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# Research to Practice: Postsecondary Education Options for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

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## Postsecondary Education Options for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

*Debra Hart, Meg Grigal, Caren Sax, Donna Martinez, and Madeleine Will*

### Introduction

Exiting high school is an exciting and tense experience for all students and families. But when students with intellectual disabilities consider what will happen next, the possibility of college is usually not promoted as a viable option. This needs to change. Receiving a college education and experiencing that very exciting time in life is as beneficial for students with intellectual disabilities as for students without. The growth that students experience in college can be measured in a number of areas, including academic and personal skill-building, employment, independence, self-advocacy, and self-confidence. For students with intellectual disabilities, this growth is also reflected in increased self-esteem when they begin to see themselves as more similar to than different from their peers without disabilities. Being part of campus life, taking classes (whether auditing or for credit), and learning to navigate a world of high expectations develops the skills needed for successful adult life. When we keep college in the mix of possibilities as students with intellectual disabilities explore which steps to take after high school, it makes the statement that we believe in their potential for success.

This brief presents the following information about postsecondary education for students with intellectual disabilities:

- ☒ Definitions of “postsecondary education” and “intellectual disability”
- ☒ An overview of postsecondary education options
- ☒ Research findings on current knowledge of postsecondary education options and outcomes, with recommendations for improving access to postsecondary education
- ☒ A bibliography, including a list of websites

### Overview of Postsecondary Models

Some local school systems nationwide partner with two- and four-year public and private colleges to offer dual enrollment options to students with intellectual disabilities, age 18 and over, who are still receiving services from their school system under IDEA. There are an estimated 2000-3000 students with intellectual disabilities annually who are eligible for PSE options. Parents and local school systems typically initiate interest in pursuing these options, while local school system personnel coordinate student services. Some options are linked to teacher or rehabilitation professional preparation programs at the host institution, and participants from these degree programs provide a range of supports to students with intellectual disabilities. Very few PSE programs offer dorm experiences. Often, services end when the student ages out of public school, most often at age 21 or 22.

There are **three main types of PSE models**: mixed or hybrid, substantially separate, and totally inclusive. Within each model, a wide range of supports and services is provided. Each model is described in the order of prevalence.

- 1 Mixed/hybrid model:** Students participate in social activities and/or academic classes with students without disabilities (for audit or credit) and also participate in classes with other students with disabilities (sometimes referred to as “life skills” or “transition” classes). This model typically provides students with employment experience on- or off-campus.
- 2 Substantially separate model:** Students participate only in classes with other students with disabilities (sometimes referred to as a “life skills” or “transition” program). Students may have the opportunity to participate in generic social activities on campus and may be offered employment experience, often through a rotation of pre-established employment slots on- or off-campus.
- 3 Inclusive individual support model:** Students receive individualized services (e.g., educational coach, tutor, technology, natural supports) in college courses, certificate programs, and/or degree programs, for audit or credit. The individual student’s vision and career goals drive services. There is no program base on campus. The focus is on establishing a student-identified career goal that directs the course of study and employment experiences (e.g., internships, apprenticeships, work-based learning). Built on a collaborative approach via an interagency team (adult service agencies, generic community services, and the college’s disability support office), agencies identify a flexible range of services and share costs.

## Definitions

### Postsecondary Education (PSE)

Education after the high-school level. Options for students with intellectual disabilities include community colleges, vocational-technical colleges, and the other various forms of adult education.

### Intellectual Disability

Refers to students with significant learning, cognitive, and other conditions (e.g., mental retardation) that prevent them from learning course content without a strong system of educational supports and services. These are not students who are in a typical manner; rather, they require significant planning and collaboration to provide them with a typical educational experience. It always includes students who (a) take the alternative state assessment; (b) exit secondary education with a certificate of attendance, instead of a typical high school diploma; and (c) qualify to receive services (IDEA) until they are 21.

Fewer programs that serve adults or youth age 21 and older fall within these three models and offer the same range of services. The major difference between dual enrollment and adult PSE options is that the local education system no longer participates in providing student supports. Primarily, the student and family maintain momentum. Efforts are supported financially in the following ways.

- ✦ **IDEA funds:** Dual enrollment programs are often funded by the school system using IDEA or local school district funds. Additionally, the higher education institution can waive tuition.
- ✦ **Vocational Rehabilitation (VR):** If student's coursework is directly related to accessing employment, state VR funds might be used. Additionally, some VR agencies may offer a tuition waiver for eligible students.
- ✦ **Family funds:** PSE options can be paid for by students' families. Students without a standard high school diploma are not eligible to apply for financial aid, nor can their families use college savings or 529 plans to pay tuition and fees. This limits access for economically challenged students.
- ✦ **Other rehabilitation organizations:** State developmental disability/mental retardation departments may provide funding to assist a student with intellectual disabilities to access PSE.
- ✦ **Scholarships:** Foundations or organizations can give scholarships to students enrolling in PSE regardless of their financial or disability status, providing the student meets other requirements. Individual colleges also award annual scholarships based on demonstrated financial need.
- ✦ **AmeriCorps programs:** Funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service, these programs provide an education award or stipend to participants who volunteer for one or two years.
- ✦ **Plans for Achieving Self-Support (PASS Plans):** PASS Plans were developed by the Social Security Administration as an incentive to encourage individuals who receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Supplemental Security Disability Income (SSDI) to enter the workforce. This plan allows an individual to work and save money without being penalized with a deduction from their SSI or SSDI check. There are restrictions on how the saved money can be used, but college tuition and fees would be permissible if shown to relate to a career goal and outcome.

## Research

Of all students with disabilities, those with intellectual disabilities have the poorest post-school outcomes. Until recently, the option of attending college, especially the opportunity to participate in typical coursework, has not been available to high school students with intellectual disabilities. The usual options for these students, especially those past the age of 18, have been limited to segregated life skills or community-based transition programs. Inclusive PSE options are beginning to replace such programs and have great potential to improve student outcomes.

The following research findings outline the current knowledge of PSE options and outcomes for students with intellectual disabilities.

- ✦ There are approximately 110 PSE programs across 28 states. These programs are listed on [www.ThinkCollege.net](http://www.ThinkCollege.net), a website that is devoted to the topic of PSE for students with intellectual disabilities.
- ✦ The majority of programs (74%) support students with disabilities who are dually enrolled in high school and college. Thirty-three percent of the programs supported adult students with intellectual disabilities in PSE. (Some programs support both.)
- ✦ Parents and local education agencies initiate the majority of programs.
- ✦ Families are expressing an increased desire for their son or daughter with intellectual disabilities to attend PSE after exiting the school system. When surveyed about desired post-school outcomes, 36% of parents of students with intellectual disabilities and other low-incidence disabilities indicated that a four-year college was their first choice. Twenty-two percent of parents wanted a community college.
- ✦ Families need more information on PSE options to use when developing young adults' transition goals.
- ✦ The majority of postsecondary programs identify "attitude" and "low expectations" as the most significant barriers to overcome. Additional barriers, in order of significance, are funding, including access to student financial aid for students with disabilities who lack a high school diploma; transportation; and entrance requirements, including "ability to benefit" tests.

community colleges, four-year colleges and institutions,

n), whose disability impacts their ability to access  
s who would access the postsecondary education  
em with access. This population typically (though not  
on with an alternative diploma, such as IEP diploma or  
es under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

✦ A matched-cohort follow-up study of 40 students with intellectual disabilities looked at 20 students who had some type of PSE experience (noncredit audit, certificate course, courses for credit, fully matriculating) and 20 with no PSE experience. Findings revealed that students with intellectual disabilities who had some type of PSE experience were much more likely to obtain competitive employment, required fewer supports, and earned higher wages. Additionally, students had increased self-esteem and expanded social networks that included students without disabilities, and all involved had overall higher expectations for these students.

✦ A survey conducted with 13 programs in one state revealed that 87% of the 163 students in programs in postsecondary sites were involved in employment training, 36% were enrolled in a typical college course, and over half participated in activities on the college campus after school hours. All exiting students were linked to an adult service agency or community rehabilitation program as they exited. Seventy-nine percent qualified for Social Security benefits, 84% had a job for the summer, and 65% exited with a paid job.

## Recommendations for Improving Access to Postsecondary Education

The following recommendations for improving access to PSE focus on strengthening three key elements: awareness, policy, and capacity-building.

### **Awareness**

- Develop a multimedia public awareness campaign on the options for and benefits of PSE for students with an intellectual disability. The campaign should reach students and families, school K-12 personnel, adult disability and generic service systems, and the higher education community.
- Encourage state departments of education to identify the current status of PSE options in local districts, monitor student activities and outcomes, and share information about exemplary programs and services in postsecondary environments.
- Inform institutions of higher education and their supporting organizations (e.g., National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education, Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities) of current partnerships serving students with intellectual disabilities. Clearly articulate the institutional and individual benefits of such collaborations.
- Inform national disability organizations (e.g., TASH, AAMR, AUCD/University Centers of Excellence, ARC, UCP, PACER/Parent Training Information Centers, AHEAD) about the options for and benefits of PSE for students with intellectual disabilities.

### **Policy**

- Secure “Dear Colleague” letters from the U.S. Department of Education to state superintendents/commissioners informing them that IDEA funds can be used to support students with disabilities in PSE and develop or enhance options and services.
- Ensure that the State Performance Plans (SPPs) and indicators 13 and 14 required under IDEA include PSE options and track outcomes for students with intellectual disabilities.
- Develop an “alternate” or universally designed “ability to benefit” test that creates access to PSE for students with intellectual disabilities.
- Modify and align existing legislation (e.g., IDEA, HEA, NCLB, WIA, SSA, Transportation Act, DD Act, Medicaid, Olmstead) to support increased access to PSE for students with intellectual disabilities.
- Identify or develop mechanisms for students with intellectual disabilities to access federal financial aid.
- Develop or modify existing policies to support students with intellectual disabilities to gain access to campus housing.

### **Capacity-Building**

- Fund demonstration and research on PSE models to increase the number of available options and develop/disseminate replication materials.
- Partner with a national organization to integrate a focus on PSE for students with intellectual disabilities. This partnership can organize information and resources, provide training and technical assistance, conduct and coordinate research efforts, and advocate for needed legislative and policy changes.
- Develop strategies that support national accreditation for PSE options that integrate students with intellectual disabilities.
- Establish a national set of standards and quality indicators for PSE.
- Integrate information on PSE for students with intellectual disabilities in pre-service training of all general and special education teachers, rehabilitation professionals, and support personnel.



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## Web Resources

[www.ThinkCollege.net](http://www.ThinkCollege.net)  
[www.transitiontocollege.net](http://www.transitiontocollege.net)  
[www.education.umd.edu/oco](http://www.education.umd.edu/oco)  
[www.transitioncoalition.org](http://www.transitioncoalition.org)  
[www.STEPS-Forward.org](http://www.STEPS-Forward.org)  
[www.heath.gwu.edu](http://www.heath.gwu.edu)

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