A focus on natural supports in postsecondary education for students with intellectual disabilities at Western Carolina University

Kelly R. Kelleya,∗ and David L. Westlingb

aWestern Carolina University, Cullowhee, NC, USA
bCullowhee, NC, USA

Abstract. Postsecondary education opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities (ID) have increased over the past 40 years. Although programs vary, some have been designed to provide a fully inclusive learning experience. The University Participant (UP) Program at Western Carolina University (WCU) is a fully inclusive program where participants live in campus residence halls, audit classes, work in internships on campus, and participate in a wide variety of on-campus activities. An important part of the UP program is the student volunteers serving as natural supports or individuals providing necessary assistance in typical environments for UP Program participants throughout the day. This paper describes how the WCU UP Program uses natural supports to facilitate inclusive opportunities, responsibilities, recruitment, training, coaching, coordination, scheduling, and evaluation of work performance. We conclude with benefits of having undergraduate students serve as natural supports in postsecondary education programs.

Keywords: Postsecondary education, intellectual disability, inclusive, natural supports, secondary transition

1. Introduction

Postsecondary education (PSE) opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities (ID) have increased over the past 40 years due to federal mandates and philosophical shifts. During the 1970’s there were limited opportunities for individuals with ID to experience college outside of specialized programs [1]. In the 1980’s, more programs and opportunities for participating in regular coursework evolved for students with ID due to Section 504 mandates of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (PL 93–112) [1, 2]. During the 1990’s transition service mandates of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [3, 4] created dual enrollment and individual support models to help increase access to coursework, job opportunities, and recreational activities based on individual interests and needs [1].

Within the last ten years, legislation and funding for research from the Office of Postsecondary Education, Office of Special Education Programs in the U.S. Department of Education, and the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research, Disability Rehabilitation Research Program have increased access to postsecondary education for students with ID (e.g., Transition Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities, Center for Postsecondary Education for Individuals with ID, College Career Connection; www.thinkcollege.net). These centers have a mission to expand alternative education options and transition services for students with ID [5]. In 2008, the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA, PL 110–315, [6]) was passed reauthorizing the Higher Education Act of 1965. The HEOA included provisions to facilitate an increase in PSE programs for students with ID including...
The UP program includes eight young adults with ID, an inclusive individualized model. At any given time, the University Participant (UP) program adheres to the tenets of necessary for successful daily living.

Participants in UP programs interact on a daily basis with their same age peers to learn skills individualized programs, individuals with ID interact participating in various college activities. In inclusive social relations, following a daily schedule, and participating in pedestrian navigation, accessing public transportation, including skills in areas such as independent living, to teach a wide range of skills on college campuses, settings. The inclusive individualized program attempts within fully inclusive postsecondary educational settings. The inclusive individualized program attempts to teach a wide range of skills on college campuses, including skills in areas such as independent living, pedestrian navigation, accessing public transportation, social relations, following a daily schedule, and participating in various college activities. In inclusive individualized programs, individuals with ID interact on a daily basis with their same age peers to learn skills necessary for successful daily living.

2. Western Carolina University’s University Participant program

The Western Carolina University (WCU) University Participant (UP) program adheres to the tenets of an inclusive individualized model. At any given time, the UP program includes eight young adults with ID, providing them with a two year, fully inclusive, on-campus living and learning experience. The program began in 2007 with the purpose of facilitating transition from secondary school to adult life. It is designed to promote self-determination and improve quality of life by exposing participants to college coursework, while also teaching them employment and independent living skills in a natural environment. UP participants are expected to complete 1800 hours of learning experiences in five learning areas in two years to earn a UP Certificate of Accomplishment through WCU’s Office of Educational Outreach. The learning areas are Personal Development Skills, Community Participation Skills, Vocational Preparation Skills, Social Participation and Learning, and Academic Knowledge acquired through elective course auditing. Within each of these areas, individual objectives are designed for participants through a person-centered planning process resulting in individualized weekly schedules. During the two year period, participants live on-campus under the same guidelines and expectations as all WCU students. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to describe the roles of natural supports in the WCU UP program, their responsibilities, recruitment, training, coaching, coordination, scheduling, job coaching, evaluation of their performance, and implications for practice.

3. Roles of natural supports

“Natural supports” refers to using individuals in natural environments in order to provide support to persons with ID [10, p. 565]. The inclusive UP model would not be possible without the use of WCU undergraduate students as natural supports. Their involvement facilitates individualized supports and instruction, and helps participants achieve greater independence. They facilitate independent living, recreation, academic, and employment opportunities based on participants’ individual goals and needs. Working as a natural support, a WCU student may live across the hall from a participant to provide support at night, accompany the participant to class, provide in-class support and help with homework, or provide necessary assistance for any other on-campus activity. A breakdown of some of the key responsibilities of the natural supports can be seen in Fig. 1.

Throughout a 24 hour day, up to 10 undergraduate students may provide support to one UP participant.

More information on the WCU UP program is available from the website at up.wcu.edu.
Currently the UP program works with over 200 natural supports each semester to support the eight participants. Some of these individuals have greater responsibilities and are paid through grant funds; while the remainder volunteer their time, participate in service learning, and/or course practicum requirements.

4. Natural support recruitment

When the UP Program started in 2007, undergraduate students majoring in special education primarily supported UP participants as both paid and unpaid natural supports. More recently, the UP Program expanded the natural supports to include a variety of majors such as nursing, emergency management care, biology, recreational therapy, sports management, psychology, and social work. Natural supports are typically recruited through instructors who require a menu of service learning opportunities within course projects or coordination through the Office of Service Learning at WCU. As program awareness has increased, recruitment has become easier due to personal connections with UP participants and word of mouth from the WCU undergraduate students. There are also internships, fraternities, sororities, and athletic groups who have collaborated with the UP program to conduct activities and provide volunteer hours.

5. Training and mentoring natural supports

In order to meet the complex scheduling needs of the UP program, natural supports must be trained in many areas. The type of support each natural support may provide, and the participant who will receive the support will vary according to their weekly availability and corresponding support assignments. Therefore, flexibility is a necessity and training must be broad.

Each semester begins with kick off meetings for continuing natural supports. For new supports, there is an initial training session with the UP program coordinator to learn the most appropriate ways to interact with, support, and in some cases, teach UP participants. New volunteers are provided with a detailed volunteer manual and with learning profiles of the UP participants. The volunteer manual covers topics such as the protocol for communicating schedule changes, frequently asked questions from volunteers, overall disability etiquette, and emergency training strategies. The learning profiles include pertinent information about each participant such as strengths, interests, dietary needs, class participation preferences, and overall strategies for helping each participant.

Most volunteers also need some form of ongoing mentoring throughout a semester, especially those who are working for the first time as natural supports. Some are initially unfamiliar with some of the disability-related characteristics of the participants and are hesitant with initial interactions. To address this issue, until a natural support is comfortable to work alone with a UP participant, they have an option to shadow veteran natural supports.

Additionally, throughout the semester, there are several opportunities for the natural supports to dialog with the UP coordinator and receive input on specific issues. These opportunities are referenced as “check and connect” meetings held face-to-face or online. The face-to-face meetings occur bi-weekly and feature a “bring your own lunch” session where the UP Project Coordinator meets with any natural supports that are able to attend. The online meetings are facilitated using Blackboard (www.blackboard.com), an online learning management system. Besides allowing synchronous meetings, this system also houses UP Program resources and provides a platform for ongoing communication through discussion boards and announcements. Available resources provided through Blackboard include each participant’s goals determined during person centered planning meetings, person centered planning meeting notes, weekly picture schedules for participants, learning profiles about the participants, assignments and updates similar to an online agenda book for recording homework details, reflective journaling features for documenting or summarizing what occurred during volunteer times with UP staff, monthly newsletters, video tutorials, and task analysis resources created by the natural supports or UP staff used by different participants.

6. Coordinating and scheduling natural supports

Imagine eight participants who require various degrees of support between 8:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m., and understand that the nature of this support can fluctuate day to day and week to week based on the nature of particular activities. Also imagine that there are another 200 or so persons who will provide some amount of support, but whose schedules vary week to week; sometimes they might have an hour available, sometimes three or four. Your job is to match the support persons...
with the participants so that the participants have needed supports for the activity in which they will choose to engage! Clearly, the task is complicated and requires a great deal of time and effort to achieve.

It is the task of the project coordinator and the some of the paid natural supports who are designated as “schedulers” to make sure that weekly schedules are completed and available before the beginning of each week. To facilitate this task, the online program WhenToWork (whentowork.com) is used. Natural supports begin the process by inputting the hours they are available to work in the coming week. (Video tutorials are used to show the natural supports how to communicate their availability within this scheduling software.) Next, the project coordinator and the schedulers create an individual weekly schedule for each participant so that they are participating in activities in the five key learning areas throughout the week. Afterwards they look at the times that support persons are available and pair them into slots that need coverage for each participant. The natural supports then communicate back to the schedulers acknowledging and confirming assigned times and roles for the upcoming week.

After natural supports are scheduled and confirmed, one assigned natural support takes each participant’s schedule and converts it to a picture schedule that can be followed by each participant. The individual schedules for participants show pictures and words of what they are doing at what time each day and the natural support accompanying them. As UP participants begin to show increased responsibility and independence, natural supports are faded from their schedules so participants can do some activities independently. As independence increases, the picture schedules have pictures of the actual UP participant so they are able to visually see themselves becoming less reliant on natural supports. Additionally, some UP participants are eventually able to make their own schedules by coordinating their own supports. Providing this structure at the beginning of the college experience and then fading the structure as independence emerges is crucial for successful transition and exercising self-determination. Figure 2 displays a sample of a weekly schedule for a participant.

Before the use of WhenToWork, scheduling was a manual process that required many hours. It is still an arduous task, but the WhenToWork system makes it much more doable. The features of this system allow for flexibility with hours, trading of shifts if assigned natural supports are unable to work, networking with email addresses and phone numbers, and notifications of important announcements through text or email.

7. Natural support roles on the job

The role of natural supports on the job varies each semester based on individual needs of participants and job choices selected for the 10 hours per week for on-campus internships. Natural supports work directly with the Career Development Coordinator who provides resources and strategies for teaching job skills and development of task analysis for increasing independence. Most natural supports fade support as participants and on-campus employers become comfortable with the job duties. Natural supports are trained to monitor and document daily activities and work behaviors after each shift and summarize weekly progress on an individualized work goal sheet reviewed by the Career Development Coordinator. Furthermore, the Career Development Coordinator conducts formal evaluations at various job sites biweekly. The Career Development Coordinator also gives quarterly progress notes and on-campus employer evaluation updates to rehabilitation counselors who support participants while they are enrolled in the UP Program. This allows the rehabilitation counselors to be more familiar with the participant as they complete the program and they are more informed of various job experiences and skill levels.

8. Evaluation of natural supports

Each semester, paid natural supports are formally evaluated on: (a) dependability, (b) engagement and initiative, (c) decision making, (d) professionalism, (e) communication, (f) teamwork, (g) professional development, and (h) problem solving. The paid natural supports self-evaluate in these areas and are also evaluated by the UP program coordinator. Additionally, peers conduct informal evaluations throughout the semester to make sure duties and responsibilities are being carried out responsibly and professionally. The formal evaluations determine continued employment and are similar to individualized growth plans for new teachers. At the end of the evaluation meetings, paid natural supports are encouraged to pick at least two areas for growth for the following semester and tell how they will achieve this growth. The UP staff encourages this professional development by providing further training or through simply informing natural supports of professional development trainings within the community. Figure 3 shows the UP natural support evaluation form.

Although not formally evaluated, unpaid natural supports complete a weekly summary template of their
experiences using the journal feature of Blackboard or various survey options. They are able to summarize time with participants giving the name of the activity or event, time worked, brief description of what happened, goals that they worked on with the participant, and reporting any problems or concerns during the overall experience.

9. Benefits of natural supports

From our experience with the UP program and preliminary qualitative data, we have found that there are many benefits related to using natural supports. There are benefits for the participants with ID, for faculty members, for the natural supports themselves, and for the entire university community.

First, the UP participants benefit from opportunities to have daily interactions with same age peers who serve as role models, guide and direct them through social activities, and help them make decisions that promote independence. For many participants this might be their first experience to have social networks beyond their families or persons paid to be with them. This allows for more genuine friendships and positive peer influences that can impact personal behaviors and social learning opportunities beyond what families can provide.

Second, for the faculty, there is a chance to observe undergraduate students as natural supports and assess their skills and dispositions as future professionals. Natural supports have an opportunity to apply what they learn in the classroom and connect research to practice by using effective strategies with the UP participants. For example, they can learn how to create individualized lesson plans, provide instruction, implement behavior plans, problem solve, and document student progress. Working with the population also allows a student to gain an occupational trial run before entering the workforce. This is consistent with findings that preservice teachers learn more from hands-on clinical field experiences [11]. Additionally, the UP Program has served as a recruitment tool for increasing special education majors and minors, as some students realized the personal value of working with students with disabilities.

Third, there are many benefits for natural supports. If natural supports are interested in building careers around human service fields, postsecondary programs can provide real and meaningful encounters for developing direct service skills and leadership opportunities. Also, when responsibilities move beyond the textbook and class requirements, being a natural support goes beyond simply earning a grade to providing meaningful opportunities to show genuine engagement, responsibility, and commitment to working with individuals with disabilities.

For those with majors besides human service areas, being a natural support often allows them to develop a more positive view of individuals with ID. They learn that a more caring community accepts individuals with disabilities to help them become productive and valued citizens in society. Exposure for including students with disabilities in the campus community sends a clear message that individuals with disabilities should be viewed as natural members of their community. Many natural supports start out volunteering with some hesitancy, but over time, a majority of them vocalize enjoyment from hanging out with the participants and seeing more similarities rather than differences. For example, a student reflecting on her service learning hours in an introductory special education course said, “I will be honest, before SPED 240 I tried to avoid people with disabilities. It’s not that I felt any different about them. I knew they were human just like everyone else in the world. I wasn’t scared or disgusted by them. I just wasn’t sure how to act. I didn’t want to say or do the wrong thing. ‘Taking this class has made me realize that I can be myself around people with disabilities.” As the comfort levels increase over time, reflections become more natural. For instance, “Friday was not any different than any other day, (the UP participant name) and I talked on our way to class, I asked if she was ready for the weekend and ready to go home. She expressed how she was tired and was going to take a nap on the ride home, we giggled and I agreed with her that a nap would be great!”

This is an illustration of a normal conversation enjoyed by friends once fears dissolve. Many have expressed how important this experience and exposure has been to them and their future careers in understanding how to work or treat individuals with ID regardless of their major or future career. Because of UP involvement, friendship and acceptance have evolved. Additionally, numbers continue to increase with natural supports returning each semester making the class or service learning requirement more of a ‘want’ to rather than a ‘need.’

10. Implications for bridging employment and postsecondary program practices

The practices described above for using natural supports in one postsecondary program cannot be
replicated as readily within competitive employment or inclusive communities due to policies not supporting personalized needs of individuals with ID. The natural support model used at WCU facilitates meeting the individualized goals and needs of individuals with ID. For example, Wehman [12] suggests various guiding elements for employment systems change that parallel to practices being conducted in inclusive individualized postsecondary programs. First, with employment systems in the community there has to be supports in place to foster self-determination and person centered planning. This is similar to postsecondary practices since all the UP participants are working and attending classes in different locations of choice while focusing on individualized goals with the help of natural supports. On a daily basis, UP participants are faced with many choices and opportunities to advocate for themselves along with their same age peers as they would in their own community. Second, Wehman [12] suggests data for documenting progress in community should relate to integrated job outcomes. Natural supports in the UP program complete daily progress notes and facilitate self-monitoring and teachable moments throughout various activities during the day. Many natural supports help build soft skills and stronger work ethic as participants complete on-campus internships. Third, Wehman [12] recommends expanding employment opportunities while increasing relationships with businesses. Building tolerance, awareness, and exposure to undergraduate college students striving to obtain the role of being business leaders of tomorrow helps increase and expand relationships for individuals with disabilities entering the business community. Fourth, systems change should be mission driven [12]. Ongoing training and resources provided in inclusive individualized postsecondary programs for natural supports focuses on the overall mission of being inclusive and person centered. As comfort levels increase and overall awareness is achieved, natural supports become mission driven. The natural supports begin to see value of having individuals with disabilities contributing to their community and seeing the importance of overall quality of life. Finally, funding must align in order to parallel successful employment [12]. The overall mission in postsecondary programs and communities are similar, but funding is not aligned to foster independence. If fully inclusive campus work internships are part of the college experience and have illustrated preliminary success, then community policies and funding streams should promote person centered missions aligning with increased competitive employment opportunities and not segregated work settings with limited wages.

11. Final thoughts

As recommended by Wehmeyer [12] in order to move forward in the transition and employment supports movement, interventions for promoting desired outcomes in the areas of employment, community inclusion, and beyond must be accompanied by modified context in which people function. Without natural supports and systematic coordination of those supports, our program could not implement the value system and key principles of full inclusive opportunities. Natural supports allow us to provide individualized supports in a fully inclusive college setting that many individuals with disabilities will never get to experience again in their lifetime. Natural supports are crucial to the UP participants so they can achieve their own personal dreams and goals, as well as increased self-determination to transition into productive individuals in their communities and potentially improved quality of life. It is important that rehabilitation counselors, psychologists, and other professionals providing direct services to people with disabilities collaborate with postsecondary programs in order to promote more inclusive community opportunities and competitive employment outcomes.

References

Appendices

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<td>Grocery shopping, cooking, laundry, Budgeting</td>
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Fig. 1. Natural support responsibilities.
Fig 2. Sample weekly schedule for a UP participant.
Natural Support’s Name: _____________________________    Date: _________________

Rating Scale:

5  Exceeds expectations  
4  Meets expectations - no improvement needed  
3  Some improvement needed  
2  Substantial improvement needed  
1  Unresponsive to this expectation

DEPENDABILITY
The paid natural support worked hours scheduled each week for the entire semester, found a substitute if needed notifying UP personnel of schedule changes, arranged drop off and pick up times appropriately, and was accessible to the UP Coordinator as needed.

LEADERSHIP/ENGAGEMENT/INITIATIVE
The paid support was engaged in person-centered planning meetings/goals, provided academic, vocational, and social skills instruction opportunities with appropriate documentation, and attended extracurricular events with UP Participants.

JUDGMENT/PROFESSIONALISM/INTEGRITY
The paid support exercised good reasoning, made good decisions to support or benefit UP Participants, and demonstrated honesty and respect in the work environment.

INNOVATION/COMMUNICATION/TEAMWORK
The paid support communicated new ideas or concerns to the team and understood and/or applied teamwork/communication strategies to actively contribute to the success of the program, other UP Program volunteers, UP Participants, and families.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT/CREATIVITY
The paid support attended volunteer trainings for professional development and implemented strategies learned from these trainings to improve work performance while collecting data on UP Participant performance.

PROBLEM SOLVING/ORGANIZATION
The paid support understands the goals and outcomes of the University Participant Program and was able to help in developing any alternative solutions when needed in a timely manner. Follow through with suggestions were conducted in order to address the problem.

OVERALL PERFORMANCE RATING

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<th>Coordinator Evaluation</th>
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Fig. 3. Paid natural support evaluation and growth plan.

PROFESSIONAL GROWTH PLAN FOR NEXT SEMESTER
CHECK AREAS FROM ABOVE WHERE YOU PLAN TO GROW NEXT SEMESTER

IF REHIRED:

How do you plan to grow in the areas you checked above?

How can we (UP Program personnel) help you grow in these areas?

We have reviewed and completed this evaluation together.

__________________________________________
UP Paid Support                               UP Program Coordinator

_______________________
Date Completed

Eligible for rehire?  _______ YES for next semester
                        ______ NO (list reason for termination)

Fig. 3. (Continued)