Establishing Inclusive Postsecondary Education Opportunities: Tips for Effective Communication
By Maria Paiewonsky, Molly Boyle, Ty Hanson, Mary Price, Pam MacDonald, & Andrea Schwartz

Many colleges now offer opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities (ID) to take classes and participate in the campus community. But what's the best way to talk to college administrators, faculty, and staff about starting such an initiative? In this brief, we'll offer some tips for how you can get an inclusive postsecondary educational initiative started at your college.

Inclusive postsecondary education means that students with intellectual disabilities take classes, access recreational and social opportunities, and are included in the community at a two-year or four-year college. Because of their disabilities, these students are generally not able to pass the standard college entrance exams. They are generally not on a standard degree track; instead, they take classes for credit, or audit them. To succeed at this, they receive support from the college's disability services office, and from an initiative at the college that offers mentoring, guidance, and any additional support services.

These initiatives are becoming widespread across the United States, and benefit not only the students with intellectual disabilities, but their peers without disabilities and the campus community as a whole. So what's the best way to get one started at your college?

STEP 1: START THE CONVERSATION.
Here are some tips for starting conversations with colleagues about inclusive education opportunities at your college.

TIP #1
Identify a familiar and trusted colleague to initiate the discussion. The person who initiates conversations about establishing an inclusive program for students with ID must be a trusted campus colleague. Ideally, this individual is familiar with key college staff and with college protocols on accessing registration, disability services, financial aid, student affairs, and support services.

TIP #2
Recognize and follow the appropriate communication protocol. Remember to initiate conversations using whatever the accepted communication channels are at your college and in your department. The best place to start might be with your program director, who in turn can help determine who needs to be involved in future planning conversations.

TIP #3
Set up small, informal discussions with college administrators, faculty, and staff members. This might be a dean, provost, college access program director, student services staff member, or disability services staff member. Although these small meetings take time, this format ensures that one or two naysayers in the group do not impact buy-in or support. Eventually, organized meetings will be necessary for planning, but initial discussions are most successful in one-to-one or small-group formats.

TIP #4
At the end of each small meeting, ask who else should be aware of plans to establish the program. If your college has a dean who directly oversees your department, you should start the conversation with them. Their support is critical, and can be very helpful as others are invited to discuss inclusive postsecondary education.

TIP #5
Share videos and stories from existing inclusive postsecondary initiatives at other campuses. Painting a picture of what inclusive postsecondary education looks like and offering testimony from colleagues affiliated with existing programs can be very helpful. Videos and stories are available at thinkcollege.net.

TIP #6
Give colleagues time to think it through. Plan to have multiple meetings to address follow-up questions. Inclusive postsecondary education is often a new concept for college personnel. Give them time between meetings to think it through, and make yourself available for follow-up meetings to answer their questions.

STEP 2: RESPOND TO COMMON CONCERNS.

Initially, your colleagues may express resistance to establishing an inclusive postsecondary education initiative on campus. One the most common reasons for reluctance may simply be the lack of awareness of inclusive postsecondary education options for students with ID. Without an understanding that these types of programs are currently in practice, it can be difficult for people to imagine one on their campus. That is why it is so important to share images, stories, and videos of existing successful partnerships.

Here are some common concerns you may hear from colleagues, and how to address them.

Table 1: Addressing Resistance

Potential concern	Suggested talking points to address concern
Will including students with ID compete with, or overburden, the disability services office on campus?	An inclusive college initiative will not replace or compete with existing disability services. It will be a new choice for students who are interested in postsecondary education and are looking for the widest range of learning opportunities at the college. Like other students with disabilities, these students are likely to request accommodations from disability services. Unlike other students, though, they may receive additional support, including educational coaches or mentors. So disability services staff will not take on additional work for these students in comparison to students with other disabilities.
Students will need to be kept safe on campus. Is that possible? Will this cause their parents to be overly involved in their college life?	Like all other students on campus, students with ID can attend orientation where campus safety and the code of conduct are reviewed. Students may also receive individual safety instruction, if necessary, and will be encouraged to carry a cell phone. In addition, all parents adjust to letting their sons and daughters learn to navigate college on their own. Some colleges offer a separate college orientation for parents. Additional orientation experiences for students or parents can be initiated the summer prior to enrollment.
Faculty are not trained to teach students with disabilities. Won't faculty be burdened by adjusting their teaching?	Faculty are not expected to change their course expectations or teaching methods. However, all students benefit from courses designed and taught according to the principles of effective faculty practices and universal design. These trainings are available on campus and online. Typical additional student supports include mentors and educational coaches, tutors, and other low-cost accommodations.
What will the other college students think about having students with ID in their classes?	Most college students without disabilities are either neutral or positive about having classmates with ID. This generation of students have experienced inclusive education and community participation by people with disabilities throughout their lives.
Will having students with ID impact the academic integrity of the college?	Personnel from other colleges indicate that including students with ID on their campuses has had a positive influence on the climate of their classes, by instilling a climate of high academic standards and collective intelligence.
Will the students with ID take seats away from more eligible candidates for a course?	Each college determines the priority of registration. Students with ID are registering for college classes for the same reason every other student is: to pursue a personal or career goal. Ideally, they will use the same registration process as other students. In addition, many of these students audit classes and may not be seeking a degree. It is extremely rare for other students to feel that they are competing with students with ID; instead, they feel that having these students in class with them enhances their course experience.
Won't having students with ID hurt the accountability the college has to increase student matriculation and completion rates?	College students with ID are a very small fraction of the student body, and often have a special student status. Since they are not typically fully matriculated, their participation is not likely to impact matriculation and completion rates. Note, however, that students with ID often complete their courses (with supports) at a higher rate than the general student population.

You should also be prepared for questions about long-range plans for the initiative:

- How do you see this growing?
- What is your five-year plan?
- How many students with ID do you see the college supporting?

Answers to these questions may be difficult to gauge in the early stages. Be honest about what you anticipate, with the understanding that it may take some time to figure out exact numbers. Most initiatives start as pilot programs, with the intent to establish a permanent support structure on campus to include students with ID. As for the numbers, a principle of inclusive postsecondary education models is that they maintain natural proportions of people with ID relative to the general population.

STEP 3: ADDRESS CRITICAL COLLEGE POLICIES.

While it may be premature to develop every policy and procedure of the initiative, discussion of some college policies should occur in the initial planning meetings:

Oversight

It will be important to budget some program funds to support a coordinator, who will be hired by the college and paid for through the initiative.

Supervision

Since inclusive higher education is often a partnership between the college and community partners (school system, vocational rehabilitation, service providers), questions arise about who will supervise the educational coaches or mentors. Typically, the college and the partner make an agreement about who will provide supervision. For example, the school or community liaison and program coordinator may jointly supervise coaches and mentors if they are school employees, but the postsecondary liaison might supervise them if they are hired by the college.

Enrollment

In some cases, college personnel have been concerned about how they would account for students with ID at the college and how they could distinguish them from matriculated students. To address this, work with registration and enrollment colleagues to develop a flagging system to indicate the students in the program. This has proven very helpful to partnerships when they want to collect data on these students as part of their program evaluation.

Accommodations

Students coming from K-12 special education settings are accustomed to curriculum and instructional modifications. Assure college personnel that students will be prepared to use only accommodations at college, not modifications. For instance, a student might complete readings assignments with the assistance of text-to-speech reader software but still complete the same reading assignment as the rest of the class. Since the underlying concern from some college personnel is what students with ID would get out of college classes, the expectation that students will learn and benefit from college classes cannot be underestimated.

Academic advising and registration

A key feature of many inclusive postsecondary programs is a collaboration between the college and school or community partners on a person-centered planning process. This helps to determine the student's career interests, and what education and work experiences they will need to pursue those interests. From there, a college program staff person meets with the student to determine what classes would align with those interests and to help the student register for those courses.

> "We sent out a video at the beginning of the year to faculty to say 'Here's what students did in classes last year. We can't wait to see what this new year brings them. Thanks for all your support.'"
>
> —Ty Hanson, Holyoke Community College

Here are some proven strategies for integrating this model into the culture of a college:

1. Speak to colleagues doing similar work across the state/country. Sharing peers' experiences helps the college see that it is part of a bigger movement, and may provide practices and resources that can be modified to work locally.

2. Hold regularly scheduled partnership meetings to share the program's goals and successes with key college personnel.

3. Be aware of all college personnel who directly or indirectly support students in the initiative, acknowledge their assistance, and communicate with them frequently. These colleagues might include faculty from various departments, as well as staff from the disability services office, admissions office, registrar's office, bursar's office, student health center, fitness center, tutoring center, and counseling center.

4. Identify ways to promote the successes of the initiative and share those successes via YouTube videos and newsletters, or at year-end events.

5. Be a vibrant presence at college events, such as the spring fling, open houses for college clubs, art shows, and basketball games.

6. Develop and submit a five-year vision statement and five-year goals to the college's committee for long-range planning. This will help keep the initiative a part of the college's long-term sustainability plan.

7. Keep data on student course enrollment and student outcomes related to employment. Gather and share information on the type and frequency of training and support provided to faculty. Be prepared to share this information on a moment's notice on behalf of the college.

STEP 4: KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING.

The work of explaining and promoting an inclusive postsecondary program is never really over. Each time new staff or deans are hired, you will again be asked to explain the model, describe typical student experiences, and share outcomes. You will be asked to explain how the program benefits the college, and what resources are being used to support it.

CONCLUSION

These strategies for communication and planning can help you to establish successful and productive partnerships as you launch an inclusive education program at your college. In small, informal meetings, concerns and misperceptions can be addressed, and along the way new allies for the initiative may be identified.

> "Every time there is an administrative change, or the program is highlighted, you should expect to explain the program and its goals again."
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> —Andrea Schwartz, Bunker Hill Community College

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Molly Boyle works as a trainer and technical assistance provider for Think College. Molly provides professional development to college faculty, administrators and disability support personnel on Universal Course Design and effective teaching strategies for ensuring equal access to all students, including those with disabilities. Previously, she coordinated the Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment project for students with intellectual disabilities at MassBay Community College in Wellesley, MA. Molly's expertise includes the provision of individual supports for postsecondary education for people with intellectual/ developmental disabilities, universal design for learning, online teaching, and adaptive technologies.

Ty Hanson, MEd is a Transition Specialist with the ICE Partnership Program at Holyoke Community College since 2007. Ty has developed policies and practices to support the participation of over 70 students with ID to attend college. She has focused her work on helping students to connect college and career goals, as well as promoting student self-determination, academic success and new social connections.

Pamela MacDonald, MEd, MSW, CAGS was the transition program teacher for five years at the Revere Public Schools. During that time, she worked with students ages 18-22 to create a plan for their future that includes academic skills, job training, daily living skills and self-advocacy skills. . Pam also worked with Roxbury Community College to develop their "Gateway Scholars Program." During her time with RCC, Pam helped to develop partnerships with area high schools and foster participation by stakeholders at the college. Pam is currently a team chairperson for the Stoneham Public Schools.

Maria Paiewonsky, EdD is a transition specialist at the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Boston. She has been providing training and technical assistance to high schools and colleges that are establishing inclusive postsecondary education options for students with intellectual disabilities since 2001. The majority of Maria's training materials have been co-written with professional and student partners from the Massachusetts Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment initiative.

Mary Price, MEd is the Director of the Center for Pre K – 12 Educational Outreach as well as the Principal Project Coordinator for the Inclusive Concurrent Grant Program at Bridgewater State University(BSU). Mary established the ICE initiative at BSU in January 2012. The program has tripled the number of students since then. Mary is focused on continuing to grow a quality program and has hired a Program Implementation Specialist and a Career Specialist to help students with ID attend college, determine career goals and continue to gain independence, social and self-advocacy skills while attending BSU.

Andrea Schwartz, LMHC, MS, is the facilitator for the ICE program at Bunker Hill Community College. In her role as Coordinator of Disability Support Services at BHCC, she ensures that all students receive access to the support services needed for success at the college, as well as access to participation in all activities at the college. She works with students to determine selection of courses related to their career goals, and follows them during their academic coursework at BHCC.

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