10.9
White	51	79.7
Asian/Pacific Islander	1	1.6
Native American or Indian American	0	0.0
Other	4	6.2
Prefer not to answer	1	1.6

Of the 64 respondents, 50 reported they were the mother, 13 the father, and one the grandmother of a student currently attending an IPSE program. The majority of respondents, 51.6% ($n = 33$), answered their highest level of educa-

tion was a Bachelor's degree. Nearly 80% ($n = 51$) of the respondents identified as White, nearly 11% ($n = 7$) identified as Black or African American, one respondent identified as Asian or Pacific Islander, 6% ($n = 4$) identified their race/ethnicity as Other, and one respondent chose not to answer the race/ethnicity question. Fifty-nine percent ($n = 38$) of respondents answered that their IPSE student is a freshman at the time of the survey. Junior parents made up 20% ($n = 13$) of the respondents, sophomore parents made up 17% ($n = 11$), and senior parents made up only 3% ($n = 2$) of survey respondents. See Table 1 for participant demographic information.

Instrumentation

The researchers developed the survey instrument, the *IPSE-PS*, for the purpose of this study. Survey items were generated based on literature related to postsecondary education for students with ID and related to parent perspectives of IPSE for students with ID (Burke et al., 2020; Francis et al., 2016; Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Graff et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2018; Stokes et al., 2013). After the initial draft of the instrument was constructed, two employees of an IPSE program, one current doctoral student in special education, and one parent of a student with a disability piloted the survey and made editing recommendations. Based on feedback from the stakeholders, minor edits were made to question formatting and rewording for clarity. The final survey instrument consisted of three sections. The sections included demographics, parent level of confidence in supporting their student in various domains of college life as well as their perceptions of the importance of those domain supports, and parent level of confidence in accessing the supports they themselves may need related to supporting their student as well as the importance of those supports.

Specifically, demographic questions included respondents' relationship to the student attending an IPSE, race/ethnicity, and year of their student in college. The second section focused on three specific domains related to respondent confidence to support their student in aspects of college life: personal development, social engagement and communication, and independent living. There were six 4-point Likert-type rating scale questions pertaining to parents' confidence in supporting their students in the areas of agency development, self-awareness, self-advocacy, risk-taking, future planning, and leadership. A definition for agency was provided: "*agency is defined as the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices.*" Respondents could select *extremely confident*, *somewhat confident*, *somewhat unconfident*, or *not at all confident* for each question. The personal development domain also included a question where respondents were asked to rank specific personal development-related skills based on perceived importance, including *knowledge of skills to support my*

student's self-advocacy, knowledge of skills to support my student's ability to navigate risk, and more. The student social engagement and communication domain included five 4-point Likert-type rating scale questions ascertaining respondents' confidence to support their student in areas including peer connections, navigating conflict, intimate relationships, difficult conversations, and friendships. Respondents were also asked to rank the importance of these skills in supporting their student in social engagement and communication. Specifically, seven questions relating to supporting student independent living skills were included using the same 4-point Likert-type rating scale for respondents' confidence. This section also included a perceived importance ranking of skills related to independent living: community safety, cooking/grocery shopping, financial independence, transportation skills, accessing health resources, and accessing adult service agencies such as Vocational Rehabilitation.

The final section of the survey asked four 4-point Likert-style rating questions related specifically to the respondent's (parent's) confidence in navigating their own support needs while supporting a student with ID in college. This included items such as *"how confident do you feel in your knowledge or skills to support your own emotional well-being during your student's transition to adulthood?"* and *"how confident do you feel in your own knowledge or skills to support your student in making his or her own decisions?"* And respondents once again were asked to rank these items by importance, on a scale of *most important to least important*.

Data Analysis

The survey was created in SurveyMonkey[®], an online platform that allows users to create, send, and analyze web-based surveys. Survey Monkey[®] responses were downloaded into SPSS[®] to analyze the survey data. Data analysis included running descriptive statistics for questions related to student support factors and parent support factors. Percentages, frequencies, and means were calculated. Each of the domain areas for parental confidence ratings and importance rankings are reported.

Results

Research Question 1: What are parents' levels of confidence in supporting their college student with ID in becoming an agentic adult, and how important do parents believe these domains to be?

In response to research question number one, respondents were asked to rate their confidence in supporting their college student in developing agency

and independence over three domains of life: personal development, social engagement and communication, and independent living as well as the importance of these supports. The mean for the confidence rating responses in the personal development support domain was 3.2. The mean for all confidence rating questions in the social engagement and communication domain was 3.0, and the overall mean for all items in the independent living domain was also 3.0. The overall mean of respondents' importance ranking for each of the three domains is 2.0. Table 2 includes response details for both the confidence ratings and the importance rankings.

Confidence and Importance in Supporting Their Student in Personal Development

In the personal development section, the first item read “*How confident do you feel in your knowledge or skills to support your student’s agency?*” An overwhelming majority of respondents, 89% ($n = 57$), indicated they were *extremely confident* or *somewhat confident* in supporting their student’s agency. Similarly, 90.6% ($n = 58$) reported they were *extremely confident* or *somewhat confident* in supporting their students’ self-advocacy, and just over 81% ($n = 52$) reported they were *extremely confident* or *somewhat confident* in supporting their students’ self-awareness. The mean response for supporting their student in navigating risk is also 3.2; however, the percentage of respondents who are *somewhat unconfident* in supporting their students’ navigation of risk in college was at 20% ($n = 13$). Even more responded as feeling *somewhat unconfident* in supporting their student in having realistic expectations for the future: 23% ($n = 15$). Finally, the smallest mean response for this domain was for supporting students’ leadership skills, at 2.9; 34% ($n = 21$) of respondents said that they felt *somewhat unconfident* or *not at all confident* in supporting their student in developing leadership skills while in college.

In response to ranking the importance of these personal development-related skills, respondents ranked supporting their student’s self-advocacy as of highest importance, with 53% ($n = 31$) choosing *most important* for this support. A close second was supporting their student’s agency development with 49% ($n = 28$) ranking this support as *most important*. These skills also received the highest overall mean ranking of 2.4. Respondents ranked supporting their student in developing leadership skills as the least important support in this section with 65% ($n = 41$) selecting *least important*, for a mean ranking of 1.5.

Table 2. IPSE-PS Survey—Student Supports Item Responses (*n* = 64)

Knowledge or skills to support...	Mean Confidence Rating*	Mean Importance Ranking**
Personal Development Domain		
your student’s agency? (Agency is defined as the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices.)	3.3	2.4
your student’s self-advocacy?	3.3	2.4
your student’s self-awareness?	3.2	1.9
your student’s determining and navigating acceptable risk? (e.g., weighing outcomes and making decisions in potentially risky situations such as dating, drinking alcohol)	3.2	2.2
your student’s ability to have realistic expectations for the future?	3.0	1.8
your student’s development of leadership skills?	2.9	1.5
Social Engagement and Communication Domain		
your student’s social engagement and connections with peers?	3.0	2.4
your student in navigating conflict resolution?	3.1	2.0
your student’s ability to have difficult conversations with friends or family members?	3.0	1.7
your student in navigating intimate relationships?	2.4	1.8
your student in navigating friendships?	3.3	2.2
Independent Living Domain		
your student in being safe in the community?	3.2	2.6
your student’s financial independence (i.e., paying bills, budgeting, maintaining a checking account)?	2.8	2.5
your student’s cooking and/or grocery shopping?	3.4	1.8
your student’s transportation skills (i.e., accessing Uber/Lyft, accessing the bus system, obtaining a driver’s license)?	3.2	1.9
your student’s knowledge of adult service agencies and how to access them (e.g., Vocational Rehabilitation, Department of Disabilities and Special Needs, Social Security Administration)?	2.5	1.8
your student in navigating resources to support their own mental health?	2.8	1.7
your student in accessing resources to support their own physical health?	3.1	1.6

Note. *4 = extremely confident, 1 = not at all confident; **3 = most important, 1 = least important

Confidence and Importance in Supporting Their Student in Social Engagement and Communication

Five questions related to social engagement and communication in relationships were included in this section of the survey (see Table 2 for response details). When respondents were asked how confident they were in supporting their student's social engagement and connections with peers, 70% ($n = 44$) reported they were *somewhat confident* or *extremely confident* in doing so. Most (83%; $n = 53$) reported they were *somewhat confident* or *extremely confident* in supporting their student in navigating conflict. Numbers dropped slightly in reports of feeling *somewhat confident* or *extremely confident* in supporting students in having difficult conversations with friends or family: 74% ($n = 47$). Numbers dropped even more steeply as only 50% ($n = 32$) reported feeling *somewhat confident* or *extremely confident* in supporting their student in navigating an intimate relationship. The mean rating for supporting students in navigating intimate relationships was 2.4, the lowest confidence rating for any item on the survey. Indeed, 11% of respondents ($n = 7$) reported feeling *not at all confident* in intimate relationship support.

Many respondents (65%; $n = 38$) ranked knowledge or skills to support their student's social engagement and connections as a *most important* support, and 55% ($n = 36$) of respondents indicated that knowledge or skills to support their student's navigation of friendships also falls in the *most important* category. Respondents ranked knowledge and skills to support their student in having difficult conversations with friends or family as the least important support in this category, with 60% ($n = 36$) choosing *least important*. Respondents indicated that supporting their student in navigating intimate relationships was also on the lower end of the importance scale, with a mean of 1.8 for this item. All other skills related to social engagement and communication were ranked in the *medium importance* range.

Confidence and Importance in Supporting their Student in Independent Living

Parent respondents were asked seven questions related to supporting their students in the independent living domain (see Table 2 for response details). When asked how confident they were in supporting their student's safety in the community, an overwhelming majority, 94% ($n = 60$) reported they felt *somewhat confident* or *extremely confident* in doing so. The second question in this section asked respondents' confidence in supporting their student's financial independence, and 42% ($n = 27$) of respondents indicated they were *somewhat unconfident* or *not at all confident* to support their student in this way. A

question regarding confidence in supporting students’ grocery shopping and cooking skills elicited 84.5% ($n = 54$) responding they were *somewhat confident* or *extremely confident* in this; this question received the highest mean score in the domain as well at 3.4. Eighty percent ($n = 51$) responded that they were *somewhat confident* or *extremely confident* in supporting their student’s transportation skills, which could include obtaining a ride via Uber® or Lyft®, navigating a bus system, or obtaining a driver’s license.

The final three questions in the independent living section related specifically to accessing disability-related services and healthcare. Just 57% of respondents ($n = 36$) reported they were *somewhat confident* or *extremely confident* in supporting their student in accessing adult service agencies such as Vocational Rehabilitation, Department of Disabilities and Special Needs, and Social Security Administration. Slightly more (66%; $n = 42$) reported they were *somewhat confident* or *extremely confident* in supporting their student in navigating resources related to mental health. Eighty percent of respondents ($n = 51$) reported they were *somewhat confident* or *extremely confident* in supporting their student in navigating resources related to their physical health.

Overwhelmingly, 70% of respondents ($n = 42$) ranked knowledge or skills to support their student in being safe in the community as one of the *most important* skills in the independent living domain. Second to this, 59% of respondents ($n = 35$) ranked supporting student’s financial independence as a *most important* support as well. Many respondents, 43% ($n = 27$), ranked knowledge or skills to support their student in navigating mental health as the *least important* skill. Knowledge to support their student in accessing adult service supports such as Vocational Rehabilitation and Social Security Administration was ranked by 40% of respondents ($n = 25$) as one of the *least important* supports.

Table 3. IPSE-PS Survey Parent Supports Item Responses ($n = 64$)

Knowledge or skills to support...	Mean Confidence Rating*	Mean Importance Ranking**
Your own emotional well-being during your student’s transition to adulthood?	3.5	2.0
Your own parent-to-parent connections with other IPSE parents or parents of IPSE graduates?	3.1	1.5
Your own ability to “let go?” (i.e., enabling your student to become as independent of you as possible)	3.3	2.2
Your own ability to support your student making his or her own decisions?	3.3	2.4

Note. *4 = *extremely confident*, 1 = *not at all confident*; **3 = *most important*, 1 = *least important*

Research Question 2: What are parents' levels of confidence in supporting their own development as the parent of an independent adult with ID, and how important do parents believe these supports to be?

In response to research question number two, respondents were asked to rate their confidence in their knowledge and skills to support their own development and transition as the parent of a college student. There were four questions regarding respondents' perceptions of their own support needs as they support their young adult child with ID to transition from high school and into and through an IPSE program (see Table 3 for response details). Question one asked about the responding parents' confidence in supporting their own emotional well-being as they support their students transition to adulthood. Over half (56%; $n = 36$) responded that they were *extremely confident* in their ability to support their own emotional well-being during this time of transition, and 39% ($n = 25$) reported they were *somewhat confident*. The overall mean response for this item was the highest in the domain at 3.5 when a numerical value is assigned to the Likert responses, where 4 = *extremely confident*, 3 = *somewhat confident*, 2 = *somewhat unconfident*, and 1 = *not at all confident*. Only 5% ($n = 3$) reported they were *somewhat unconfident* in supporting their own emotional well-being. Eight percent of respondents ($n = 50$) reported they feel *somewhat confident* or *extremely confident* in building parent-to-parent connections with other IPSE parents. The majority, 87.5% ($n = 56$) reported feeling confident in their ability to "let go" as their student transitioned through an IPSE and into adulthood and independence. Finally, 94% of respondents ($n = 60$) reported feeling confident in supporting their student in making his or her own decisions.

In evaluating the importance of these items, respondents ranked knowledge and skills to support their student in making their own decisions as the most important item with 48% ($n = 30$) ranking this item as *most important*. The mean ranking for this item was 2.4. Respondents ranked their knowledge of parent-to-parent connections with other IPSE parents lowest on the list, with 58% of respondents ($n = 34$) marking it of *least importance*. The mean ranking for this item was 1.5. Parent emotional well-being and their ability to "let go" were ranked of *medium importance* by the majority of respondents, with mean responses of 2.0 and 2.2, respectively.

Discussion

To frame the discussion of the findings from this survey, we use Arnett's (2007) theory of emerging adulthood as a framework for understanding the

lives of transition-age individuals, ranging from late teens to early 20s. Arnett frames this time of life as a time when individuals “benefit from growing social cognitive maturity, which enables them to understand themselves and others better than they did as adolescents” (2007, p. 70). As well, emerging adults enjoy their freedom to focus on themselves, and they often take satisfaction in their progress toward self-sufficiency (Arnett, 2007). This framework gives some context for the typical experience and expectations for emerging adults, which research has indicated is not necessarily different for people with ID (Hall, 2017; Shalock, 2005; Voermans et al., 2021) but may be more nuanced in specific ways such as the level and type of support needed to achieve adult life goals.

Parents report overall confidence in having the knowledge and skills to support their student’s agency development, with an overwhelming 89% ($n = 57$) reporting they are *extremely* or *somewhat confident* in this. This overall confidence may be a reflection of the fact that the students of the parents surveyed are currently enrolled in an IPSE program. Other researchers have found that parents of students with disabilities feel that school environments are “secure and predictable” places for their children (Cribb et al., 2019, p. 1775). As well, this confidence is likely a reflection of the privilege inherent in the demographics reflected in our study’s participants. An overwhelming majority of respondents (88%, $n = 56$) reported having earned a Bachelor’s degree or higher. This fact alone likely positions them to better support their student through emerging adulthood than parents with less education. Kim and Kutscher (2021) found that parental educational level was highly correlated to student achievement in college, specifically academic outcomes and self-confidence.

Despite the high confidence levels of respondents to support their student’s agency development, respondents grew increasingly less confident in their report of supporting their student’s development of specific agency-building skills, including self-awareness (81%, $n = 52$), risk-taking (80%, $n = 52$), and assuming leadership roles (66%, $n = 42$). This finding could indicate that parents are not clear on the component skills comprising the construct of agency. Further research should be conducted to better understand the reasons behind parents feeling less confident to supporting student development of these specific skills, but some IPSE researchers have found that risk in particular is a more difficult construct for parents to embrace and support for their student with ID (Rooney-Kron et al., 2022). Some young adults with ID describe their parents making most of their decisions about what they can and cannot do (Hemm et al., 2017), giving them nearly no opportunity to practice risk-taking.

Much of the extant literature on dignity of risk touts the benefits of providing opportunities for prudent and informed risk-taking for all emerging adults,

including those with ID (Bumble et al., 2021; Perske, 1972). Additionally, parents of students with ID who graduated from IPSE programs suggest that providing students with opportunities to take risks is essential to supporting the student's transition to life after college (Francis et al., 2018; Rooney-Kron et al., 2022). Risk-taking, experimentation, and exploring possibilities and options are all typical manifestations of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2007; Doyle & O'Donnell, 2022).

Almost half of respondents (45%; $n = 29$) said they were either *somewhat unconfident* or *not at all confident* in their ability to support their student in navigating intimate relationships. Aligned with this low confidence rating, 46% of parents ranked supporting their student in intimate relationships as one of the *least important* skills within the social engagement domain, with this item receiving a 1.8 mean ranking on a 3-point importance ranking scale. While parents do not seem concerned with their lack of knowledge and skills in this area, research shows that young adults with ID express a desire for sexual intimacy (Gil-Llario et al., 2018). In fact, the level of sexuality interest of young adults with ID is no different from their peers without disabilities (Castelão et al., 2010). The parent responses in this study are similar to other findings regarding parent perceptions of discussing intimacy with adolescents with ID (Pownall et al., 2012). Although parents seem uncomfortable supporting students in developing intimacy knowledge or unconfident in their ability to develop this knowledge, the field of special education is clear on the ethics of providing comprehensive sexuality education to students with ID (Stinnett et al., 2021). Perhaps parents in our study are relying on the IPSE program to provide education surrounding intimacy to their student. This assumption by parents that IPSEs are providing skill-building and knowledge of navigating intimate relationships may be misguided, however, according to a 2019 survey of IPSEs. Stinnett and Plotner (2023) found that only 40% of IPSEs surveyed ($n = 88$) were providing their students with proactive sexual intimacy education.

The primary concern for parents appears to be financial in nature. Parents report feeling less confidence in their student's ability to reach financial independence, which may be tied to parent reports about feeling less confident in their student's preparedness for successful employment. Parents also feel supporting their child's financial independence is one of the most important independent living skills, with 59% ($n = 35$) ranking it as of highest importance. This relates to past findings, reiterating that parents of children with disabilities often worry for their financial future especially as they approach adulthood (Chambers et al., 2004; Burke et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2018). This finding is not dissimilar to findings from a survey of over 3,700 parents con-

ducted in 2022 by the Pew Research Center: nine of ten parents surveyed said that it was *very* or *extremely important* for their child to become financially independent post-college (Minkin & Horowitz, 2023).

Overall, the parent respondents report immense confidence in their ability to support their students in the majority of the domains and skills related to agency on the *IPSE-PS* survey. This perceived confidence may be due to the fact that respondents are overwhelmingly parents of current freshmen students attending an IPSE (59.4%, $n = 38$), so they very recently prepared for this major life transition. Additionally, parents of students attending an IPSE may have parent support provided by the IPSE program or other parent networks and resources like Facebook groups or resources from federal TA centers for IPSEs, and this may be contributing to their confidence levels. Francis and colleagues (2018) found that parents of students in IPSE report that they do want parent-to-parent relationships for support, and parents in their study requested that the IPSE assist in fostering those connections. We found that overwhelmingly parents report they are either *extremely* or *somewhat confident* in their ability to “let go” (87.5%, $n = 57$) when it came time for their student to transition to college. Other studies have reported that often parents of young adults with disabilities struggle with the concept of “letting go,” (Miller et al., 2018). As the *IPSE-PS* survey is a self-report, it is possible that parents may be overestimating their abilities (*Dunning-Kruger effect*; Kruger & Dunning, 1999).

Recent reports regarding parents’ worries for their children speak to their high levels of anxiety related to mental health concerns (Minkin & Horowitz, 2023). Some of the spike in mental health issues for children and young adults are related to the COVID-19 pandemic; however, mental health concerns for emerging adults have been trending upward even before COVID-19 (Chen et al., 2019). While our survey respondents did not reflect this specific worry related to supporting their students’ mental health, we wonder if responses may have been different if the survey had been administered during the COVID-19 pandemic or more recently, in the post-COVID era.

There are a number of limitations of this study, including the small sample size. Additionally, the majority of our respondents were female ($n = 50$); it would be interesting to see if confidence and importance ratings may be different between parenting partners. Most (88%) respondents indicated they have a Bachelor’s degree or better, therefore lack of diversity in parent educational background is a limitation. Finally, 51% of survey respondents identified as White, therefore lack of racial and ethnic diversity was a limitation of the study. While acknowledging our study participants’ lack of racial and ethnic diversity as a limitation, we would be remiss to not mention that this is largely a reflection of the students enrolled in IPSE programs nationally, at least

TPSID-funded programs. In 2021–22, students enrolled in TPSID programs self-reported their race and ethnicities as follows ($n = 494$): 56% White; 15% Black or African American; 11% Hispanic; 7% Asian; 3% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander; 1% American Indian or Alaskan Native; 3% more than one race, and 4% race/ethnicity unknown (Grigal et al., 2023).

Implications for Practice and Future Research Directions

While the goal for many families and transition-age students is to become as independent as possible through education and experiences offered in an IPSE program, the natural support offered by immediate family, namely parents, is recognized by research as substantial and valuable (Kohler, 1996). Parents can use the information in the current study as a guide for what areas to consider when supporting their student as they enter into and progress through an IPSE program. The findings of this study can be used by IPSE program staff when or if planning family involvement and programming, namely new student and parent orientations and ongoing education activities they provide for parents and families. IPSE programs could adapt survey items on the *IPSE-PS* and administer to the parents of incoming freshmen to gauge parent confidence in supporting their student development and the perceived importance of supports across domains. Having this information prior to students arriving at IPSE programs could help staff better understand the support needs of students and their parents as they make the transition to college.

While this study includes survey responses from eight IPSE programs across four states nationwide, future research should explore parent responses from more states and compare responses across regions. Researchers could collect additional demographic data about the level of support provided by the student's IPSE and then compare responses across IPSEs of varying support levels. Notably, the current study did not ask respondents if their student lived at home or on-campus while attending the IPSE. As well, more specific information related to student support needs could be beneficial when analyzing parent responses. Specific support domains, namely the independent living domain items such as transportation and cooking, could take on a different level of importance for parents of students who were living on-campus. Therefore, future researchers should examine whether certain supports and their perceived importance of these supports correlated with students' residential context.

Future research could also explore how other stakeholders, especially students in IPSE programs, IPSE program staff, and other family members of students with ID in IPSEs may rate their confidence to support student self-determination development as well as their perceived importance of specific supports across domains. Accessing parental perceptions of the supports

discussed in the current survey through different methodologies, namely qualitative methods such as focus groups or one-on-one interviews, could help uncover the fine-grain contextual factors that are often missing from survey responses. More specific information regarding family makeup, socioeconomic status, rurality, and many more factors would only better illuminate our understanding of parent needs related to supporting their students in becoming agentic young adults.

Because the survey we sent out was collected pre-COVID-19, future research could produce very different results in terms of parents' comfortability with "letting go," supporting their students to take risks, and other aspects of college life, simply due to the complicated nature of sending a student off into a post-COVID world. Future research should also investigate whether parents are aware of their student's desire for intimacy and, if so, if they expect IPSE programming to support their student in this domain. This is an area for attention, as more than half of young adults with ID report that they did not receive sexuality education in high school (Barnard-Brak et al., 2014).

There are decades of research stating the importance of self-determination skills for students with ID as they transition from secondary education to postsecondary education and into adult life. While parental support of these students likely changes during this time, it never completely wanes. It is important for IPSE programs to better understand parental needs related to supporting their student to develop self-determination and agency as well as their perceived importance of these supports. A better understanding of stakeholders' confidence in supporting students will inform the education and training IPSEs can provide families and ultimately enhance self-determination outcomes for students with ID.

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