Supporting Students With Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities to Attend College

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TEACHING Exceptional Children, Vol. 49, No. 6, pp. 411–419. Copyright 2017 The Author(s). DOI: 10.1177/0040059917711695

One of Ms. Barry's students, Paul, a 16-year-old with autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disability (ID), came to school talking about his older brother who had just started college. Paul wants to go to college, too, but his parents do not think that this is a realistic goal and are asking for her advice. Ms. Barry has never heard this question from a student's parents before and is unsure about what to tell them.

Students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), such as autism spectrum disorder and Down syndrome, have more opportunities to go to college than ever before (Hart, Grigal, & Weir, 2010). Over the last decade, the issue of increasing access to college for students with IDD has gained much national attention, in part due to federal funding through the Higher Education Opportunity Act (2008). According to Think College—a national organization dedicated to expanding and improving opportunities for inclusive higher education for students with IDD—more than 240 inclusive college programs for students with ID exist across the United States (see Figure 1; Think College, 2017). This number represents an exponential increase in programs—nearly 10 times greater than the number of programs available in 2004 (National Coordinating Center Accreditation Workgroup, 2016). Not only are there more programs to choose from, with recent revisions to the Higher Education Opportunity Act, students with ID also can access federal financial aid for attending postsecondary education programs that meet federal requirements (Hart et al., 2010).

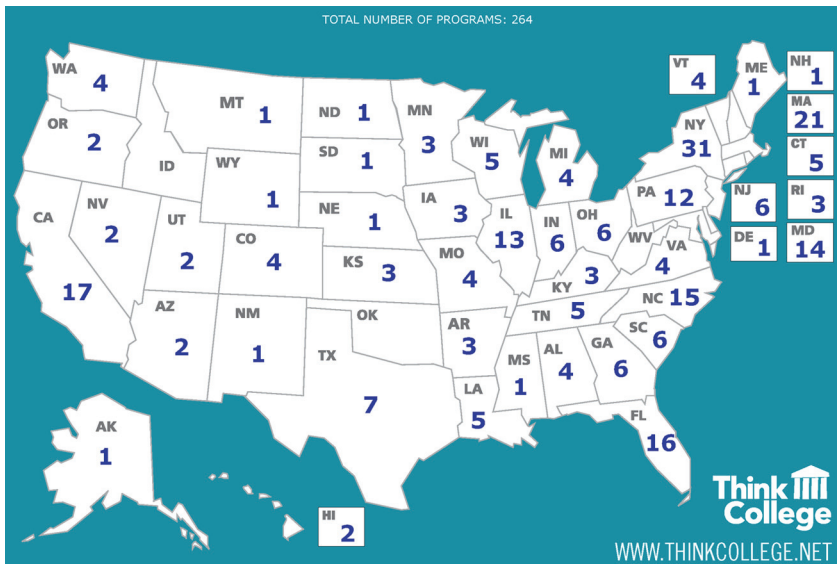
Several sources of data provide a snapshot of college attendance by students with IDD. An analysis of data from the Rehabilitation Services Administration suggests that up to 20% of youth with ID in each state are in postsecondary education while receiving vocational rehabilitation services (Grigal, Migliore, & Hart, 2014). The National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 indicated that 28.7% of youth with ID enrolled in some type of postsecondary education within 8 years after exiting high school (Newman et al., 2011). Through recent federal funding for Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students With Intellectual Disabilities, 2,245 students accessed postsecondary education at 57 college and university campuses between 2010 and 2015 (Grigal, Hart, Smith, Domin, & Weir, 2017). Alongside the exponential growth in programs, these data suggest that students with IDD are attending college in greater numbers than ever before.

Postsecondary education programs for students with IDD are located on 2- and 4-year college campuses, and several offer on-campus living (Grigal, Hart, & Weir, 2012). Some are dual-enrollment programs, serving students who are still eligible for special education services, whereas other programs admit only those who have exited high school (Papay & Bambara, 2011). Although these programs are diverse, a commonality is that they provide pathways to participation that historically have not been available to students with IDD due to traditional requirements of a high school diploma and minimum grades or test scores (Grigal et al., 2012). Each program is structured differently: In some programs, students participate in courses and receive grades in the same way that their typically developing peers do (Grigal et al., 2017). Sometimes students audit courses or take them pass/fail. Finally, some programs provide separate classes designed for students with IDD (Grigal et al., 2017).

College is a place where students with IDD can develop academic and personal skills, self-advocacy, and self-confidence (Hart et al., 2010). In college, students with IDD can also learn employment skills and gain experiences that support them in achieving their employment goals (Papay & Bambara, 2011). The college experience can support students in the transition from high school to adult life in the community. Further, by attending college, students with IDD are afforded the opportunity to take on a valued role within society: that of a college student (Hart et al., 2010).

Although going to college may not be a goal or a good fit for every student with IDD, inclusive postsecondary education opportunities are becoming more widely available to this group of students (National Coordinating Center Accreditation Workgroup, 2016). Yet,

Figure 1. Map of inclusive postsecondary education programs in the United States



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despite the significant growth of inclusive college programs in recent years (Hart et al., 2010), families of transition-age students with IDD report needing more information and support from teachers to facilitate planning for postsecondary education (Griffin, McMillan, & Hodapp, 2010). The purpose of this article is to provide teachers with tips to support their students with IDD who want to go to college.

Tip 1: Provide Families With Information and Resources

Given that the movement to provide inclusive postsecondary educational opportunities for students with IDD is still in its early years, many students, families, and teachers may be uninformed about the possibilities. Parents have reported several barriers to participation in inclusive postsecondary education for their children with IDD (Griffin et al., 2010). In a survey of 108 family members of transition-age youth with IDD, the most often cited barriers reported by participants were (a) the need for further information or guidance around this topic (73%), (b) lack of support from school staff in understanding this topic (36%), and (c) financial barriers (36%; Griffin et al., 2010). Although families likely still struggle with these, many resources are available for educators to support families and students with IDD in understanding their options (see Table 1).

Information Sources

A primary resource that educators can share with families is ThinkCollege.net, an information hub focused on inclusive postsecondary education for students with IDD. The site is easy to navigate and provides accessible family-friendly resources, such as a database of postsecondary education programs that is searchable by location and other characteristics. ThinkCollege.net includes many other accessible resources developed for prospective college students with IDD. Teachers can help students to learn more about college by watching videos of college students with IDD discussing topics such as why college is important to them, how to get started, and tips for success in college. Table 1 provides a list of resources relating to college that teachers can share with families.

To help students and families learn about what postsecondary education for students with IDD is like, teachers can invite representatives from local programs to speak with their classes or present at a college information night. Representatives could include college students and alumni, their parents, and program staff. These individuals can give a range of perspectives on the skills that are needed in the college environment. Teachers and parents can then help students to identify their strengths and needs in relation to these skills, as well as support students to set and meet goals that will help them to be successful in college (see Tip 2).

Table 1. Resources Related to College for Students With Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities and Their Families

Resource	Description	Web address
Federal Student Aid	Information on financial aid for students with intellectual disability	https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/eligibility/intellectual-disabilities
Going to College	Online activities related to college life with a disability	http://www.going-to-college.org
I'm Determined	Online resources supporting student self-determination	http://www.imdetermined.org
ME! Lessons for Teaching Self-Awareness & Self-Advocacy	Curriculum on self-awareness and self-advocacy available free through the University of Oklahoma's Zarrow Center	http://www.ou.edu/content/education/centers-and-partnerships/zarrow/transition-education-materials.html
National Center for College Students With Disabilities	National online clearinghouse for information about disability and higher education	http://www.nccsdonline.org
National Parent Center on Transition and Employment	Information and resources for parents and youth on topics including postsecondary education	http://www.pacer.org/transition/
Ruby's Rainbow	Nonprofit offering postsecondary education scholarships for students with Down syndrome	https://rubysrainbow.org
Think College	Information hub on inclusive postsecondary education	www.thinkcollege.net

Some families will find that they live in a geographic area where there are few existing programs designed to support students with IDD. In these situations, students could consider applying to programs farther away that offer residential options; families can find these programs by using the Think College searchable database. Educators can also provide families with resources about how to develop new postsecondary education opportunities for their children with IDD by approaching local colleges or universities about this possibility (e.g., Papay & Griffin, 2013).

Financial Barriers

Educators can provide parents with accessible resources to explain some of the available supports for finances. For example, one resource available on ThinkCollege.net is an audio podcast focused on the topic of paying for college. With written materials regarding financial aid and work-study opportunities provided under the Higher Education Opportunity Act, these resources can begin to address the financial barriers that many families face. In collaboration with transition specialists, teachers can provide information and connect students with representatives from state vocational rehabilitation and developmental disabilities agencies to discuss resources that may be available to pay for college. In addition, teachers can advocate for students with IDD and their parents to be included in their high school's college preparation events, such as financial aid information sessions.

Ms. Barry arranged for a presentation from a local inclusive postsecondary education program. She invited her students and their parents, as well as families and teachers from younger grades. It was so successful that she plans to make it an annual event so that families can revisit the topic periodically. Staff and students from the program gave information on the classes and other experiences that are available to students with IDD, as well as the skills that students need to be successful.

After learning more about the options for inclusive postsecondary education for her students, Ms. Barry designed a writing lesson plan on the topic of going to college. She taught her students how to search online for information about students with IDD attending college. One of the resources that she shared was the "For Students" section of the ThinkCollege.net website. She assigned students to watch a video called "Why Go to College?" After watching, their assignment was to write three sentences about why students in the video wanted to go to college.

Afterward, Ms. Barry asked her students individually about whether they wanted to go to college and why. Paul was able to give additional reasons for why he wanted to attend college, beyond wanting to share the same experience as his brother. He also used the ThinkCollege database to locate several inclusive postsecondary education programs in his home state.

Tip 2: Encourage Student Participation in Transition Planning

Once a student has identified college as a postsecondary goal, the transition plan will need to be revised to reflect that. Ideally, students themselves are a part of this process (Test et al., 2004). Research has shown that students who set college as a goal and are involved in transition planning are significantly more likely to achieve their goals than those who do not participate in transition planning (Wei, Wagner, Hudson, Yu, & Javitz, 2016). In addition, active involvement in the transition-planning process is an authentic way for students to develop their self-determination skills (Test et al., 2004). Success in college requires self-determination (Ankeny & Lehmann, 2011), and teachers can foster students' self-determination by using evidence-based practices to support active involvement in transition planning. By supporting students to advocate for themselves in high school, teachers are providing them with much-needed practice to later engage in these crucial skills once in college.

Practice Opportunities

Teachers can provide students with opportunities to practice the skills involved in participating in their transition-planning meetings. For example, when Ms. Barry asked Paul about why he wanted to go to college, she was supporting him in rehearsing what he would say in his transition-planning meeting regarding his postsecondary goals. In past studies, teachers and researchers have arranged "mock" individualized education program (IEP) meetings in which students rehearse what will happen during the actual meeting (Test et al., 2004). This type of practice can prepare students to be more comfortable participating in the actual IEP meeting. It also provides the teacher opportunities to give the student prompts, praise, and corrective feedback, as needed, prior to the actual meeting.

Teachers can also encourage students to be involved in their own transition planning by actively soliciting their input throughout the transition-planning process. This can take the form of getting student input via self-assessments or less formal documents, such as the writing assignment from the prior vignette; these activities can promote self-awareness among students, and help them to be more informed about their own needs. Within the transition-planning meeting and broader planning process, teachers can intentionally provide students with opportunities to engage in self-advocacy by asking them questions or supporting them to perform a particular role in the meeting. For example, a teacher might support a student in preparing and rehearsing a brief presentation ahead of time so that the student can provide information to the IEP team about his or her present levels of performance.

Additional Supports

Finally, some students will need more supports to engage in self-advocacy, and teachers can assist them by helping to develop those supports. For example, www.imdetermined.org provides templates for a "one-pager" that students can complete about their strengths, preferences, interests, and support needs. To help students create one-pagers, teachers can show them samples available on www.imdetermined.org. There are samples on the site created by students at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. After showing their students these models, teachers can assist them in completing the template and individualizing it by adding photos and graphics. Teachers can then prompt students to use their one-pagers as supports to help them advocate for themselves more effectively. For example, teachers could prompt students to refer to their one-pagers during IEP meetings as different topics are discussed. Teachers can also suggest that students use the one-pagers to explain their support needs to the staff of an inclusive postsecondary education program or to college faculty.

From his writing assignment, Ms. Barry knew that Paul wanted to take college classes such as Introduction to Film. Ms. Barry brought Paul's assignment to his IEP meeting and asked him to share his interest with the group. He talked about how he liked to research the reviews of recently released movies and wanted to do that for the college newspaper. With this in mind, Ms. Barry asked Paul how he needed to improve his writing to meet this goal. The team then created several objectives related to writing and identified the needed instruction and supports.

Before Paul had voiced his desire to go to college, his parents had been considering a full-time work-based learning program for the next academic year. But, given his goals related to writing, Paul and his team decided that he should continue to focus on academic skills that he needed to improve before starting college. They agreed that Paul would attend classes in the mornings and participate in the work-based learning program in the afternoons.

Students who set college as a goal and are involved in transition planning are significantly more likely to achieve their goals than those who do not participate in transition planning.

Tip 3: Teach Self-Advocacy, Navigation, and Safety Skills

Teachers can play a crucial role in helping their students gain the skills that they will need to be admitted to an inclusive college program and to be successful in that setting. Although admissions criteria vary from program to program, some prerequisite skills are shared by many programs. Some of the more common criteria include the ability to (a) communicate the desire to go to college, (b) navigate campus independently, and (c) remain safe on campus (Grigal et al., 2012; Papay & Bambara, 2011). Again, teachers and families should be aware that all programs have their own admissions criteria, and they should inquire about those specifically; however, the skills around self-advocacy, navigation, and safety are among the most common across programs.

Self-Advocacy Skills

The first of these skill domains relates to self-advocacy about the desire to go to college. Not only is this a prerequisite skill for admission to many programs, but the broader skill set of self-advocacy is important for success once students are in college (Ankeny & Lehmann, 2011). Many of the strategies we described in the preceding section relate to promoting self-advocacy specific to the context of IEP and transition planning. Beyond these strategies, teachers can use lessons and activities from available curricula, such as *ME! Lessons for Teaching Self-Awareness & Self-Advocacy* (Cantley, Little, & Martin, 2010). This online curriculum consists of 10 units, including lessons and materials, and is available free through the University of Oklahoma's Zarrow Center (for website, see Table 1).

These lessons teach valuable self-advocacy skills and can be incorporated into an existing curriculum or taught as a stand-alone course. Each lesson plan includes objectives, materials, lesson procedures, and student evaluation. Through the lessons, students engage in activities to learn essential skills and knowledge to support their self-advocacy in current and future environments. As one example, teachers could use the Unit 4 worksheet titled "Where do I go from here?" Teachers could ask students to complete the worksheet itself, or they could create activities and lessons around the questions posed in it—for example, "Where am I now?" and "Where do I want to be 2 years after high school?" (in relation to education, work, and living arrangements). By creating lessons that help students identify their goals, teachers will be better able to support students to communicate their goals during IEP meetings and, if relevant, during interviews for admission to postsecondary education programs. The *ME!* curriculum also includes instruction and activities on clear communication that can help teachers to support students in further developing their self-advocacy skills. (Cantley et al., 2010)

Navigation Skills

A second skill domain that may be needed for admission to an inclusive postsecondary program is independent navigation. Many students with IDD

have gone to school in settings that do not require or encourage independent navigation. This is particularly true for those who have experienced mostly self-contained settings. Going from a self-contained classroom setting to a college campus may be challenging, and students will need assistance to learn the skills needed for independent navigation. Teachers can support students by teaching these skills in school and coordinating with the students' families to promote use of these skills at home.

One evidence-based strategy used to teach independent navigation is the use of technology supports. For example, Kelley, Test, and Cooke (2013) taught four college students with IDD to use a video iPod as a support in navigating the college campus. High school teachers can utilize the methods described by Kelley and colleagues to teach high school students with IDD these skills either on campus or in the community. For example, teachers can individualize instructional materials for a particular route by taking digital photographs of the landmarks along the route. Teachers can then insert the photographs into a PowerPoint in the order that students will encounter them on the route. To provide instructions about the turns or directions to follow at each landmark, teachers can add arrows or textual directions to the photographs and slides. Finally, teachers can teach students how to access the PowerPoint on a portable electronic device and how to follow the directions to learn new routes.

Safety Skills

Another skill domain often required for college attendance among students with IDD relates to safety skills, some of which are also necessary for independent navigation. In a review of studies on safety skills, Mechling (2008) identified several showing that individuals with IDD can learn safe pedestrian/street-crossing skills through a variety of teaching procedures. One set of strategies for teaching safe pedestrian skills includes the following steps: (a) Conduct a street-crossing simulation in the school hallways; (b) show students a video model of peers safely crossing the street; and (c) provide students with direct instruction and feedback in community settings (Branham, Collins, Schuster, & Kleinert, 1999).

Dual enrollment can be a good way for students with IDD to explore college while they still have the supports available through their IEPs.

Another relevant safety skill is the ability to call for help when lost or in danger, and several studies have examined this skill as well (Mechling, 2008). Cell phones—specifically smart phones—are ubiquitous on most college campuses today. Students with cell phones should be taught to use them to enhance their own safety. Finally, in several studies, individuals with IDD learned the skills to respond appropriately after being approached by a stranger (e.g., Fisher, Burke, & Griffin, 2013). Teachers can use these studies as a basis for their teaching or provide them as resources to the parents of students with IDD.

To teach these safety skills, educators can use behavior skills training, which has been found to be an effective approach in teaching safety skills to students with IDD (Mechling, 2008). Behavior skills training includes providing verbal and visual instructions, modeling the skill, asking students to rehearse the skill, and giving praise and corrective feedback to the students. Mechling (2008) concluded that an important feature in skill acquisition is the students' behavioral performance of the skill. Thus, teachers should give students opportunities to practice skills, and they should provide feedback until students achieve mastery. Traits that are often characteristic of individuals with IDD (e.g., gullibility and social naiveté) make this population more vulnerable than their typically developing peers (Snell et al., 2009). Therefore, learning safety skills is vital not only for admission to a postsecondary program but also for the well-being of students once they are on campus.

In talking with Paul and his parents at the IEP meeting, Ms. Barry encouraged them to contact the three postsecondary education programs that Paul identified, to get more information about the specific admissions criteria and processes. After learning from Paul and his family about the admissions policies of the programs they were considering, Ms. Barry realized that there were a few commonalities across programs. For example, all three emphasized that Paul would need to be able to walk to his classes and internship site within the first few weeks on campus. Ms. Barry knew that Paul could do this but that he would definitely need some training to be safe and successful.

To address this issue, Ms. Barry developed a unit for her students to help them learn to navigate new routes around their high school campus. She developed visual supports for the students, which included a picture and written description of a landmark on the route. In this way, the lesson was also supporting the students' literacy development. When the unit was over, Ms. Barry gave each student the homework assignment to learn a new route in their own neighborhoods. She sent parents information about strategies that had been successful in helping students to learn the new routes at school, as well as recommendations for teaching students to use a cell phone in case of emergency.

Tip 4: Help Students Transition to the College Environment

Secondary teachers can facilitate a smooth transition from high school to college by educating students and families about the difference between

these two environments. A primary distinction between high school and college relates to the laws governing each setting. Whereas the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 2006) mandates a free and appropriate public education, the ADA Amendments Act of 2008 (2009) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (2009) protect students against discrimination and ensure accessibility in college and other settings (Madaus & Shaw, 2006). In contrast to IDEA, the other two acts do not entitle students with disabilities to an education; instead, they require access and appropriate accommodations in college classes taken for credit. In many inclusive postsecondary education programs, students with IDD audit classes rather than enroll for credit. This allows them to access the course and for the expectations and content of the class to be modified. For example, a professor may determine that, instead of reading all required course texts, a student auditing the course is responsible for reading particular articles or portions of the textbook. It should be noted, however, that an audited class cannot be applied as credit toward a degree.

Secondary teachers can share resources with students and families that explain such differences between high school and college for students with disabilities. For example, teachers can share with students the website www.going-to-college.org, which has video and text resources to explain what to expect in college and how to access accommodations. In the *ME!* curriculum (see Tip 3), teachers can use Unit 4, Lesson 2, to teach students about their rights and responsibilities after high school and Unit 8, Lesson 2, to teach students how to advocate for their rights in postsecondary school (Cantley et al., 2010). For family members, teachers can share the Think College Learn module "For Families: Options and Planning for College" (see http://www.thinkcollege.net/think-college-learn/), which has video, audio, and written information on the differences between high school and college for students with IDD and on the changing roles of families in these settings.

Summary of Performance

Secondary teachers can help students to transition successfully by sharing relevant information about their support needs with the program staff and college disability support office, as appropriate and as requested by the student.

Although college students with IDD will not have IEPs as they did in high school, sharing information from the IEP and summary of performance (SOP) can help ease the transition from high school to the postsecondary setting (Madaus & Shaw, 2006). As discussed in Tip 2, students can and should participate in the transition-planning process—this includes the development of the SOP. In the SOP, teachers have the opportunity to provide information about the student's skills in academic content areas as well as other important areas, such as self-determination and independent living (Madaus, Bigaj, Chafouleas, & Simonsen, 2006). Teachers should solicit feedback from their students about the specific supports that they have found to be most helpful in high school (e.g., accommodations, modifications, assistive technology), and they should incorporate this information into the SOP. Teachers can then give copies of the IEP and SOP to students to include in their college application packets.

Dual-Enrollment Options

Dual enrollment, in which students take college classes while still enrolled in high school, can be a good way for students with IDD to explore college while they still have the supports available through their IEPs. The Office of Special Education Programs has advised that if dual enrollment is allowed under state law for K–12 students, it can be designated as a transition service on the student's IEP and paid for with IDEA Part B funds (Musgrove, 2013). More than half of all programs listed in the ThinkCollege database offer dual enrollment for students in high school, and about a quarter of all students who attended Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students With Intellectual Disabilities between 2010 and 2015 were dually enrolled (Grigal et al., 2017). Teachers and students can use the ThinkCollege programs database to search for dual-enrollment options for students with IDD in their area. If no opportunities are listed, teachers should work with school counselors to identify dual-enrollment opportunities that may be available to all students (e.g., through a local community college) and then determine if their students with IDD could access these, given the needed supports.

In many inclusive postsecondary education programs, students with IDD audit classes rather than enroll for credit.

Other Opportunities

In addition to dual enrollment, teachers can provide students with other opportunities to gain firsthand knowledge of the college experience. For example, teachers can arrange a field trip or provide families with information about campus tours. Some postsecondary education programs have camps and orientations designed to provide prospective college students with a sense of what college will be like. Such firsthand experiences can help students learn about college life so that they can then make an informed decision about whether or not it is a good fit for them. This would likely benefit any college-bound student, but it may be particularly helpful for students with IDD, who may struggle with abstract concepts (Snell et al., 2009).

Ms. Barry supported Paul and his family as they gathered information

needed for his college applications. She made sure to include evidence of the accommodations and other specially designed instruction documented in his IEP and SOP, and she gave Paul copies of these to include in his application packets. She helped Paul prepare for college admission interviews, paying attention to his ability to explain why he wanted to attend college and what he wanted to learn. She also worked with Paul on understanding his disability and advocating for the accommodations that he needed to be successful. At his final IEP meeting, Paul led the meeting and presented pieces of his SOP.

Paul was accepted into two programs—one very near his home and one on the other side of the state. He was excited but unsure about whether he wanted to live away from home. Ms. Barry told him and his family about a weeklong camp that is held at the college across state, and the family agreed that Paul should attend. At the camp, Paul was able to go to classes and live in a dorm room with a roommate. He enjoyed the experience and decided that he definitely wanted to live on campus. Now he is a first-year college student and loves every minute.

Conclusion

Given that college is a realistic possibility for students with IDD, school personnel (including special and general education teachers, related services personnel, school counselors, and administrators) need to be aware of this option and be prepared to discuss it with students and their families (Hart et al., 2010). This will likely mean that training is required to ensure that educators are familiar with higher education options for students with IDD in the same way that they are knowledgeable about college options for other students.

Inclusive higher education is a new frontier for students with IDD, and many families of students who are interested in this opportunity need support to access it. Special education teachers are often among the first resources to which families look to learn more about such opportunities. By becoming familiar with this growing national movement, relevant resources, and teaching strategies to promote success, educators can better support students with IDD who want to go to college.

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TEACHING Exceptional Children, *Vol. 49, No. 6, pp. 411–419.*
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