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Teaching Note—Description and Preliminary Evaluation of a Modified College Experience for Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

Kimberly Remis, Crystal Dea Moore, Julia Pichardo, Zuliany Rosario, and Jeffrey Palmer Moore

ABSTRACT

This article describes the implementation and preliminary evaluation of a modified college experience for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) at a small liberal arts college. To increase social work students' interest in working with this population and access of people with IDD to higher education, Bridges to Skidmore was founded in 2010 as a low-cost method for providing cooperative learning opportunities for students and individuals with IDD. Preliminary evaluation reveals that participation can change students' attitudes toward those with IDD, which may increase their intention to work with this population in the future. The program has created an enriching experience for the college students, lecturing professors, and adults with IDD, and can be easily replicated on other campuses.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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People with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) are a population at risk. Vulnerable to oppression, discrimination, and exploitation, they continue to be stigmatized despite social and educational policies designed to promote inclusion (Laws, Parish, Scheyett, & Egan, 2010; McManus, Feyes, & Saucier, 2011; Mock & Love, 2012; Werner & Grayzman, 2011). Social workers are uniquely suited to provide services for this population (Werner & Grayzman, 2011). The profession's strengths-based lens and values of empowerment, social justice, and the inherent worth and dignity of all humans function as a strong philosophical orientation that guide care sensitive to the needs of the individual in the context of the environment. Unfortunately, interest in this field among social work students is low (Russo-Gleicher, 2008; Werner & Grayzman, 2011). Compared to other students in helping professions (e.g., occupational therapy, special education, and nursing), one study revealed that social work students reported the lowest level of intention to work with people with IDD (Werner & Grayzman, 2011).

Opportunities abound in assisting this population with its complex needs, including communication difficulties, cognitive challenges, and comorbid conditions (Werner & Grayzman, 2011). Effective care necessitates a multidisciplinary approach, with which social workers are highly familiar. As programs continue to integrate people with IDD into least restrictive settings, community-based approaches to inclusion in work, leisure, and continuing education are needed. People with IDD and their families need social workers to help them access and navigate these multiple systems, particularly in light of current demographic trends.

The number of people affected by IDD continues to rise; according to the Centers for Disease Control, from the years 1997–2008 the number of children being diagnosed with a developmental disability increased 17% (Boyle et al., 2011). In addition, people with IDD are now living longer. This shifting demographic of middle-age adults and elders with these conditions creates new caregiving challenges. Increasingly, their caregivers, usually parents, are aging and dying while their dependent children are still alive (Laws et al., 2010).

Given these trends, the complex needs of people with IDD, the natural fit of social work, and the qualities of the field of IDD, it is incumbent on social work programs to develop strategies to increase student exposure, knowledge, interest, and openness to work with this population. Unfortunately, few social work programs offer courses or concentrations in IDD (Laws et al., 2010). A growing body of research reveals that increased knowledge about disability, positive and sustained contact with people with IDD in a supportive environment, and cooperative learning environments promote favorable attitudes toward those with IDD and reduce misconceptions about them (Barr & Bracchitta, 2008; Werner & Grayzman, 2011). This evidence can be used to develop interventions to promote student interest and intent to work with this group.

Development and implementation of such interventions in the college setting could be doubly advantageous. Although there are state and federally funded programs to develop comprehensive postsecondary educational opportunities for people with IDD (Grigal, Hart, & Weir, 2012), access to higher education has been elusive for this group (Ryan, 2014), and researchers have documented substantial barriers in implementing such programs (Mock & Love, 2012). To address the need to increase students' willingness to work with this group and the postsecondary aspirations of those with IDD, members of a social work department at a small liberal arts college collaborated with a local non-profit agency, Saratoga Bridges, to develop a program. Drawing on the evidence base related to effective interventions to increase positive attitudes toward those with disabilities while invoking the values of inclusion, service, collaboration, and inherent worth and dignity, Bridges to Skidmore (B2S) was founded in 2010. B2S is a popular modified college experience for people with IDD that uses strengths-based and empowerment perspectives. Operating on a shoestring budget, B2S increases students' interest and self-efficacy in working with the IDD population and helps to meet the socialization and continuing education needs of individuals with IDD in a college setting. This Teaching Note describes the program's basic structure, implementation, and preliminary program assessment to provide information for replication.

Basic program structure and implementation

The program was developed because of a desire to meet the educational needs of undergraduate students and individuals with IDD. The idea was conceived by a social work faculty member and her husband, a manager at a collaborating nonprofit agency that serves adults with IDD. A social work student was recruited to help with program design, planning, and implementation as part of her course work for Social Work Practice With Groups, Organizations, and Communities. The program objectives include the following: increase students' exposure to diverse groups, provide a modified college experience for participants with IDD, enhance students' ability to communicate with people with disabilities, raise awareness of issues related to disabilities among students and faculty, expose students to a opportunity-rich human services field, and provide socialization experiences and education opportunities for participants with IDD. B2S employs a formative evaluation model, and over the years, several quality improvement changes were implemented. The program serves a wide range of disabilities including Down syndrome, autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy, and Fragile X, among others. The base components of B2S are (a) classroom lectures, (b) written assignment completion sessions, (c) written assignment evaluation, and (d) program completion and graduation.

Each semester, a college student (most often a social work major) who has been involved with the B2S program is appointed as the program's student coordinator and is responsible for day-to-day implementation, which is an invaluable professional development opportunity. The coordinator receives independent study credit for the experience and, in collaboration with the supervising faculty member, is responsible for planning the student orientation sessions, recruiting professors to lecture, and developing and responding to written assignments. Recruitment of lecturing professors involves meeting with each faculty member to explain what is expected during the lecture and to answer any questions.

Table 1. Examples of schedules.

Date	Lecture/HW	Lecture/HW Topic
1/27	Orientation Part One	Icebreakers and syllabus
2/3	Orientation Part Two	Population and participant backgrounds, communication strategies
2/10	Panel From the Past	Learn from graduates of the program
2/17	Meet Your Partner!	Assigned reading
2/24	Lecture 1	Volcanoes (geoscience department)
3/3	Written Assignment 1	Volcanoes
3/17	Lecture 2	Overview of Sociology (sociology department)
3/24	Written Assignment 2	Overview of Sociology
3/31	Lecture 3	Taste and Smell (neuroscience program)
4/7	Written Assignment 3	Taste and Smell
4/14	Lecture 4	Come to Where the Wild Things Are! (English department)
4/21	Written Assignment 4	Come to Where the Wild Things Are!
4/28	Graduation!	

Note. HW = homework.

The program is implemented on a semester basis, and the community agency transports 15 of its clients (Bridges students) once a week for 10 consecutive weeks (each weekly session is 55 minutes) to participate in the program on the host college campus. The Bridges students are matched with a college student who receives one college credit for participation. B2S begins with orientation and training classes (3 hours over 3 weeks) for the college students in which the goals of the program, basic information on disabilities, and strategies to communicate with the Bridges students are presented. Two of the three sessions are held with no Bridges students; during the third session, B2S graduates of the program from the agency come to answer the college students' questions to increase their comfort level in working with the Bridges students. Bridges students do not receive an orientation from the agency, but that occurs during a designated B2S session.

After the third orientation session, a get-to-know-your-partner session takes place in which the Bridges students come to campus and the pairs are introduced. During this session, the student partners read a short, accessible article together and provide written answers to questions. This functions as an assessment of the Bridges students' reading and writing abilities and helps the college students better understand how to assist the Bridges students. The subsequent weeks consist of biweekly lectures (55 minutes) given by the college's faculty (four over the course of the semester), who volunteer their time and expertise. Examples of lectures and the departments of the faculty members who gave the talks include: Gratitude (Psychology), Opening Ceremonies of the Olympics (Health and Exercise Science), Detectives with Disability (English), Medieval History - The Real Game of Thrones (History), I Love a Parade - Performing Social Cohesion (Sociology), Advertisements (Business), Introduction to Spanish (World Languages and Literature), Being a Muslim in America (Religious Studies), and the Life of the Ocean (Biology). During the weeks in which there is no lecture, the pairs complete a written assignment related to the topic of the previous week's lecture. As part of the feedback process, written assignments are evaluated and returned at the beginning of each writing session. Occasional classroom etiquette mini lectures are also provided after assignments are returned. At the end of the semester, certificates of participation and graduation are presented during a ceremony. Bridges students who successfully complete four consecutive semesters graduate from the program. [Table 1](#) provides an example of a semester's schedule.

The college students use social work assessment skills, such as strengths seeking and being person centered, to maximize the experience of participants in a collaborative learning environment. Lecture participation and assignment completion are accomplished through interactions by each student pair. The stated goal for each pair is to reach completion and graduation for Bridges students. Given the varying levels of ability in physical, social, emotional, or cognitive skill sets of the Bridges students, the college student may be required to assist with communication or cognition in various forms to complete the program requirements.

The college student is tasked with providing as much help as necessary, and no more than necessary, to facilitate the Bridges student's full participation in lectures and completion of the

written assignments. During early iterations of B2S, it became apparent that some Bridges students were not capable of the defined level of participation (e.g., participating in lecture and written assignments without being disruptive to the B2S group as a whole). These participants were provided with an alternative experience (visit to the library) while the main group continued, and program application guidelines were adjusted to allow the widest range of participation while accommodating those whose behavior is inappropriate for a classroom experience.

The evaluation criterion for written assignments is a modified pass/fail (pass minus—needs improvement, pass—satisfactory, and pass plus—distinguished) including feedback. The evaluation component differentiates this program from community visits regularly engaged in by adults with IDD and changes the focus from a visit to a college campus to a legitimate classroom experience. The Bridges students informally reported that the evaluation component of the program is important to them. The program is designed to give Bridges students a regular college experience, which they perceive as traditional lectures and evaluations.

College students are expected to complete logs throughout the semester to reflect on and evaluate their involvement. During the fall semester, the social work students enrolled in Social Work Practice With Individuals and Families are required to participate in B2S as part of their service-learning expectation associated with the course. In the spring semester, that practice course is not taught, so the program is offered as a one-credit classroom-based experience open to all students at the college. The program typically has a waiting list in the spring.

As implemented, the program is low cost. Needed resources include classroom space, faculty time (to deliver lectures and supervise the program), supplies (e.g., copies, folders, paper, and pens for participants), the student coordinator's time, and the costs for the end-of-semester luncheon. The collaborating agency provides a program liaison who selects agency clients for participation, staff to accompany clients to the program, and transportation. Client participation in the program is a reimbursable activity for the agency.

Program evaluation and assessment

The program's evaluation model is formative, resulting in many improvements. When B2S began, each college student was matched with two Bridges students. Feedback indicated that one-on-one work would be more conducive to relationship development and responsiveness to the needs of each Bridges participant. Additionally, students expressed the need for more training to increase their skills and knowledge about working with people with IDD. The orientation for the college students is now three-sessions—two sessions without any Bridges students present and one session with program graduates. To accommodate an increased orientation period, the number of faculty lectures was decreased, which facilitated program implementation as the recruitment of faculty to lecture in the program can be challenging. The amount of reflective writing assignments for the college students was increased to give them more opportunities to process their experiences. The final major change was completing written assignments during class time only. During the initial implementation, these assignments were given to Bridges students to complete at home. This was overwhelming and anxiety provoking for some, and they made demands on staff for assistance. The switch to in-class assignments promoted collaboration and helped build the partners' working relationships.

To provide insight into the college students' own experiences, a qualitative study was implemented (approved by the college's institutional review board) in which written reflections from 14 students enrolled in the program were subjected to content analysis. Students were asked to respond to the following questions: (a) What did you learn about yourself during B2S? (b) What did you learn about people with disabilities? (c) Discuss your relationship with your partner: how did it evolve over the course of the semester? (d) What would you change about the program to enhance your learning? Your partner's learning? (e) Did the experience change you in any way? If so, how?

The responses revealed overwhelmingly positive reactions. Several students discussed their misconceptions and preconceived notions about this population prior to program participation. They discussed being afraid, their concern about “talking down” to these individuals, being ignorant about this group, seeing only the diagnosis and not the person, and questioning the Bridges students’ learning abilities. All the students who mentioned these issues then went on to discuss their change in attitude. For example, one student wrote, “Ultimately, in working with my partner and with other Bridges to Skidmore students this semester, I learned that having a disability absolutely does not define who a person is.” Another said, “I definitely grew out of my fear of approaching and interacting with people with disabilities.” Finally, one student said,

People with disabilities want many of the same things out of life as everyone else, and it took taking this class to help me see that . . . I was shocked the first day when my partner told me she lived in an apartment with a roommate and had a part-time job.

In discussing the progression of their partnerships, some students initially had difficulty connecting, but as the relationship matured they developed friendships as well as partnerships. This illustrates the importance of providing quality interaction opportunities over time rather than single encounters in helping to support positive attitude change among people without disabilities toward those with disabilities (Barr & Bracchitta, 2008; McManus et al., 2011; Ouellette-Kuntz, Burge, Brown, & Arseneault, 2010; Rice, 2009; Rillotta & Nettelbeck, 2007). Other themes included the benefit of learning from one another, being inspired by their partners’ gratitude, finding this experience rewarding, wishing to continue to work with this population in the future, and discovering strengths of people with IDD. One student remarked, “And now [I] believe that I may want to have a career assisting and working with [adults with I/DD].”

Suggestions for changes to B2S were offered by the students. Unfortunately, some were not feasible, such as meeting with partners twice a week (because of the agency’s schedule) and working in groups (because of the varying abilities of the Bridges participants), although these suggestions point to an increased desire to have more exposure to the B2S students. Other ideas that were implemented include a more thorough orientation, getting to know the other students in the class, and small activities such as word searches to help reinforce the topics covered in the lecture. But notwithstanding these limitations, most students said it was a privilege to be a part of this experience, and one student said, “This was by far my favorite class at Skidmore College.” One student made the following powerful statement: “The classes that are worth taking, in my opinion, are the ones in which you learn something, but also the ones that force you to question who you are, what you believe, and how you see the world. B2S is one of these.”

Lessons learned and conclusion

All formative evaluation efforts, including the content analysis previously described, indicate that B2S is a positive experience for those involved. Future evaluation efforts need to examine if the program does lead to student involvement in professional positions with this population. Although a formal evaluation has not been implemented with the B2S students, the agency reports there is a waiting list to get into the program, and B2S graduates routinely express how sad they are to see the experience end. According to agency staff, at least two of the B2S graduates have developed plans to attend a local community college because of the inspiration they received in B2S. To further refine the program and represent the voices of the B2S students in the evaluation process, the B2S students need to be included in future formal assessment efforts.

Although B2S is rather simple to replicate, there are things to consider prior to implementation. Developing a strong collaborative relationship with an agency is the most pivotal aspect of the process. In the B2S case, this was accomplished by the fact that one of its cofounders is a management-level employee at the collaborating agency, which allowed a smooth connection. Once other agency managers and staff were on board, the next challenge was scheduling a consistent time with the agency every week for

the participants to be transported to the college. This required extra staff and transportation costs for the agency.

Each semester, the student coordinator develops a schedule that reflects the liberal arts, and unfortunately, finding professors willing to lecture has been challenging. Although they are asked to speak about their passion, which would make preparation time minimal, many decline the offer to participate. But among those that do, they find the experience highly rewarding. After her lecture, one faculty member wrote in an e-mail, “I . . . hope you’ll convey to all involved how much I thank them . . . for having me to the class and indulging my speculative thoughts. It’s the most fun I’ve had in a lecture in, well, probably ever.” One by-product of the program is the exposure of faculty from diverse disciplines to those with IDD in a positive and collaborative environment.

Although attracting students to the program has not been a problem lately (in recent semesters there have been waiting lists), significant outreach had to be conducted early during the semesters when the course was offered to all majors. Unfortunately, recruitment of male students continues to be a problem. Other issues include the wide array of functioning levels among the B2S students, which makes structuring lectures and developing appropriate written assignment to accommodate these differences challenging. Providing adequate support to the college students is also important, and the inclusion of journals, blogs, reading assignments, and the consistent availability of the student coordinator have been effective in addressing this.

Finally, B2S has been a wonderful way to increase the visibility of social work at the college. The initiative is often cited as a great example of community-college collaboration, service learning, and an academic experience that helps to promote responsible, informed citizenship (part of the college’s strategic plan). The fiscal costs are low, yet the rewards are high. It is but one way for those who are privileged enough to routinely engage with the academy to share their resources with those who otherwise might not ever have the chance to take a college class.

Notes on contributors

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