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The Missing Image-Bearers at College: The Inclusion of People with Intellectual Disabilities On the Christian University Campus

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Abstract

Since the passage of the Higher Education Opportunities Act of 2008, higher education has expanded and improved access for individuals with intellectual disabilities. However, Christian colleges and universities have fallen behind in terms of creating innovative and spiritually formative programs for people with intellectual disabilities. Through the exploration of a literature review, a theological framework, and the description of three Christian programs that currently exist, this paper argues for the good of the inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities on the Christian college campus as fellow image-bearers. Additionally it contends that the Christian university has a unique position of to provide these opportunities as a blessing to the community and sign to all.

Introduction

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, public sentiment, activism, and faith-animated engagement have fueled movements to increase access to higher education in America. Higher education leaders have worked to dismantle racist, xenophobic, and sexist structures; and many have strived to provide financial means to people of all socioeconomic backgrounds (Thelin, 2004). When viewed through the theological frame, this movement is exciting and encouraging, as the college community has grown to more fully reflect the kingdom of God. Higher education has, in a sense, acknowledged the image of God in all students by inviting them to bear that identity within the university community (Ostrander, 2009). However, one population is strikingly missing from this growth in access.

Rarely on a college campus does one find an individual with an intellectual disability. Access has surely increased for individuals with other kinds of disabilities, but the prospect of individuals with intellectual disabilities attending college still seems foreign to many college students (Griffin et al., 2012). Though this population represents about 15% of the population of the country, very few people with intellectual disabilities attend college (American Association of Intellectual and Developmental Disorders, 2018).

Christians have led the charge in higher education since its inception (Glanzer, Alleman, & Ream, 2017), and the venture of Christian higher education has the chance to show the radical inclusion of the ministry of Christ by inviting this population to enrich Christian campuses, too. Ostrander (2009) lays out the significance of the Christian university simply, “Why does college matter to God? Because it prepares us to be image-bearers of God and effective agents of redemption in every corner of creation” (p.33).

The distinctive and theologically significant benefit Christian colleges can offer is more than simply instruction. They can provide faith-animated learning and human development, especially in the manner of spiritual development. This study provided a review of current realities for people with intellectual disabilities in college communities today followed by a theological framework to evaluate the ways Christian colleges are welcoming students with intellectual disabilities. Ultimately, this research demonstrated the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities provides not only great blessings to these students, their families,

and the other members of campus community, but also demonstrates that Christian higher education cares about more than academic and instructional performance.

Literature Review

Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities in the United States

The American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) defines intellectual disability as one that causes “significant limitations in intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior” (2018, para. 1). Examples of intellectual disabilities include, but are not limited to, Autism Spectrum Disorders, disabilities caused by traumatic brain injury, and Down Syndrome (Special Olympics, 2018).

Intellectual functioning involves cognitive abilities such as learning and reasoning. It is traditionally measured with an IQ test, and people with intellectual disabilities tend to score lower than 70-75 (AAIDD, 2018). Adaptive behaviors include social, conceptual, and practical skills required for daily, independent living (AAIDD, 2018). The onset of an intellectual disability normally occurs before the age of eighteen (AAIDD, 2018).

Around four million Americans have intellectual disabilities (Cusack, 2017). This population often struggles to find meaningful employment, as only 15% of people with intellectual disabilities have jobs (Cusack 2017). Though public school education provides opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities to attend until they are 21, opportunities dissipate in higher education; only 8% of this population attended postsecondary education as of 2001 (Getzel & Wehman, 2005).

Additionally, parenting a child with intellectual disabilities can be a great stressor. Studies have shown parents of children with intellectual disabilities are more likely to develop “clinically significant levels of stress, anxiety, and depression” (McConnell & Savage, 2015, p. 100). McConnell & Savage (2015) argue equivalent attention must be paid to the societal constraints and “contemporary social arrangements” that do not adequately support the realities of families with children with intellectual disabilities (p. 106).

The above data provides a clear picture that this population has needs exacerbated by environments unsuited to their realities (Reid, 2015). However, people with intellectual disabilities often have unique strengths that are developed and magnified through the presence of appropriate and consistent support (AAIDD, 2018). Though intellectual and

adaptive functioning is important to the traditional college student, current higher education initiatives have shown college can provide a supportive community and valuable experience to individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities at College

Some people with intellectual disabilities choose to attend college without the support of a specialized program. These students can encounter distressing struggles ranging from social confusion to structural inadequacies of the campus (Reid, 2015). Reid (2015) notes that one of the most distressing struggles can be social stress, as exemplified by a case study focused on a student with an Autism Spectrum disorder.

However, more attention has been given to creating supportive college environments for students with intellectual disabilities following the passage of the Higher Education Opportunity Act in 2008 (Lee, 2009). Aspects of the legislation were aimed at increasing access for students with intellectual disabilities, such as restructuring the way these students can access financial aid (Lee, 2009). Now, 266 postsecondary education programs aimed at serving individuals with intellectual disabilities exist in the United States (Think College, 2018). These programs are archived on the website of Think College (Think College, 2018).

Think College. Think College is an organization committed to “developing, expanding, and improving inclusive higher education options for people with intellectual disabilities” (Think College, 2018, para. 1). The organization established standards and quality indicators to which programs for students with intellectual disabilities can gauge their effectiveness. Many of the programs listed focus on the development of students’ learning abilities, social skills, and independent living skills (Think College, 2018).

Along with providing education and training for professionals in this area of higher education, the website also provides links to all 266 programs available to students with intellectual disabilities. Only 48 of these programs are offered at private institutions, and only eleven of these programs are housed at Christian institutions (Think College, 2018). Appendix 1 lists the colleges that offer these programs with their national association affiliation and whether their website explicitly uses Christian language and lists explicitly Christian practices as a part of the program.

Benefits for Students without Intellectual Disabilities

Up to this point, this review has listed facts pertinent to individuals with intellectual disabilities. However, programs serving college

students with intellectual disabilities can provide developmental benefits to students without intellectual disabilities as well. In fact, students who interact more with people with intellectual disabilities “hold more positive attitudes toward them” (Griffin et al., 2012, p. 237). Developmental theories show college students who have an increased awareness of a certain population experience development in their appreciation and valuing of people from that population (Chávez, Guido-DiBrito, & Mallory, 2003).

Therefore, the presence of students with intellectual disabilities fosters the development of other students’ appreciation of this population of people. The unique gifts of people with intellectual disabilities will additionally provide a benefit to the college population. The next section will address the ways that the inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities on college campuses will allow the college community to more fully reflect the image of God.

Theological Framework

Created in the Image of God

Christian college leaders have the responsibility to view students in light of the Christian narrative. One of the most important aspects of this narrative is that all people are created by God and in God’s image (Ostrander, 2009). Being an image-bearer points to the intrinsic value of the person and the way the person reflects aspects of God to the world. Colleges can educate and help develop students in light of this identity.

A Good Human Being

Glanzer, Alleman, and Ream (2017) note that a university needs to “possess some understanding of a core human identity and moral ideal about what makes a better human being” in order for the university to embrace the “soul of their mission” (p. 2). In light of this, one can see that a college risks over-intellectualizing the view of a good human being if it continues to exclude individuals with intellectual disabilities. The current admission policies and programmatic offerings of Christian colleges without specialized programs exclude these individuals from the campus community and thus the campus’s ability to reflect the fullness of God’s image.

If a whole population of image-bearing people is excluded from the college campus, the whole campus community suffers a loss. However, the Christian college, unique in its ability to cling to a shared view of what makes a good human being, has the opportunity to include

individuals with intellectual disabilities on the college campus as image-bearers of God alongside other students. Further, the inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities coheres with the qualities that distinguish a Christian college according to Ream and Glanzer (2013).

Distinctiveness of a Christian College Community

According to Ream and Glanzer

Christian universities can define their venture with “broader terms” than both Bible schools and secular universities (Ream & Glanzer, 2013, p. 7). The unique standing of a Christian university allows the institution to pursue not only the instruction of students in disciplines as animated by faith but also the formation of students and the ordering of their loves (Ream & Glanzer, 2013). This focus frees a Christian university to be an ideal home for programs serving students with intellectual disabilities. The following three distinctives set Christian universities apart from other higher education institutions, and each quality can be seen as a motivating force for including individuals with intellectual disabilities in the campus community.

Holistic development. Christian universities are different than Bible schools in that they educate students not only in church ministry preparation but also in other disciplines. Similarly, the Christian university is poised to educate individuals and shape them into the various identities they will hold throughout their lives including the identities of citizen, child, parent, man, or woman (Ream & Glanzer, 2013).

The inclusion of individuals with intellectual disabilities can be an exemplar of holistic development, as the programs are designed to prepare students for a more independent life. Because of the nature of intellectual disabilities, their education necessitates a holistic approach, as their need for learning social and other adaptive skills presents much of their areas for growth (AAIDD, 2018).

The presence of students with intellectual disabilities also allows for the education of the rest of campus. Staff and faculty require growth in order to provide specifically supportive environments for these students, and students without intellectual disabilities who are unfamiliar with this population would be challenged to grow in their awareness of, and sensitivity toward, this group (Griffin et al., 2012). Christian universities including students with intellectual disabilities have the opportunity to foster the development of members of the campus community holistically into better and more loving neighbors.

Transmission and discovery. Ream and Glanzer claim, “Christian

universities join in this search for knowledge with their own set of unique practices, virtues, and ends” (2013, p. 8). The inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities in the context of the history of the university is a new venture. Christian universities, therefore, can be a part of the discovery of how to do these programs well. Because of the mission fit, Christian universities are poised to do so in a distinctively Christian way, again leading the charge in increasing access to education.

Centrality of worship and theology. Finally, the Christian university is distinctive because of the central role it allows for the worship and study of God. Meaningful faith communities place every student within the story of God and God’s world, allowing each person to stand out as an image-bearer. The centrality of the worship of the Gospel of Christ, who called all lost sheep into his fold “so there will be one flock, one shepherd,” poises Christian colleges to be leaders in the best practices for including individuals with intellectual disabilities in the campus community (John 10:16, English Standard Version).

Additionally, Christian universities risk over-intellectualizing the Christian faith because the community is filtered according to intellectual or academic performance. This phenomenon could have negative impacts on the Christian faith and for all Christians, but especially certain communities within the faith, such as people with intellectual disabilities (Whitt, 2012). The inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities, therefore, allows the gift of their faith to imbue into the campus’s faith culture and provide an alternative to an over-intellectualized faith.

An Example of Inclusion: L’Arche Communities

Jean Vanier, who was a Catholic priest and leading writer in inclusive communities, founded L’Arche Communities in 1970. L’Arche provides meaningful community in the form of dedicated homes of people with intellectual disabilities and people without intellectual disabilities doing life together (L’Arche USA, 2018). The innovative organization includes communities across the world, and the insights from L’Arche provide Christian universities valuable wisdom in the inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities.

One of L’Arche’s aims is especially relevant to colleges and universities: L’Arche communities pursue being a sign to the rest of the world. The website proclaims:

In a divided world, L’Arche wants to be a sign of hope. Its communities, founded on covenant relationships between people

of differing intellectual capacity, social origin, religion and culture, seek to be signs of unity, faithfulness and reconciliation (L'Arche USA, 2018).

Christian colleges should pursue being a sign to the rest of society that their educational venture is unashamedly about more than instruction, career placement, or profit. Inspired by the same motivating faith as Vanier and L'Arche, Christian universities can provide a sign to the rest of the world that all people are valuable as image-bearers of God and that education goes beyond instruction to formation.

Collegiate Examples

Three variants of the inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities are provided. They are analyzed according to the way they pursue the three Christian distinctives as well as being a sign to the rest of the world.

Friendship Houses

Friendship Houses are an example of a way of including people with intellectual disabilities in the campus community not as students but as neighbors and roommates with seminary and graduate students. Graduate students are given the option to join the Friendship House for the duration of their study to live alongside other graduate students as well as people with intellectual disabilities. The first Friendship House began at Western Theological Seminary in 2009, and Duke Divinity School established its Friendship House in 2010 (Little, Raye Rice, & Conner, 2015).

The core values of Friendship House Partners USA include a desire to “produce something reflective of God’s love for all humanity” (Little et al., 2015, p. 5). Friend residents, residents with intellectual disabilities, are able to grow in living skills and find meaningful involvement in the surrounding campus and city communities. Student residents and resident advisors provide intentional support and experiences for the friend residents and commit to living life together with the Friendship House group (Little et al., 2015).

“Theological formation” is an important aspect of life within the Friendship House, and the groups are committed to spending time focusing on faith development through significant experiences and consistent prayer meetings and discussions with both friend residents and student residents (Little et al., 2015, p. 23). The theological formation provides a centering paradigm for the communities, as “several important aspects of the common life at Friendship House

converge in the varied spaces of theological reflection” (Little et al., 2015, p. 23).

Ream and Glanzer's distinctives. Friendship House provides an opportunity for people with intellectual disabilities to develop and grow as a part of the campus community, though not as students. Still, Friendship Houses allow for the holistic development of friend residents in the provision of life skills and social development alongside the work of spiritual formation. Additionally, Friendship Houses have contributed to the discovery and transmission of knowledge in their field by developing and spreading to five communities across the country. Finally, the centering aspect of theological formation distinctly identifies the communities.

Friendship houses as a sign. Friendship Houses act as a sign to the rest of the campus community by exhibiting Christian community through meaningful and committed life together. Also, they are a blessing to the parents of people with intellectual disabilities and a sign that the Christian mission motivates a care and appreciation for their children. Finally, the venture grows and prepares seminary and graduate students to be prepared as Christian leaders in their future and provides a caring home for these student residents, as well.

Saint Vincent College's Bearcat B.E.S.T Program

Similar to Friendship Houses, Saint Vincent College's Bearcat B.E.S.T. program was “born of the need expressed by parents of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities” (Saint Vincent College, 2018). The program's goals are summarized in four pillars: growing the level of independence in students with intellectual disabilities, preparing students for employment, empowering students, and benefitting students in creating a caring community (Saint Vincent College, 2018). Saint Vincent College partners with students' school districts to continue their schooling after the completion of high school until the students are 21 years-old. In doing this, the cost to families is greatly reduced (Saint Vincent College, 2018).

The three-year Bearcat B.E.S.T program utilizes evidence-based educational strategies in supporting and teaching the students with intellectual disabilities, instilling academic, independent living, social, and vocational skills (Saint Vincent College, 2018). Externships provide students opportunities to develop their employability. Furthermore, students are able to eat together with other Saint Vincent College students, participate in clubs, and attend various activities. These students are also

held to Saint Vincent College's conduct expectations (Saint Vincent College, 2018).

Ream and Glanzer's distinctives. Saint Vincent College's program is innovative in many ways. It focuses on the holistic development of students as independent people and aims at their thriving in many aspects of life. Similarly, Saint Vincent College stands out in terms of the discovery and transmission of knowledge in providing the innovative partnership with school districts and utilizing evidence-based educational strategies. Though the Bearcat B.E.S.T allows for integration in the larger Catholic campus community, the centrality of theology and worship of God is not as clearly described on the program website. The Bearcat B.E.S.T program could continue to distinguish itself as unique with greater attention given to the centrality of Christian theology and practice.

Bearcat B.E.S.T program as a sign. Bearcat B.E.S.T. has an opportunity to be a sign not only to the campus community and the families that it serves but also the public school system in the surrounding community. The partnership allows the Catholic educational enterprise to bless the school system as motivated by its Christian mission. The continued development of the centrality of theology and worship of God as expressed by the Bearcat B.E.S.T. program could continue to magnify the program's role as a sign.

Judson University's RISE Program

Judson University's RISE is an acronym for "Road to Independent Living, Spiritual Formation, and Employment" (Judson University, 2018). The program was created in 2016, and its mission is to "provide [students] with intellectual disabilities the college life experience, in a Christian community, to prepare for independent living and customized employment" (Judson University, 2018).

Judson accepts cohorts of twelve students with intellectual disabilities into the two-year program in which graduates receive a Certificate of Completion in Liberal Arts (Judson University, 2018). Students take classes with their cohort focused in the following areas: "independent living, current events, math & money management, fitness & wellness, person-centered planning, professional skills, and daily living through Christian values" (Judson University, 2018 p. 2). Students also have the opportunity to take classes with traditional college students in which faculty can allow the students to audit or pursue an adapted syllabus. In their second year, students choose a concentration ranging from business to creative arts to Christian ministries (Judson University, 2018).

RISE students live on campus with other RISE students and a housing mentor living nearby. They eat with traditional students and have access to the same resources traditional students have (Judson University, 2018). Faith development is also an integrated aspect of RISE, as “RISE students participate in all campus life activities, including chapel three times each week and small groups” (Judson University, 2018).

Ream & Glanzer's distinctives. Not only is Judson's RISE program the most integrated into the campus community, it also shows the highest level of Christian integration. The program clearly meets each of Ream and Glanzer's distinctives with excellence. RISE focuses on holistic development by providing students classes and experiences to develop living skills. Additionally, students are able to choose their own concentration, allowing them to focus on a field in which they can work for the rest of their lives. Similarly, Judson can be a great contributor to the discovery and transmission of knowledge in the field of higher education for people with intellectual disabilities in the Christian framework, as it was the most explicitly Christian-focused program listed on Think College's page. This puts Judson in a special position to lead this venture.

Finally, the centrality of theology, worship, and spiritual formation sets Judson's RISE program apart from others. Students are consistently taking classes in spiritual life as well as practicing their faith through practices and discussions. The centrality of formation even shapes the name of the program, emblematic of the faith integration of all of RISE.

RISE as a sign. Because RISE is so integrated into the campus community, the program is poised to be a wonderful sign to the students, staff, and faculty at Judson. Faculty must adjust their teaching style to reach a non-homogenous group of students. Similarly, traditional students must learn to be caring and committed neighbors, as RISE students will be living next to them on campus. Finally, the unique ways people with intellectual disabilities approach the faith and worship (Whitt, 2012), as well as their gifts, will serve to transform the worship environments of Judson in chapel sessions and small groups.

Conclusion

Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche communities, said in an interview in 2006:

I'm not really sure that we can really understand the message of Jesus if we haven't listened to the weak... we can love people

who have been pushed aside, humiliated, seen as having no value. And then we see that they are redeemed. And at the same time, we discover that we too are broken, that we have our handicaps. And our handicaps are about elitism, about power, around feeling that value is to just have power (Vanier, 2006).

Inspired in this way to know the message of Jesus more fully and to see the redemption of all image-bearers, Christian colleges and universities can be motivated to hospitably include individuals with intellectual disabilities into their campus communities. This inclusion serves the population of people with intellectual disabilities, a community open and ready for education and formation, and their families. It enriches the campus with the unique strengths and image-bearing capacities of individuals with intellectual disabilities that are currently missing from the college campus. Finally, this inclusion can provide a sign to the campus and to the world of the mutual brokenness of all people along with the mutual image-bearing beauty of all people worthy of community. The Christian university is especially poised to take on leadership in this venture in higher education.

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Appendix 1: Think College Programs at Christian Institutions

Institution	ACCU or CCCU	Explicitly Christian language on website	Explicitly Christian practice on website
Bethel University (BUILD Program)	CCCU	yes	yes
Concordia University of Wisconsin (Bethesda College)	neither	yes	yes
Edgewood College (Cutting Edge Program)	ACCU	no	no
Elmhurst College ((Elmhurst Learning and Success Academy)	neither	no	no
Huntington University (Able Program)	CCCU	no	no
Judson University (RISE Program)	CCCU	yes	yes
Lipscomb University (Ideal Program)	neither	yes	no
Mercyhurst College (Oasis Program)	ACCU	no	no
Roberts Wesleyan College (BELL Program)	CCCU	no	no
Saint Vincent College (Bearcat B.E.S.T Program)	ACCU	yes	no
Union University (EDGE Program)	CCCU	yes	no

Note. Information is taken from Think College (2018), Bethel University (2018), Concordia University of Wisconsin (2018), Edgewood College (2018), Elmhurst College (2018), Huntington University (2018), Judson University (2018), Lipscomb University (2018), Mercyhurst University (2018), Roberts Wesleyan (2018), Saint Vincent College (2018), Union University (2018), Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (2018), and Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (2018).