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## *“Disabled or Not, People Just Want to Feel Welcome” Stories of Microaggressions and Microaffirmations from College Students with Intellectual Disability*

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### Abstract

*As part of a larger storytelling project with college students belonging to minoritized social groups, nine young adults from an inclusive college program for students with intellectual disability (ID) participated in narrative interviews. All were invited to tell stories about campus incidents of microaggression and microaffirmation related to their disability. They also were invited to tell stories about other social identities they claimed. Stories were analyzed thematically and for correspondence with findings from previous studies involving other social identity groups. Students told a variety of stories about interpersonal incidents on campus that made them feel respected or disrespected. They also shared stories of institutional encounters that influenced their sense of acceptance at the university. Although they told more stories about microaffirmations, they were not immune to microaggressions. However, many of the students’ microaffirmation stories placed importance on not being perceived as different rather than a clear affirmation of disability identity. Students’ stories have implications for fostering a campus climate where students with ID are respected and included and where ableism is addressed in substantial ways.*



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With the rise of intelligence testing and the eugenics movement, individuals that are now identified as intellectually disabled (ID) were believed to have especially limited capacities for education and work. Segregation in institutions for the so-called feeble-minded paired with circumscribed educational opportunities relegated those with ID to the bottom of the “steep steps” leading to higher education (Dolmage, 2017, p. 41). This history of academic ableism has persisted and students with ID continue to be the least likely to attend any type of postsecondary education as compared to other disabled students (Newman, 2005; Newman et al. 2011). However, higher education options have emerged for this group. The argument was made across multiple fronts: increased inclusion in other educational settings prompted a desire for inclusive college options; college participation offers a socially valued role for people with ID, which could promote a greater quality of life; and the clear link between college education and employment could benefit a community that has abysmal employment outcomes (Hart, Grigal, & Weir, 2010).

College programs for students with ID gained momentum with funding for model demonstration projects in the reauthorization of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (2008), but they are still relatively rare. Approximately 260 programs exist in the United States within two- and four-year institutions of higher education (Grigal, Hart, & Papay, 2019). In response to the marginalization of people with ID in higher education, national (U.S.) program standards emphasize inclusive, person-centered approaches that support students with ID to engage in typical college academic and social experiences in pursuit of credentials, employment, and further education (Grigal et al., 2019). Research on social experiences of college students with ID has examined program features that support integration (e.g., Folk, Yamamoto, & Stodden, 2012; Plotner & May, 2019; Stefánsdóttir & Björnsdóttir, 2016) but has not considered their perspectives within a larger frame of how diverse social identity groups experience belonging on campus or how they integrate both positive and negative experiences into their perceptions of campus climate.

College students’ experiences of belonging – or lack of it – influences their enrollment in higher education, how well they learn and thrive, and whether they complete college (Fleming et al., 2017; Harbour & Greenfield, 2017; Museus, Yi, & Saelua, 2018; Vaccaro, Daly-Cano, & Newman, 2015). Students’ sense of belonging is linked to their perception of campus climate, which is influenced by the repeated, daily interactions they experience. Students who are members of minoritized groups may have more negative perceptions of campus climate because dominant campus environments, systems, and people can explicitly and implicitly perpetuate racism, ableism, and other discrimination patterns (Garvey et al., 2018; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Johnson et al., 2007; Lett, Tamaian, & Klest, 2019; Stebleton et al., 2014).

Pierce (1970) introduced the concept of microaggressions to describe the subtle, stunning putdowns experienced by members of racially minoritized groups in the course of their everyday lives. The microaggression concept also has been studied in relation to the experiences of disabled people and connected to discourses on ableism, disability prejudice, and disablism across academic and other social environments (Dolmage, 2017; Keller & Galgay, 2010; Nario-Redmond, Perlman, & Silverman, 2020). Rowe (2008) coined the term microaffirmations as a way to focus on everyday acts, public or private, that help individuals from underrepresented groups to succeed in higher education contexts. Despite prevalence of microaggressions, students’ experiences of microaffirmations may influence their sense of resistance, agency, and belonging on campus.

The present study extends and connects previous work on ableism, microaggressions, microaffirmations, and campus climate by considering the experiences of an underrepresented

group of college students – those with ID. A campus storytelling project involving undergraduates from racially minoritized groups provided an opportunity to consider experiences of students with ID through a social identity lens. The storytelling project highlighted student experiences through narratives of marginalized and othered persons, in the context of a racial justice standard. Conceptual frameworks of microaggressions and microaffirmations were used to elicit and examine the students' everyday encounters on campus that influenced their perceptions of inclusion, exclusion, and campus climate. With the expansion of the storytelling project to include students with ID, who were enrolled in an inclusive program on campus, the ways in which microaggressions and microaffirmations might be experienced relative to a disability identity were considered.

### **Microaggression**

Sue and colleagues defined microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial, gender, sexual and religious slights and insults to the target person or group” (2010, p.6). Existing research has documented college students' experiences of racial microaggressions (see, for example, Harwood et al., 2012; Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000; Yosso et al., 2009) and the relationship between microaggressions and negative perceptions of campus climate (McCabe, 2009; Minikel-Lacocque, 2013; Solorzano et al., 2000; Yosso et al., 2009). Studies have also provided useful descriptions of microaggression types. Sue et al. (2007) described three types: microinsults, microinvalidations, and microassaults. Yosso et al.'s (2009) description of racial institutional microaggressions provided an additional distinctive type. In this storytelling project, we classified microaggression experiences shared by students into these four categories.

#### *Disability & Microaggression*

The concept of ableist or disability microaggressions also has been examined. Frequently cited is Keller and Galgay's (2010) study in which they identified ten specific types of microaggressions experienced by disabled adults. These included: denial of personal identity, denial of disability experience, denial of privacy, helplessness, secondary gain, spread effect, infantilization, patronization, second-class citizen, and desexualization. Others have attempted to refine this typology or identify alternative formulations relevant to particular disability groups (e.g., Bell, 2013; Conover, Israel, & Nylund-Gibson, 2017; Gonzales et al., 2015; Robb, 2015). These studies surveyed adults with physical, sensory, mental, or unspecified cognitive disabilities regarding community experiences. None included participants identified with ID. Ryan and Scura (2011) speculated that five types of Keller and Galgay's disability microaggressions would be most often experienced by college students with disabilities: denial of personal identity, denial of privacy, patronization, spread effect, and second-class citizenship.

College students with physical disabilities have noted that their feelings of social isolation are often connected to microaggressions experienced across campus (Bialka et al., 2017). The negatively perceived actions of others include being ignored as a person, having one's disability ignored, assuming that physical disability was linked to cognitive disability, witnessing praise for others who were nice to a disabled person, and being treated as if they were a child. Intersectional erasure was a central theme in the narratives of other college students with physical disabilities

who also claimed social identities related to their gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity (Abes & Wallace, 2018). These students described negative experiences related to their disability being objectified and accommodated, but not recognized as an identity. When disability was recognized as an identity by others, it was treated as additive rather than intersectional. Further, students often found themselves downplaying their disability in order to fit into the campus culture or other identity groups. Minimizing or concealing one's disability can also be a protective mechanism for avoiding discriminatory interactions (Silverman, 2020; Solis, 2006). Ableist microaggressions have been associated with higher levels of depression and anxiety among disabled college students (Lett et al., 2019). Although microaggressions experienced by college students with ID have not been previously reported, a study of young adults with ID's sense of belonging in community settings highlighted similar interactions that led to feelings of exclusion (Robinson et al., 2018). These included being present but not engaged due to others' indifference or negative response to impairment. Also, when others focused only on the young adults' impairment and not on other aspects of their identity, they did not feel a sense of belonging.

### **Microaffirmation**

We also studied microaffirmations to help us understand positive elements of campus climate that lead individuals to feel that their inclusion, well-being or success is promoted. The first round of storytelling data focused on the experiences of racially minoritized students and defined racial microaffirmations as “behaviors, verbal remarks or environmental cues experienced by individuals from minoritized racial groups in the course of their everyday lives that affirm their racial identities, acknowledge their racialized realities, resist racism or advance cultural and ideological norms of racial justice” (Rolón-Dow & Davison, 2018, p. 1). Through careful analysis of the different ways students described experiencing affirmation, Rolón-Dow and Davison (2018) developed a typology of microaffirmations that included microrecognitions, microvalidations, microtransformations and microprotections. While this typology development focused on racial microaffirmations, we were interested in how this concept might apply to affirmations of disability-related identities.

#### *Disability & Microaffirmation*

At the time of this study, we had not found any research that directly investigated microaffirmations involving disabled people. However, findings about disabled college students' negative campus experiences pointed toward actions and environments that might promote positive assessments of campus climate. Generally, these were institutional, such as building a visible and strong disability community and creating accessible social spaces on campus that provide a platform for positive interactions and disability dialogue (Abes & Wallace, 2018; Bialka et al, 2017; Scott, 2019). For some students interpersonal interactions in which their disability is recognized as an identity, not just a condition to be accommodated, is affirming (Abes & Wallace, 2018).

For young adults with ID, in the absence of studies about college-related microaffirmations, we considered studies that examined their sense of belonging in campus or community settings (Björnsdóttir, 2017; Renwick, et al., 2019; Robinson et al., 2018). Reflecting on her university's initial implementation of an inclusive program, Björnsdóttir (2017) believed that shared experiences in coursework in pursuit of a diploma mattered, because students were

afforded opportunities to experience feelings of being valued or respected within an identified group and having a sense of shared experience or characteristics with that group. A sense of belonging may be further influenced by inclusive physical and social environments and students' self-knowledge.

In community settings, interactions that signal acceptance for being one's self appear essential to establishing a sense of belonging for youth with ID (Renwick et al., 2019; Robinson et al., 2018). Experiences interpreted as being recognized and valued also matter. Recognition referred to others acting in a way that affirmed the self-image of the young adult. Being valued was perceived when others acted in a way that was deemed respectful or promoted a sense of fitting in and feeling safe. Access to public spaces that supported socializing and continuity of relationships also enhanced feelings of belonging.

## **Methodology**

The present study was intended to extend the limited literature focusing on perception of campus climate and belonging among college students with ID. We explored how students with ID characterized their daily campus encounters through frameworks of microaggression and microaffirmation. We wondered what their stories would reveal about experiences of ableism, access, inclusion, and belonging in higher education.

The subjects of this study were current students and alumni from a mid-Atlantic university's two-year certificate program comprised of coursework and internships for students with ID. The program was established in the division of continuing education, which provided professional and academic offerings to adult and non-traditional learners. Typically, students in continuing education programs have not had access to traditional undergraduate campus-based resources and supports. Since the establishment of the program in 2010, program staff have developed agreements with administrative offices across the university to promote access for students with ID to the majority of resources on campus, including student services (e.g., writing center; health center), "first year experience" courses and activities, student-led organizations, and residence life (i.e., on-campus housing and related social activities).

All 23 students who, at the time of this study, were enrolled in the program for students with ID or had graduated within the last two years received email invitations to participate in the study. If they expressed an interest in participating, they received explanations of what the institutional review board-approved study entailed and were enrolled in the study once they provided informed consent. Nine young adults agreed to participate. Two identified as white and female. Of the seven who identified as male, three also identified as black or African American and four as white. All participants expressed themselves verbally. Participants chose pseudonyms for themselves.

We used narrative interviews, a method that encourages participants to retell stories about important events, the social context in which they occur, and the feelings associated with them (Muylaert et al., 2014). The purpose was to elicit stories of microaggressions and microaffirmations experienced by the students on campus. The 30-60 minute, audio-recorded interviews were conducted by an undergraduate student or the first author. Both interviewers were familiar to the participants through engagement in other activities of the campus program for students with ID, but had no direct supervisory or instructional relationship with the students. We did not assume that all study participants were familiar with the terms microaggression and

microaffirmation. Rather, the concepts were explained in language more familiar to students. To solicit a story about a microaggression we asked participants to describe an experience where they felt misunderstood, disrespected, insulted, or excluded in relation to their identity as a student with ID. Regarding microaffirmation, we asked participants to describe an experience where they felt affirmed, respected, strengthened, protected, or included in relation to their identity as a student with ID. Participants were invited to tell stories about other social identities, too. Several participants told more than one microaggression or microaffirmation story.

Participants also were asked how these stories informed their understanding of the university's campus climate for diversity, equity, or inclusion. After transcription, we used the students' own words to create two or more brief vignettes for each student about their experiences of microaggression and microaffirmation. The vignettes included the students' description of the contexts, effects, and responses, presented in a story format. In some cases, editing was done to support clarity and flow of the story. The vignettes were shared with each participant to ensure that we had adequately captured the experiences they had shared and to provide an opportunity for them to offer suggestions for clarification or improvement.

We developed a rubric to analyze participants' stories for correspondence with a taxonomy of microaggressions utilizing definitions provided by Sue et al. (2007, 2010) and Yosso et al. (2009). For microaffirmation classification, we used the typology provided by Rolón-Dow and Davison (2018). After each story was independently classified by three separate researchers, we met as a team and discussed classifications. Differences were discussed to clarify which microaggression or microaffirmation type fit best. We noted that a few stories contained elements fitting into multiple types. In these cases, we selected a primary classification that best matched the stories' conclusions as shared by the storytellers. We also compared the stories to specific examples of disability microaggressions identified by Keller and Galgay (2010).

## Findings

### *Microaggressions*

In total, five of nine storytellers told microaggression stories. A sixth said he could not think of an incident, but when telling his affirmation story, he offered examples of negative treatment due to his disability. Another student shared how he worked to avoid conflicts between his friends with ID and his brother's nondisabled friends. Two participants said they could not think of a microaggression incident.

Some stories had elements that matched Keller and Galgay's disability microaggressions. These included five types of disability microaggressions: denial of personal identity, spread effect, infantilization, patronization, and second-class citizen. These match Ryan and Scura's list, except that this study's participants did not report denial of privacy. They did report infantilization.z

**Microinsult.** According to Sue et al. (2010), micro-insults are comments that seem rude or insensitive and demean a person. This example from Fred also represents an instance of infantilization related to his experience with staff from a community disability service agency, who coached him at his campus job.

Sometimes people treat people with disabilities as kids. That can make you feel uneasy. You can be 20 years old and they'll treat you like a 10-year-old. I remember, I had two job coaches and they consistently did not accept the methods

on how I do a job. They're trying to tell me, "Don't do it this way" but I have my own methods in doing certain things the way I want to do them. When this happened I didn't really say anything much to them, because I was kind of annoyed. So, I didn't really talk to them. I would let it go after the job was over. But I decided that in the future I'd be a little bit more prepared. I'd tell them, "Make sure you don't disrespect me. Treat me the way I want to be treated." And I have done that.

Fred believed that being perceived as a child who did not know how to do things was a common problem for people with disabilities.

**Microinvalidation.** Sue et al. say that microinvalidations "exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feeling or experiential reality" of a person's identity (p. 278). None of the students' stories clearly represented an interpersonal interaction of this type. However, Zach told a story about proactively managing encounters between friends with and without a disability to avoid such negative experiences. He expressed his discomfort with having his brothers' friends who were nondisabled visiting his campus apartment at the same time as his friends who had ID because of the verbal conflicts that sometimes occurred between the groups. He connected this to his high school experience. He explained,

I learned that my brother's friends and my friends, they don't really mix. Just like, when I was in high school with the kids with disabilities in a group. I had people at school that knew I was with them. So, I would get worried about what they would think of me. I ended up not really liking the experience of being in classes just for people with disabilities. I hang out with a lot of people that have disabilities. But I also know a lot of people that don't have disabilities. I've tried to teach both; just making sure everybody understands. Nobody really says much to me about my disability, like judging. It's more like myself and how I feel sometimes. Sometimes it can get in the way of me hanging out with people.

Although there is not a direct microinvalidation in this story, Zach highlighted the emotional labor involved in avoiding microaggressions and how this connects to his negative self-judgements about disability.

**Microassault.** According to Sue et al. (2007), micro-assaults may involve "violent verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior or purposeful discriminatory actions" (p. 278). Daniel told a complicated story in which he said he felt twice-victimized. In brief, the story occurred during a change of classes. Daniel was slow to leave his desk and another student bumped him. Daniel told him to stop, but the other student bumped him again. A female student nearby focused on Daniel and told him he should get up and leave. She said nothing to the student who bumped Daniel. Daniel characterized this as aggressive behavior and a misdirected intervention that made him the problem. In his story he also racially stereotyped his primary aggressor as an "oriental dude" dressed all in black like a gang member. Reflecting on this incident, Daniel said: "I've been picked on at school ever since I was a kid because of being African American and having a disability. I had to deal with that kind of diversity and adversity all my life as a child." In this example, Daniel experienced being treated as a second-class citizen due to his race and his disability.

Nicole reported a microassault that happened at a campus fireworks event. A group of undergraduates that she did not know began

...gossiping because I was wearing clothes that they were not wearing. ... They were, like, saying mean words to me ... And they said, “Look at this kid.” And I said, that “I’m not a kid, I’m 21.” I was yelling at them, telling them, “I’m 21, older than you guys.”

She described the incident as bullying and was so upset that she considered “calling the cops” but ultimately decided to talk to her friends about what had happened.

***Institutional microaggressions.*** Institutional microaggressions lead recipients to feel as if a university structure, practice, or policy discriminates against, dismisses, overlooks, or targets their various social identities (Yosso et al., 2009). This example from Isaiah, also matches Keller and Galgay’s patronization and second-class citizen types. Isaiah recounted an attempt to join a fraternity. Because he was in a certificate program and not in a degree program, he didn’t qualify under an existing university rule. With support from program staff, he made a pitch to an administrator about changing the rule. Isaiah reported that during the meeting “...she [the administrator] was like, “Wow, you don’t seem like you have a disability” and “It’s great that you’re giving your presentation.” The proposed change process discussed at that meeting ended up being more complicated than Isaiah was prepared to tackle. He reflected,

I think that if you’re considered a regular undergraduate it might be easier. And, I think that even if I had a disability, but identified as a regular undergraduate student and not with the program [for students with ID], then I probably would have got into a fraternity a little bit easier, because everything would have been open to me.

Later in his stories, Isaiah reflected on how being part of a new program supporting students with ID may have created unintentional institutional barriers at the same time that the program was pushing the institution to change its practices. He explained:

What makes it a bad thing is ‘cause it’s its own program that’s been placed in another environment. So it’s almost like the campus just kind of said, “Hey, you come on in, you do your thing.” And now it’s like you’re separated, but you’re not, and now you’re trying to become part of.

Matt encountered an informal policy intended to support students with ID, but that instead had an isolating effect. He was one of the first from the program for students with ID to live in an undergraduate residence hall. In an example of spread effect, the residence life staff presumed that the students’ label of ID indicated limited social abilities that would require protection. He explained,

The reason why they put us in upper level dorms in the first place was because they thought that socially, putting us in a first-year dorm would not be a good fit, so that’s why they just put us in an upper level dorm, which was, in my opinion, not the best move.

He thought, “No one was doing anything on purpose, it was just the way the environment was at the time that made me feel isolated. It made me feel like I didn’t belong.” With encouragement of program staff, he spoke to residence staff and moved into a first-year dorm the next semester. He said, “The new dorm was a lot more engaging. It was a lot more social, it was everything a freshman student wants out of college. I met a lot more people.”

*Microaffirmations*

All nine participants offered stories of feeling affirmed on campus. Three told additional stories, for a total of 13 stories across participants. In general, participants had positive perceptions of campus climate. They described the climate as “supportive,” “an environment for learning” and a place where “people with disabilities can explore on campus and find their social network.” Matt said:

It’s sort of a close-knit community. Everyone wants to feel that they belong here. People have ways to make people feel like they do belong here. Disabled or not, people just want to feel welcome, and when you come to campus that’s the vibe you get.

Participants’ microaffirmation stories involved interpersonal and institutional encounters. They often used words such as accepted, respected, and included. However, not all of the students’ stories included explicit affirmation of their disability identity.

**Microrecognition.** Microrecognitions involve a person’s belief that their presence, identity, or experience as a member of a social identity group has been made known or visible. There is a sense of being included by others. This example from Rick involves two social identities that mattered to him.

I was just hanging out, and I just got invited to go to lunch with a couple of friends from [the certificate program]. [When I saw them] I was like, hi, how are you doing? We decided we were all kind of hungry that day. And we’re just like, okay, we’re all going to go to eat, so, let’s put some money together. Let’s go buy some lunch. And so that’s what we did. This was a cross-campus trip. ... This campus is a place where you can get a good education. And I am an educated black man. I am not a college drop out. I think it is important for people to reach out to other people whether you have a disability or if you are black or white. You have to be comfortable in your own skin. People should reach out and involve others. Other students have reached out to me, but just the students in my program, not undergraduates.

Rick believed that his identities – whether as a disabled person or a black man – should not be a barrier to inclusion. Although, the inclusion he feels is only partial; it is other students with ID in the program that reached out to him in ways that are inclusive of his identities.

Some students described being moved from a state of feeling alone or different to feeling – in their words – comfortable, accepted, included, and respected. These feelings arose through having access to a variety of classes, clubs, workplaces, and informal social opportunities, including opportunities to engage with other students with ID and being connected to undergraduates in disability-related programs on campus. For Emily, this happened through hanging out with an undergraduate she met through a college-affiliated Best Buddies friendship program that matched young adults with ID with same-age nondisabled peers: “We usually went to McDonald’s [or the] mall. I felt comfortable when we hung out.” Nicole said that being invited to participate in social activities by members of the Baptist Student Ministry made her feel supported and happy.

In many campus spaces, storytellers felt they were not ignored. Others “reached out,” expressed interest in them, and treated them with kindness, respect, and “like all other students.” As Mike said:

In my undergrad classrooms I felt respected and included. I took two classes - sports management and child development. I chose those two classes because I like sports, and I thought it'd be cool to learn about working with kids. I thought it was a great experience doing those classes because I learned more about the business side of sports. And [I learned about] children, how they function when they're younger. These were medium-sized classes, and I felt included because the other students didn't treat me any different just because I have a disability. They treated me the same, like all the other students. They were respectful to me. They were just kind to me, you know. We talked about the class, and what we're learning about, and just seeing how their day was. There wasn't just one specific time that this happened. Looking back, I still feel great about these classes. I don't think there was ever a time that I didn't feel included.

The majority of the stories students told did not use disability affirming language. The language they used of being treated “like all other students” represented a low bar for what constitutes a microaffirmation. It is beyond the scope of the data set to determine whether students were comparing these experiences to prior experiences of being infantilized, excluded or disrespected or whether students were reflecting on internalized ableism. Some students provided more details in their stories that helped us better understand what they found significant and affirming about an experience in relation to their disability identity. For example, what Mike seemed to find affirming was that he was treated as an adult.

People, my co-workers at my jobs, they treat me with respect, too. People are saying hi to me, and they're not ignoring me when I say hi to them. Also, they talk to me like a normal person instead of a person with a disability, or baby, like I'm a child. They don't act like I'm not there. They don't treat me like I'm invisible. They don't treat me like I'm slow. They treat me like a normal worker. They treat me how everybody else should be treated. In two years at work, I never felt disrespected. Other people see me as an independent person, and so, they treat me with respect. I think they treat me very well.

Mike was not saying that he wanted his disability erased; rather, he appreciated being seen as an adult and having his humanity acknowledged with respect and dignity.

**Microvalidation.** Validations occur when a person perceives that others have accorded truth or value to the person's social identity and experiences. In this micro-validation example, Fred described how he is treated at work in the campus admissions office. He said,

When I'm at work, my boss and coworkers respect me consistently. They give me good eye contact. They talk to me as if I'm an adult... they'll give the time to actually listen and hear what you have to say to them. I'm appreciating that my boss and coworkers see me as an adult instead of looking at me as my disability... They see the real me. I feel like a lot of people don't see that way. I accept my disability as part of me. It's part of me. I'm not gonna deny that. I don't have a problem with my disability. I just want people to treat me normally. That means, they treat me like an adult. I don't want to be treated like a 10 or 13-year-old little kid, you know?

I think that my being treated like an adult at work shows that people can be more confident of individuals with disabilities. Individuals with disabilities do belong on campus and at work in some way, shape, or form.

Fred is explicit about how the experience he shared accorded value to his disability identity. He described being treated “normal” as being treated like an adult and asserted that people with disabilities belong on campus. There were only two stories classified as microvalidations, perhaps suggesting the extent of the work that remains to be done to create campus climates where disability identity is validated.

**Microtransformation.** Microtransformations are about a sense of enhanced capacity for success or about experiences with institutional policies, practices, or initiatives that enhance or enable some facet of a student’s social or academic life. Daniel indicated that his story did not relate to his disability, but rather to being a “black African-American male.” This story shows how a seemingly small event created hope for bigger and better things. Daniel said:

Doing the tour with the Black Student Union made me feel like I was welcome and included. It represents my culture as a Black African-American male. And it makes me feel like I could do something more and greater; that I could be a future black leader as a writer someday. My main goal, after I finish college and become successful in my career, is that someday I want to find a mate. After I take the time to get to know her as a friend, then I could settle down. That is something I've been wanting to do for a long time. Being welcomed on the tour made me think that maybe my goals are possible.

Across transformation stories, feelings of empowerment were connected to opportunities to be engaged or involved over time in exploring identity and personal interests. These opportunities were embedded in various institutional programs or activities that increased capacity for social or academic integration into the university. In addition to the Black Student Union, these included a service-oriented alternative spring break program for undergraduates, a unified theater group for people with or without disabilities, and the campus program for people with ID. In these spaces, participants described being welcomed and treated as a typical member of a community. Not only that “you can be you,” as some participants mentioned, but you could also learn more about yourself and accomplish meaningful goals. Reflecting on his experience with the theater group, Isaiah said:

The club was for people with disability and [people] without disabilities. They let us know that the club was open to all kinds of people. It made us feel really welcomed and accepted for who we was. Feeling that way kind of happened as I went along. I'd joined in my first semester, but I couldn't be there the second semester because of the scheduling. But the head of the club, Julie, was with me in a class and told me that everyone was missing me. She said they wanted me to come back.

Knowing that Julie was [also] a coach for students [in the certificate program] was important because she knew us. She was someone you could go to with any questions or anything. Everyone else you could ask questions to but if you don't feel comfortable about that, you can always go to Julie. Particularly, I would. But I'm saying, if anyone else don't know how to speak out, and one of their goals might

be to be more inclusive or interact with more people, then the fact that just knowing, “hey, Julie's here, I know somebody,” makes it easier.

Isaiah's story highlights how the theater group's proactive engagement of students with disabilities and having a “coach” were instrumental to facilitating his social integration.

Matt described how participation in a service-oriented alternative spring break program for undergraduates deepened his sense of belonging at the university and accomplishment as a person with a disability.

It definitely made me feel like I was more a part of the university than I ever thought I would be. We rebuilt houses for people who suffered from Hurricane Matthew. We stayed at a campsite. Imagine being a kid and going to summer camp, that's what it was like. The people on the trip were nice. They wanted to get to know you, to be around you, to do stuff with you. I didn't know any of the students on the trip before, I got to know them on the trip. ...When we had to reflect after [each] day, that's when I actually felt more like people could actually see what you value and what you're doing and why you're here. ...I felt valued. I felt like people actually liked you for you. We talked about what you're studying in school, and why you're on the trip, and what kind of stuff you're into. A lot of people talked to me. ...There's a bunch of people who made me feel good about myself, boosted my confidence a lot, and made you feel like you were part of something, really great people trying to help people. [I remember feeling it was] one of the best experiences of my life. I just tried to stay in touch with people that I went on the trip with. ... I think this story shows that you can accomplish anything whether you're disabled or not.

**Microprotection.** Feeling shielded or protected from harmful or derogatory behaviors, practices and policies tied to a social identity is considered a microprotection. One participant offered an example related to the campus' “End the R Word” campaign. This event was part of a national initiative to discourage use of the word “retarded,” because of its history as a negative and demeaning descriptor. As people passed through a busy student center they were asked by students with and without disabilities to add their signature to a banner proclaiming their support. Isaiah characterized this act as the campus “banning” the word and signaling that the campus was “inclusive.” He reflected,

It was like we were saying, “Hey, we're here for disability. We don't want to hear that word.” It made me feel proud to see the big banner with all the signatures. Just the amount of people that signed made me feel like some people really care.

## **Discussion**

The microaggression and microaffirmation stories of students with ID encompassed a variety of interpersonal and institutional dynamics that influenced their sense of belonging and perspectives on campus climate. Their stories reflected themes like those of college students with physical disabilities regarding the value they placed on being recognized and not ignored as a person (Abes & Wallace, 2018; Bialka et al. 2017). Their stories also touched on themes of belonging in the community as a person with ID, including the importance of sharing experiences and goals with other social identity groups (Björnsdóttir, 2017; Robinson et al., 2018). Although they told more stories about microaffirmations, which often focused on interpersonal interactions

signaling respect for them as adults who had their own interests and abilities, they were not immune to microaggressions such as denial of personal identity, infantilization, and being treated like a second-class citizen.

The microaggression and microaffirmation conceptual frameworks utilized in this exploratory study were originally developed to study experiences of individuals from minoritized racial groups. We found the microaggression framework helpful for illuminating the particular experiences of college students with ID. This suggests the potential for extending earlier work on disability microaggressions in ways that would help to identify commonalities of experiences with other social identity groups, yet also maintaining a critical focus on the diversity of experiences. These students' stories reflected experiences that may be more common to people with ID than other social identity groups. For example, being treated like a child was mentioned negatively by several participants. They also expressed the desire to be treated as "normal" and not differently from others. This study also directly considered microaffirmations, a concept that has been less well-studied relative to disability identity. Applying the microaffirmation framework provided insight into the types of interpersonal and institutional actions that students associated with a positive campus climate and enhanced their sense of belonging. However, the framework was difficult to utilize when students described their affirming experiences as those in which they were perceived as "not different," rather than as experiences of positive recognition or validation of a disability identity.

While students acknowledged being identified as disabled, none of the stories they told indicated a strong embrace of a disability identity. Predominantly, storytellers simply wished to be recognized as not different from their college peers. This stance may reflect a desire to distance themselves from their histories of being educated separately from peers and the stigma associated with ID in K-12 settings (Siperstein, Pociask, & Collins, 2010). They had experienced ableism across years of schooling in which they were routinely identified as not meeting academic standards and separated from their "normal" non-disabled peers. Further, many of the storytellers did not have immediately apparent markers of disability (e.g., facial characteristics of Down Syndrome), which allowed them to "pass" as non-disabled in many circumstances; a choice that is common among individuals labeled as ID as they negotiate their identity in different environments (Carey, 2013; Rapley, Kiernan, & Antaki, 1998; Spassiani & Friedman, 2014). Choosing to not disclose disability can also serve as self-protection against the stress of pervasive ableism or promote access to a desired in-group and its benefits (Nario-Redman, 2020; Silverman, 2020; Solis, 2006). Alternatively, students' microaffirmation stories may have reflected their intent to actively construct more complex social and academic identities in an environment that they perceived as welcoming; asserting a broader view of their humanity in which disability played a lesser and not ultimately defining role as had been their experience previously (Dorozenko, Roberts, & Bishop, 2015).

Whether our storytellers would have self-identified as ID apart from the context of the college program in which they were enrolled was not a question we asked. Exploring the students' own constructions of disability in a college context would be strengthened by analyses that examined stories of microaggressions and microaffirmations in relation to their conceptions of ableism. This may require a different methodology that engages with participants over time to more deeply understand how their disability identities integrate or reject ableist ideologies. This would include attention to how students made sense of a disability identity relative to their involvement with K-12 special education versus college environments. When telling their stories,

students occasionally referenced their prior negative experiences with being identified as disabled, which continued to shape their interpretation of and response to more recent interactions in college. Similarly, in studies of high school students who identified as Latina/o or African American and received special education services for learning disabilities, students reported the lasting impacts of low expectations, disregard, and bullying in environments they characterized as hostile due to adults' communicating stereotypes about race and disability and peers questioning or misunderstanding their disability (Banks, 2017; Dávila, 2015).

In some stories, social identities of race and gender were foregrounded. Daniel and Rick's microaffirmation stories strongly asserted the importance they placed on their identities as black men. Yet, in many stories race or gender identities were not mentioned, even when students were prompted to share other stories about their identities. Considering the variation in the ways in which our storytellers did and did not highlight their racial and gender identities, examining the intersectional experiences of college students with ID who identify with other marginalized groups is of interest. While our research methods, acknowledged the possibility of intersectional microaggressions and microaffirmations, we did not prioritize this type of inquiry. Future research should intentionally engage with participants from multiply minoritized groups, including ID, to further explore the ways that microaggressions and microaffirmations reflect entanglements of race, ability, gender, and social class in higher education cultures. Utilizing a DisCrit framework (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2012) would further illuminate the ableism that is often overlooked in minoritized college students' experiences while also highlighting the diversity of disability experiences. For students labelled as ID, whose voices may be less often heard and affirmed in academic spaces, this approach would afford opportunities for understanding the role of internalized ableism in their creation and claiming of different social identities.

The students' stories also highlighted institutional structures and contexts that influenced their sense of acceptance in the campus community. In some instances, such as Isaiah's interest in joining a fraternity and Matt's wish to live in a first-year residence hall, university policies limited access to desired social experiences and made them feel they did not belong in spaces that other students readily accessed. Because they were part of a new program on campus for a new student group, they sometimes bumped into unexpected rules or systems that marked them as different. These situations caused students to question or negotiate their fit on campus, similar to the experiences of young adults with ID as they establish their place in a community (Renwick et al., 2019). Some participants observed that programs that support people with ID provide an important point of connection to caring people with shared experiences and interests, but such programs must ensure that they do not inadvertently create barriers to belonging.

### **Implications for Higher Education**

Institutional policy and administrative decisions to open or restrict students' access across several aspects of the traditional college environments played a key role in influencing their feelings of belonging or exclusion. This encompassed access to undergraduate courses, living on-campus, student organizations, and other campus social activities. The degree of inclusion among college programs for students with ID can vary widely (Grigal et al., 2019). The stories offered by these students suggested that the more inclusive programs can be, the greater likelihood of creating a feeling of belonging on a daily basis. Participants' stories demonstrated that accessible social spaces provided the context for frequent, positive interpersonal interactions with peers, such as being greeted in a friendly manner in a classroom or at a campus social event. These encounters

went a long way in reinforcing their sense of being accepted for who they were and welcomed in general.

The difficulties that students had navigating some restrictive university policies highlighted the necessity of engaging in institutional advocacy when creating and implementing inclusive programs for students with ID. Anticipating that many university administrators and staff have limited experience working with students with ID, program staff can expect to be involved in educating others about the capabilities of people with ID and the nature of inclusive practices in a college setting. Building on Harbour and Greenfield's (2017) recommendations for promoting a positive campus climate for students with disabilities, these efforts must address institutional responsibilities across units, not just disability support services. Similarly, attention to disability must be embedded in campus diversity initiatives, the academic curriculum, and structures that support student communities (Scott, 2019). This should include building opportunities for shared experiences across identity and interest groups (Björnsdóttir, 2017).

Several students suggested that the university should find ways to educate the larger campus community about disability, with a goal of helping people to understand that disability was not wholly defining of a person. They thought that the institution should also educate about the "social challenges" a person with a disability might experience on campus and how to intervene in supportive ways. This may suggest that the students recognized that their disability was not the problem, but how others perceived them was a concern. These suggestions echo recommendations from studies of college students identified with other disabilities (Abe & Wallace, 2018; Bialka et al., 2017), such as engaging college student organizations in promoting accessible social environments, recognizing (without objectifying) the challenges faced by disabled students, honoring disability culture and history, and having public resistance campaigns to ableism. These collectivist or social change approaches, which affirm a disability identity and build community, can be effective ways to combat ableism and create institutional change (Nario-Redmond, 2020; Silver, 2020). Students in this study were only minimally involved in collectivist activities based on disability identity or pride. Other than the "End the R Word" event, students were more often supported by program staff to engage in individual self-advocacy when confronted with institutional barriers. Given that participants valued involvement with student organizations and campus groups, program staff should also support students to connect with others who advocate for institutional change and assert the value that their perspective as a disabled person would bring to the group's efforts.

Staff did actively support students in identifying organizations that they were interested in and supported them as needed to become involved. The scope of these organizations across participants was diverse and reflected students' interests in such areas as their background (e.g., Black Student Union), faith (e.g. Ministry for Baptist Students), and disability-oriented organizations (e.g., inclusive theater, Best Buddies). While institutional policy supported access for these students, the availability of dedicated support is often helpful in order for students to access resources needed to participate effectively (Grigal et al., 2019). Based on our storytellers' experiences, maintaining access to other students with ID is also important; these peers may serve as important anchors for friendship and exploring new roles in the unfamiliar setting of higher education. The storytellers' positive comments about the relationships they built with fellow students with ID (and disability-oriented groups), suggest that these choices should also be supported. Engaging with others who share identities or understanding of disability experiences can offer social protection and support (Nario-Redmond, 2020). Whereas some programs might

seek to separate students with ID from each other under the guise of promoting a more genuinely inclusive college experience, some of this study's participants placed great value in these relationships due to their shared experiences.

## Conclusion

Higher education settings have only recently begun to provide access to students with ID. Their emerging presence on campuses provides an important opportunity to explore how they experience ableism, what promotes their sense of belonging, and thus, how postsecondary education environments can become more inclusive. From the students with ID in this study, we learned that access to traditional college classes, activities, and resources, as well as positive interactions with nondisabled peers, often promoted their feelings of belonging and acceptance. However, the students' microaffirmation stories were less connected with the reinforcement of a disability identity and more focused on not being perceived as different. The microaggression stories shared by the students about the ableist attitudes and practices they encountered, reinforced that more work is needed to ensure that students with ID are treated equitably on college campuses. The institutional elements of students' microaggression and microaffirmation stories highlighted the degree to which institutional ableism plays a central role in the college experiences of students with ID and the positive transformative impact of creating greater access.

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Rebecca Martusewicz, *Eastern Michigan University*  
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Peter Mayo, *University of Malta*  
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João Paraskeva, *UMass Dartmouth*  
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Brad Porfilio, *San Jose State University*  
Marc Pruyn, *Monash University*  
Lotar Rasinski, *University of Lower Silesia*  
Leena Robertson, *Middlesex University*  
Sam Rocha, *University of British Columbia*  
Edda Sant, *Manchester Metropolitan University*  
Doug Selwyn, *SUNY Plattsburgh*  
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Patrick Shannon, *Penn State University*  
Steven Singer, *The College of New Jersey*  
Kostas Skordoulis, *University of Athens*  
John Smyth, *Federation University Australia*  
Beth Sondel, *University of Pittsburgh*  
Hannah Spector, *Penn State University*  
Marc Spooner, *University of Regina*  
Mark Stern, *Colgate University*  
Peter Trifonas, *University of Toronto*  
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