

The Impact of a College Course Where Pre-Service Teachers and Peers With Intellectual Disabilities Study Together

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Stuart Z. Carroll¹, Jerry G. Petroff¹, and Richard Blumberg¹

Abstract

In 2006, the authors' college joined the ranks of those offering programs for young adults with intellectual disabilities on campus. The program includes several inclusive courses in which typical students study together with their peers with intellectual disabilities. This article describes how 12 pre-service teachers who participated in an inclusive liberal learning understood their experience. The analysis of interviews with these pre-service teachers suggests that they emerged from the course with a commitment to the idea that students with intellectual disabilities have a right to a challenging liberal education. Most emerged with a stronger commitment to inclusive teaching practice and felt that the use of small group activities and discussions was the best way to build classroom community, create relationships among participants, and maximize learning. All of the interviewed pre-service teachers considered this course a positive academic experience.

Keywords

pre-service teacher education, inclusion, attitudes on disability

Students are students whether or not they have a disability. The reason they are in the classroom is because they want to learn. They may need different things, but they want to try to figure things out and get an education. That is what I have learned—students are students are students.

Pam, secondary education/
history major, April 2007

Pam was a participant in the Great Conversations (GC) course, an inclusive postsecondary class in which typical college students explored liberal arts and science topics together with young adults with intellectual disabilities (IDs). The course is part of the Career and Community Studies (CCS) program at the College of New

Jersey (TCNJ), one of the few efforts nationwide to put liberal studies at the center of a postsecondary curriculum for people with IDs.

The CCS program was not originally designed to give pre-service teachers opportunities to interact with age peers with IDs or to develop their inclusive teaching skills, but early on, we discovered the mutual benefits in bringing the two populations together. We began to see participation with CCS as one way in which pre-service teachers could develop dispositions and skills for teaching

¹College of New Jersey, Ewing

Corresponding Author:

Stuart Carroll, College of New Jersey, School of Education, 358 Forcina Hall, 2000 Pennington Rd., Ewing, NJ 08628

E-mail: szcarrol@tcnj.edu

GC is not a credit-bearing course, and we anticipated that it would be difficult to find college students willing to participate in a semester-long experience without an extrinsic incentive. We felt, however, that we could find many TCNJ students who would commit to attend a 2-week module on an interesting topic. We also suspected that once a student attended, he or she would be tempted to attend again, which in fact occurred; several students came for the first module then stayed for the entire course! Others attended more sporadically, but every student we interviewed attended at least 10 class sessions.

We found our typical student participants in a number of ways. First, we tapped into the pool of mentors already volunteering with the program. Second, we involved students in designing and implementing lessons and modules and encouraged them to recruit other participants. This led to links with student groups such as New Jersey Water Watch, the History Honors Society, and the Secondary Education Teachers Association. Professor of secondary education Dr. Ruth Palmer offered her sophomore psychology of learning students the option to participate in GC in lieu of tutoring at a local high school, and many of these students became GC regulars. As a result of these efforts, typical GC lessons had 12 to 15 TCNJ students learning alongside the 6 to 8 CCS students.

Non-CCS students were involved in the course in various ways, with some taking responsibility for designing and delivering modules and others simply attending class as students alongside their CCS peers. Non-CCS students included special education Masters of Art in Teaching (MAT) students, special education undergraduates, and secondary education undergraduates. The students we interviewed for this article included members of all of these groups.

Research Questions

Over the course of the first GC semester, we became interested in the experiences of the pre-service teachers who became part of the class and began to wonder about their beliefs and attitudes concerning inclusion

and disability. We defined the following research questions to guide us in tapping into their experience:

1. What value did participants see in their involvement in the GC class?
2. What value did participants see in CCS students' involvement in the GC class?
3. What views did our participants express about effective inclusive practice?
4. What did our students believe about inclusion in their future careers?
5. What attitudes did our participants express about individuals with IDs?

Our goal was to understand participants' sense of their own experience. We did not see this study as a way to assess participation in GC as an intervention but rather as a way to listen to and understand the voices of the pre-service teachers who were involved in the course.

Background

It has long been known that teacher expectations for groups of children affect teaching and learning (Good & Brophy, 2007). Studies have found that many teachers have ambivalent attitudes about the inclusion of significantly disabled students in the regular classroom (Rainforth, 2000; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996) and express disproportionately indifferent or rejecting attitudes toward individual students with disabilities (Cook, Cameron, & Tankersley, 2007). Some research has indicated that teachers have a particularly negative view of the inclusion of students with behavioral and intellectual disorders (e.g., Wilczenski, 1992). Soodak, Podell, and Lehman (1998) found that teachers expressed both hostility and anxiety toward prospective students with IDs, partly because of their lack of experience with this population.

It has been shown that unless pre-service teachers emerge from their initial teacher preparation programs with positive attitudes toward

inclusion, it is difficult to subsequently change their views (Murphy, 1996). It is generally accepted that traditional knowledge-based special education courses may have little impact on attitudes (Tait & Purdie, 2000), so many educators with a commitment to preparing teachers for inclusion have come up with innovative ways to shape pre-service teachers' thinking in this area, including strategies that emphasize direct contact with individuals with disabilities (e.g., Campbell, Gilmore, & Cuskelly, 2003; Ford, Pugach, & Otis-Wilborn, 2001; Hastings, Hewes, Lock, & Witting, 1996; Turner, 2003).

The research on the impact of direct contact is mixed. Experience working with children and youth with disabilities has generally been found to correlate with more positive beliefs about the benefits of inclusion (Roni & Leyser, 2006), as has nonwork experience and pleasant interactions with individuals with special needs (Hannah, 1988; Harvey, 1985). In a recent review of this literature, Evans, Assadi, and Herriott (2005) concluded that positive attitudes develop when the contact between students with and without disabilities is structured and not uncomfortably intimate. They cited Yaker's (1988) observation that "there are positive attitudes when contact with disabled people includes equal status, cooperative interdependence, support from authority figures, and opportunities for individualizing out-group members" (p. 7).

Unfamiliarity with individuals with disabilities is cited by pre-service teachers as a concern they have about inclusive teaching (Hamre & Oyler, 2004), and it has been noted that lack of contact can result in attitudes of superiority or panic (Marks, 1999). There are, however, studies that have shown that direct contact alone does not necessarily have a positive effect on attitudes (Rees, Spreen, & Harnadek, 1991), and it appears that minimal contact can have a miseducative effect if it is unpleasant (McHatton & McCray, 2007).

Research on secondary teachers' attitudes toward inclusion has found that general educators focus on potential problems with the practice and question whether students lacking requisite literacy and numeracy skills can

be successfully included (Ellins & Porter, 2005). In some cases, special educators have been found to perceive even greater barriers to secondary inclusion than have their general education peers (Carter & Hughes, 2006).

In studying general and special educators' understanding of the notion of "access to the general curriculum" for children with significant disabilities, Dymond, Renzaglia, Gilson, and Slagor (2007) found that general educators believe that "access" means equitable access to the information and activities that go on in regular classrooms but not necessarily to the mastery of any particular content. They found that special educators put a strong emphasis on the immediate needs of the child and on adapting the curriculum to meet these, also with little emphasis on academic mastery.

Carter and Hughes (2006) found that general and special educators were broadly in agreement on the benefits they felt students with significant disabilities could gain from inclusion, these being primarily social and functional rather than academic. Although many important works have been written on the value of giving significantly disabled students access to high-level content and academic learning (e.g., Browder, Spooner, Wakeman, Trela, & Baker, 2006; Hitchcock, Meyer, Rose, & Jackson, 2002; Rose & Meyer, 2001; Spooner, Dymond, Smith, & Kennedy, 2006; Wehmeyer, 2006), it appears that not all practitioners are convinced that this is a priority.

Although the success of inclusion depends on positive teacher attitudes, it is also vital for pre-service teachers to develop the skills needed to plan and deliver intellectually rigorous content to students with a wide range of ability levels. The push to give students with significant disabilities greater access to the general curriculum (Browder et al., 2006) requires a high level of expertise in designing and delivering differentiated instruction (Anderson & Gumus, 2006). These skills can be taught explicitly in methods courses, but pre-service teachers derive a particular benefit from seeing effective practice modeled by college or classroom instructors (Bishop & Jones, 2003). When such modeling is done by instructors without specific special

education expertise, it may counter the medical model of special education, which can undermine the general educator's sense of his or her own ability to address special needs (Pearson, 2007).

Inclusive postsecondary programs can provide a venue where pre-service teachers can acquire the dispositions and skills to be eager and successful inclusive educators. Although an increasing number of institutions provide postsecondary opportunities to young adults with IDs, the practice is still rare (Ferguson & Blumberg, 2002; Hart, Zimbrich, & Parker, 2005; Neubert, Moon, Grigal, & Redd, 2001). Even more rare are college programs that intentionally involve pre-service teachers with peers with IDs, though there have been some creative efforts to do so (e.g., Dolyniuk et al., 2002; Turner, 2003). The benefits that have been suggested for the typical students who participate in these programs include the opportunity to become more comfortable around people with IDs, the chance to connect theory learned in classes to real-world relationships and interactions (Dolyniuk et al., 2002; Grigal, Neubert, & Moon, 2002), and the opportunity to develop familiarity with the postsecondary education lives of individuals with IDs (Turner, 2003). In Hamill's (2003) study of a woman with Down's syndrome experience who was included in a college class, she found that the other students in the class were highly positive about her participation and felt that it gave the course a sense of purpose.

Many features of the GC experience connect with the suggestions in the literature for preparation of eager and capable inclusive educators. Although the program is unique, we believe that the experience of pre-service teachers who participated in the GC class can give us insight into the ways that interaction with peers with disabilities can shape the thinking of pre-service teachers.

Method

To understand the experience of the pre-service teachers who participated in GC, we developed a general interview guide to elicit

their reflections on their involvement (Patton, 2002). The protocol began with general questions that focused on participants' observations about the CCS students, the course, and their sense of how participation in the course would affect their future lives and careers. We followed the protocol loosely, allowing participants to guide the discussion, probing when necessary, and returning to topics that had been skipped when the opportunity arose. We never allowed the interview guide to get in the way of our listening to the participants, but we felt that a guide was essential to allow us to summarize our findings and draw general conclusions (McCracken, 1988).

Topics covered in the guide included participants' background, their experience with teaching and with disability, their motivation for participating in GC, their observations about what the course meant for CCS and non-CCS students and for themselves, and their assessment of the effectiveness of various teaching practices used in the course. The protocol concluded by asking the students to identify what they felt they had learned about teaching, the specific content, and disability and to consider the impact that their participation in the course may have had on their future careers and lives. A copy of the interview protocol is included here as Table 2.

In early April 2007, we invited all of the 18 pre-service teachers who had attended the course on at least a semiregular basis to be involved in the interviews, and 12 agreed to do so. This group included Stephen, Kyle, and Kathy, three graduate special education majors who designed and delivered course modules and attended several additional classes; Andy, a secondary education undergraduate who had designed and delivered a module and attended a second; Pam, who worked with Andy to design a module and attended almost every class for the entire semester; Bridget, Irene, Nadine, and Amy, four special education undergraduates who attended the class on a semiregular basis as part of their work as mentors in the program; and Ricky, Michelle, and Stacey, three secondary education majors who attended the

Table 2. Great Conversations Interview Protocol**Background**

Tell me a little about yourself. (name, age, major, year in college, where you're from, your K-12 experiences, etc.)

How would you describe your learning experiences in school? How would you describe your learning experiences in college?

Prior to your experience with the CCS program, what experiences had you had with teaching?

What experiences had you had with people with disabilities?

Encounters with CCS

How did you first hear about the CCS program?

When did you first meet the CCS students? What were your first impressions of them?

What made you want to become involved with the program?

What has been the nature of your involvement with the CCS program?

Great Conversations and other lessons (for the CCS students)

When were you first involved in a lesson with the CCS students?

What did you observe about their learning? What did you notice about the way they participate in class?

What lessons/activities seem most effective with them?

What lessons/activities have you found less effective?

What have you found surprising in the lessons you have observed?

Great Conversations and other lessons (for the interviewee)

Describe your participation during the Great Conversations lessons you attended.

Which were your favorite lessons? Which did you least enjoy?

What did you learn from the lessons you attended?

Describe your personal interactions with CCS students during lessons.

How do you act when you are working with them? How does that feel?

Learning about teaching

What has this experience taught you about teaching?

What have you learned that you will be able to use in your own classroom?

How has this experience affected your thinking about your future career?

How will you explain this experience to a prospective employer?

How do you explain it to your friends?

Attitudes about disability

What did you know about cognitive disability before you became involved in this program?

What have you learned about cognitive disability through your interactions with the CCS students, both in and out of classrooms?

In what ways, if any, has this experience affected your attitudes about cognitive disability? Inclusion? The nature of the education that people with cognitive disabilities should receive?

Conclusions

What is your best story about the Great Conversations class? CCS students in general?

How do you anticipate continuing your involvement with CCS, Great Conversations, the cognitively disabled, in the future?

What impact do you think this experience will have on your future career and life in general?

CCS = Career and Community Studies.

class regularly as an alternate field experience in their psychology of learning class.

We conducted the interviews in late April and early May. Most interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes, though those of the graduate students were considerably longer, reflecting

the greater extent of their involvement. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

We analyzed the interview data by reading the transcripts, developing preliminary codes, and engaging in a process of modified analytic induction (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). We also

decided to write fuller profiles of two students, Pam and Bridget, so as to give readers a richer sense of participants' sense of their own experiences. We gave Pam and Bridget the opportunity to read and respond to these as a way to ensure that our interpretation of their experience was accurate and to validate our conclusions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All students' names in this article have been changed except for those of Pam and Bridget, who expressly waived anonymity.

Findings

To capture the full context of this research, we begin with the profiles of Pam and Bridget. Pam is in secondary education whereas Bridget is in special education, so these profiles cover the two main groups of non-CCS students who took part in the class. That said, both Pam and Bridget were highly involved in the course, so their experiences are not entirely typical, and of course there is no way that their attitudes can be attributed entirely or even primarily to their participation in the class. We address the more universal aspects of the GC experience in the second part of this section as we look at themes that emerged from our analysis of all 12 interviews.

Pam

At the time of the interview, Pam was a junior with a major in history and a concentration in secondary education. Prior to her involvement with the GC course, Pam had very successfully completed her junior practicum experience at Trenton Central High School and had some substitute teaching experience. She had little familiarity with individuals with intellectual or other disabilities prior to the course.

Pam first heard about GC when Andy, a fellow member of the History Honors Society, sent out an e-mail inviting other students to join him in creating a civics module for the course. Pam had just finished her junior practicum and was eager to keep on teaching, so she contacted Andy and joined the team

creating and delivering the civics lessons. She gave little thought to the fact that many of her students would be individuals with IDs.

Once she met the CCS students, however, Pam found she had a "strong immediate connection" to them that she was unable to explain. She had committed to work on the civics module and attend another, but ended up attending every class she could for the entire semester. She developed a close relationship with Kiersten, one of the CCS students, and sat beside her throughout the semester. She also became friendly with the CCS students outside of class and had frequent interactions with them around campus.

Pam was able to use what she had learned in her junior practicum experience in designing and teaching GC lessons. She had experienced block scheduling at Trenton Central and knew how to plan 80-minute lessons. She felt it was important to teach a small number of concepts in depth, to limit lecturing, and to be keenly aware of prior knowledge of concepts and vocabulary lest students get lost. She also felt that the only way to know whether this had occurred was to do frequent comprehension checks. She was not entirely satisfied with the way the civics module went, but she was pleased with her own contribution to it and to subsequent modules.

Pam felt she learned a great deal from attending GC. First, she mastered new content in modules such as probability, which explained statistical concepts she had never understood. Second, she learned teaching strategies, such as the use of group work to help students process content, something she had not believed in prior to the course. Third, she observed how important it was for teachers to be organized and prepared, especially when teaching complex, experiential lessons. Finally, she learned a great deal about individual CCS students and refrained from seeing them as a unitary group. She had deep insights about what would or would not work for each student and concluded that this kind of awareness would be necessary for her to succeed as an inclusive teacher. When asked if she had learned anything about cognitive

disability in general, she said that she did not think so because the students were so different.

Pam's commitment to inclusion grew deeper over the course of the semester, though she still felt that it would require a teacher to do a fair amount of extra work and invest "extra energy." Pam mentioned that she was considering doing a master's degree in special education once she completed her bachelor's.

In talking about the involvement of the CCS students in the GC classes, Pam repeatedly pointed out that they are just like other students and often just like her. For example, she noted a time that they "glazed over" during a guest speaker's talk but said that that was exactly what she or her friends would do in a similar situation.

Pam felt that there were times that the CCS students did not understand content that was presented but always attributed this to the way the material was taught. She felt that the CCS students could learn anything as long as the teacher could figure out how to explain it. She was impressed by the CCS students' participation in class and desire to learn and actually wondered if they could have learned more or explored certain concepts more deeply.

Pam used the word *love* to describe her feelings about CCS on several occasions, and at times, her enthusiasm was overwhelming. Toward the end of her interview she said, "Up to this point in my life right now this has probably been the most rewarding and educational and fun and just overall amazing experience that I have had."

Bridget

At the time of the interview, Bridget was a sophomore special education and psychology dual major. She had done an independent study in her mother's special education classroom when in high school and was in the field with her social studies methods course that semester. Otherwise, she had little prior teaching experience.

She did, however, have extensive experience with people with disabilities. Bridget had an older brother with Down's syndrome,

and seeing how badly school served him was one of the reasons that she decided to become a special educator. In addition to her work in her mother's classroom, she also served as a Best Buddy for a girl with Down's syndrome throughout her 4 years in high school.

When Bridget came to TCNJ, a friend told her about the CCS program, and Bridget was excited by the idea of a postsecondary option for students with IDs, having seen how few options there were for her brother after high school. She volunteered to serve as a mentor in the fall 2006 semester. In spring 2007, she became a part-time student worker with the program and attended the GC class 1 day a week in partial fulfillment of her work commitment.

When Bridget first met the CCS students, she encountered some initial communication problems, but by the end of her first hour with them, she felt that she had made six new friends. Throughout her interview, she talked about the students with evident affection.

One thing that Bridget enjoyed about the GC course was that the students got to learn about topics that would not necessarily come up in their other classes. She was impressed by how quickly they learned and how much they had to say about psychology, ecology, and rock and roll when they studied those topics. She felt that the students had a right to learn this content and noted that even though it would not directly lead to a job, it was "going to help them in their daily interactions with people and their general understanding."

She felt that the classes were pitched at an appropriate level for the CCS students, with a mix of simulations, hands-on activities, movies, and PowerPoint presentations. Although she felt that the small-group activities were generally effective, she noted that some non-CCS students were better at asking questions and leading discussions than others and that the CCS students responded differently in different situations. She felt that her knowledge of the students made her particularly effective in small-group situations.

Bridget believed that the non-CCS students should have stepped back and allowed the CCS students to answer most questions posed in class and to take the lead in activities. She

learned new material in the class and felt that just about every participant did, but it annoyed her when the non-CCS students would try to take center stage.

Bridget felt that participation in GC would be of great benefit to elementary and secondary pre-service teachers who could become comfortable with peers with disabilities and realize that "they are normal kids and . . . they are pretty cool to be with." She felt proud when the CCS students succeeded in class and had pleasant interactions with the typical college students.

From observing GC lessons, Bridget learned the importance of being flexible and not panicking because one piece of a lesson does not work as expected. She also saw the importance of preparation and organization.

Bridget believed in inclusion but felt that it was situational, depending on individual students and teachers. She felt it was too simple to "just say inclusion works."

Bridget often used the word *love* in describing the GC course, the CCS program, the students, and the professors she worked with. It had a great impact on her feelings about TCNJ, as she explained: "I love college. I love my classes. I love going to all my education classes. That is a good thing."

Themes From the 12 Interviews

Several of the topics noted in the above profiles of Pam and Bridget emerged as themes in our analysis of the 12 interviews we conducted. There was variation in the intensity of responses depending on the nature of the participants' background and the extent of the participants' involvement, but on the whole there was a great deal of agreement about the nature of the GC experience. We organize the findings according to our research questions.

1. What value did participants see in their involvement in the GC class? First, every student described the course as fun, and most said that they loved it. For many, it was the most positive experience of their semester or even the most powerful feature of their teacher education program. Nadine, who was not satisfied

with the quality of her other field experiences, saw GC as an additional place where she could "actually work with students who have a disability that I may encounter in a classroom." Participants who taught GC classes saw it as a laboratory in which they could apply concepts they had learned, whereas many who just participated appreciated the opportunities to learn interesting content in a stress-free environment. Those who taught lessons also mentioned the benefits of collaboratively working with faculty in designing lessons. Stephen, for example, pointed out that this was the only time he got to have a faculty member see him teach when he was not being formally evaluated.

2. What value did participants see in CCS students' involvement in the GC class? Our participants universally agreed that students with IDs deserved to be exposed to the liberal learning topics that were covered in the GC course and often framed it as a human rights issue. They were not sure if this content would be of immediate use to the CCS students or even if the CCS students had mastered any particular material, but they felt that they would benefit from having increased general knowledge, better ability to present their own ideas, and greater skill in thinking critically about the world. Irene, a special education major who had initially been skeptical about the value of college and academics for students with IDs, was struck by the quality of the conversations she could have with the CCS students and was impressed that her interactions with them were not characterized by "the superficial, nice, nice conversations with people with mental retardation" she had experienced elsewhere.

That said, most participants felt that the most important benefits of the GC course for the CCS students lay in the social realm. As Kyle put it, "What we are really teaching [them] here is that they can continue with their lives and stay a part of the conversation." Although participants did not consider mastery of specific content to be of great importance, many noted that the development of relationships depended on the shared

experiences in the class and the creation of a community of learners.

3. *What views did our participants express about effective inclusive practice?* Students generally agreed that the hands-on experiences in GC classes were the most enjoyable, and several said that they would try to use more active lessons in their own future teaching. Conversely, participants widely agreed that the least effective teaching strategy in the GC course was lecturing, as it was not sufficiently interactive to maintain the interest of either the CCS or the non-CCS students in the class.

Certain teaching strategies received mixed reviews. A few students felt that videos and PowerPoint presentations were useful ways to present or reinforce information, whereas others felt that these were not very educational. Most felt that group work was positive and facilitated the inclusion of the CCS students, but others noted that some group experiences fell flat and that the participation in groups was uneven.

Several students pointed out the problem of role confusion during some lessons. At times they felt like they should participate as students, whereas on other occasions they felt they should hold back and encourage the CCS students to engage. Kathy stated a strong preference for "equal" activities such as a dice game during the probability module, as then there was no doubt that every student was a learner. All of our participants identified specific content they felt they had learned and believed that there was something for everyone in the course.

4. *What did our students believe about inclusion in their future careers?* Students were not won over to inclusion in an uncritical way. Although several mentioned that it was exciting to see lessons in which students with IDs could learn alongside their typical peers, they felt that school contexts were complicated and that inclusion might not work for all people. It was interesting, however, that many participants felt that students as capable as the CCS members could certainly be included. Ricky said he had previously thought it would be "weird to have a special education kid in my class, but if they are at the same intellectual level as everyone else and can react

and participate I don't see how it would be a problem." This is interesting when you consider that individuals with IDs have been among the last students to be included in regular classes.

5. *What attitudes did our participants express about individuals with IDs?* We asked students what they had learned about cognitive disability in general, and most felt that they actually had not increased their understanding of it because the CCS students were all so different that generalizations could not be made. Throughout the interviews, participants were reluctant to talk about the CCS students as a group and spoke more about interactions with individual students. When pressed to talk about the collective reactions of CCS students to particular course features, many participants declined to do this and expressed the view that the CCS students responded no differently than did other college students.

Those students who had expressed an initial apprehension about being in class with peers with IDs universally indicated that participation in the course had reduced their anxiety and made them more comfortable with disability. The students who already had extensive experience felt that their prior positive views were affirmed, and several expressed pride when they saw CCS and other typical students becoming connected.

Conclusion

The CCS program is one of few programs that offer a liberal education to young adults with IDs, and the GC course is a key part of that effort. The benefits to future teachers have been incidental and largely unintended, but as the program has moved forward, we have become much more aware of the positive effects that the CCS program can have on pre-service teachers and campus culture as a whole.

Participants in these interviews were not entirely typical of the group of non-CCS students in the GC course; it is fair to presume that the students who were still involved at the end of April were more engaged than those who participated early

in the course then stopped attending. That said, the group included secondary and special education majors, and some were involved far less than others. For all, however, this was a positive experience, and many saw it as transformative.

Although the literature on the effects of direct contact with people with disabilities on the attitudes of people without disabilities is inconclusive, this study suggests that such encounters, when purposeful and well structured, can have an enormous impact. GC classes were interactive, fun, and nonthreatening, and both CCS and non-CCS students enjoyed learning together in such a context. This is interpretive research, and we can make no assertions about the effects of participation in the GC course as an intervention, but the comments of our participants indicate that they saw it as a powerful experience.

Participants left the course with the belief that students with IDs can handle serious academic content and can benefit from engaging with ideas of the type they were exposed to in the GC course. Many concluded that students with IDs had a right to a liberal education and indicated a desire to teach challenging content to all students in the future.

All participants claimed to have gained from involvement with GC, but we were particularly impressed by the impact described by students who became most actively involved and took responsibility for entire learning modules. These were among our best and brightest students, and this course appears to have given them an opportunity to do challenging and rewarding work that stretched them beyond their already high levels of achievement.

We hope that our findings will be of assistance to individuals advocating for the creation of on-campus transition programs and opportunities. Although there is much evidence of the benefits of such programs for people with IDs (e.g., Grigal et al., 2002), little has been written on the impact on the other students who encounter them on campus.

We are keenly aware that the CCS program is unique and energy intensive and are concerned that those who cannot envision creating so total a program may question the relevance of this

research to their contexts. We believe this would be a mistake, as there are elements of the GC experience that can be replicated in less total ways. For example, as high school programs for 18- to 21-year-old students with significant disabilities look for ways to make community connections, colleges can make their campuses and students more available to them. Similarly, it may be possible for pre-service teachers to have early field experiences that involve working with individuals with IDs in common learning tasks. In such situations, there are many opportunities for faculty to model excellent practice.

In an era when the demands on teacher education are ever increasing and often oppressive, these may seem like great challenges, but if we are truly committed to the idea that students with significant disabilities deserve access to the general curriculum, we have to intervene ambitiously and aggressively. The idea that people with IDs really can benefit from intellectual engagement with big ideas is counterintuitive, both to regular educators who presume that all of their students need mastery of basic skills and to special educators whose tendency is to focus on functional and life skills. Our participants were not entirely disabused of these beliefs, but their participation in the class expanded their sense of what can be imagined for students with significant disabilities, and this result alone justifies the considerable effort to create experiences like GC.

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Bios

Stuart Z. Carroll, PhD, is an associate professor of Elementary and Early Childhood Education at TCNJ whose work focuses the preparation of preservice elementary teachers for inclusive classrooms.

Jerry G. Petroff, PhD, is an associate professor of Special Education, Language, and Literacy at TCNJ with expertise in inclusive education, assistive technology, and the transition of students with disabilities from school to adult life.

Richard Blumberg, PhD, is an associate professor of Special Education, Language, and Literacy at TCNJ with expertise in post-secondary transition, inclusive educational practices, and positive behavioral supports.