

College Programs for Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities: Results of a National Survey

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Providing transition services for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) on a college campus creates opportunities for academic, vocational, and social skills instruction in a community setting with college-age peers. A survey conducted in 2008 of college programs in the U.S. for students with IDD ages 18–21 (Papay & Bambara, 2011) gathered information on these programs and the opportunities they provide. Survey questions addressed the characteristics of postsecondary education programs and the extent to which students with IDD were participating in college classes.

Fifty-two program coordinators from eligible programs identified through the Think College database completed the survey (64% response rate). Programs were located on two-year or community college campuses (57.7%) and four-year college or university campuses (42.3%). The survey asked respondents to choose a model of practice that described the program at their school: individualized, mixed, or separate. These models were defined as follows:

- Individualized programs focus on typical college activities that meet the needs of an individual student with no instruction in separate settings (n = 6, 11.5%).
- Mixed programs provide opportunities for inclusive activities with typical college students as well as life-skills or vocational instruction in separate settings (n = 36, 77%).
- Separate programs focus on life-skills instruction in separate settings with students with disabilities only and no opportunities for inclusive activities with typical college students (n = 6, 11.5%).

KEY FINDINGS

PURPOSE, FUNDING, AND ENROLLMENT

Purposes cited by coordinators for operating a program on a college campus included employment (90%), inclusion with same-age peers (75%), independent living skills (75%), and participating in college classes (63%) (see Table 1). Most programs were operated by school districts (56%) and relied on school-district funding (87%), but other sources of funding, including tuition and grants, were also reported.

Across all programs, the median enrollment was 12 students. Mean enrollment was almost 25 students due to a small number of programs with much larger enrollment. Program enrollment was larger in separate and mixed programs than in individualized programs.

ADMISSIONS CRITERIA

The most common admissions criterion reported was student age (87%). More than half of the programs (52%) reported that students must indicate a desire to be on campus; the same percentage of programs reported excluding students who exhibit challenging behavior. Forty-six percent of programs reported that students must live in a particular school district. Individualized programs reported fewer admissions criteria, suggesting that these programs can be flexible in the types of students admitted.

LEVEL OF PARTICIPATION IN AND TYPES OF COLLEGE CLASSES

Less than one quarter of all students (24%) in the programs surveyed were reported to be taking college classes. However, 100% of individualized programs and 85% of mixed programs reported that at least one student in their program was taking a college class. Students with higher academic abilities were more likely to be taking classes for credit, whereas students with limited academic abilities were more likely to be taking classes informally.

The majority of classes taken for credit were vocational and remedial classes; the majority taken informally or audited were academic, health and fitness, and arts classes. At two-year and community colleges, more classes were reported to be taken for credit, whereas at four-year colleges, more classes were reported to be taken informally.

IMPLICATIONS

Postsecondary education programs are a promising approach to providing transition services in an age-appropriate and inclusive setting. However, the results of this survey demonstrate disparity across existing programs, both in their focus and in the access they offer to inclusive courses.

Difficulties were encountered in identifying only those programs that were serving transition-age students, and it is possible that there were additional programs not represented in the database and therefore not included in the survey. Therefore, these results may not accurately represent all postsecondary education programs for transition-age students with IDD. Further research is needed to examine the quality of services and outcomes of college-based transition programs for this population of students.

REFERENCES

Papay, C. K., & Bambara, L. M. (2011). Postsecondary education for transition-age students with intellectual and other developmental disabilities: A national survey. *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities*, 46, 78–93.

Table 1

Overall Purpose of Being on a College Campus as Cited by Program Coordinators by Type of Postsecondary Program

	All	Individualized	Mixed	Separate
To gain employment or opportunities for vocational training	47 (90%)	6 (100%)	36 (90%)	5 (83%)
To experience inclusion with same-age peers	39 (75%)	5 (83%)	30 (75%)	4 (67%)
To develop independent living skills	39 (75%)	5 (83%)	30 (75%)	4 (67%)
To receive postsecondary education/ to participate in college classes	33 (63%)	6 (100%)	27 (67.5%)	0 (0%)

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FAST FACTS, Issue No. 3, 2012

FAST FACTS is a publication of Think College, a project of the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston, funded by grants from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (CFDA #H133A80042), the Administration on Developmental Disabilities (CFDA# 93-632, Grant No. 90DD0659), and the Office of Postsecondary Education (Grant No. P407B100002). The opinions contained in this document are those of the grantee and do not necessarily reflect those of the funders.



Recommended citation for this brief: Papay, C., Bambara, L. (2012). *College Programs for Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities: Results of a National Survey*. Think College Fast Facts, Issue No. 2. Boston, MA: Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston.

