

Credential Development in Inclusive Higher Education Programs Serving Students with Intellectual Disabilities

By Judy Shanley, Cate Weir and Meg Grigal

The term credential, in higher education, refers to a verification of qualification or competency issued to an individual by an accredited institute of higher education.

The terms most commonly used for educational credentials are: diploma, certificate, and degree. When students complete coursework and master content they earn credits. Credit hours are the building block components for educational credentials. (US Department of Labor, nd)

The value of a college credential is fairly well understood. In some cases the benefit is very clear, such as when a credential is required in order to work in a certain industry or occupation (nursing licenses, for example). In other cases, the value of holding a credential is less clear-cut. It is sometimes difficult to quantify how much a college credential contributes to a hiring advantage, higher earnings, enhanced job security, or advancement along a career pathway (US Department of Labor nd).

For programs for students with intellectual disability to offer students benefits similar to what their peers receive, a standard approach to awarding credentials upon program completion is necessary.

The question of how to develop a credential that can be earned by students with intellectual disability (ID) attending an institution of higher education (IHE) that will have value and meaning outside the specific institution that awards it is a very important one. Currently, there is no standard credential that is awarded by IHEs to students who are attending college through

a program designed specifically for students with ID. While some programs do offer a formal certificate that is recognized by the institution, many others offer no credentials to program completers, provide a certificate of attendance that does not represent the completion of any specified course of study or they may offer a certificate that is developed and awarded by the PSE program and not the institution. These certificates are not likely to have much meaning to employers or to other colleges outside of the program.

For programs for students with intellectual disability to offer students benefits similar to what their peers receive, a standard approach to awarding credentials upon program completion is necessary. This document offers an approach that supports the planning, implementation and evaluation of credentials offered by IHEs to students with ID to ensure that they are meaningful, are based upon recognized standards, and hold value to external entities such as employers.

CREATE A CREDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT TEAM

To create a meaningful credential, solicit input from a wide array of internal and external entities. One value of a credential is derived from how it will be viewed outside of the institution. To ensure that program credentials are viewed favorably and the value of the credential is clear, the planning team should involve business leaders, community agencies, higher education authorities, associations, and organizations during the planning process.

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Business leaders offer guidance about how a credential can assist students to get jobs in the community. Community partners such as human service agencies and vocational rehabilitation bring a helpful perspective, as they will most likely be involved in the next stage of the students' life. Involvement of higher education authorities, associations, and organizations ensures that the credential is aligned with typical higher education practices and will be useful to those students who wish to continue their education upon completion of the program. Some programs have reviewed the entry requirements for other IHEs as they develop their credential for students with ID.

We wanted the credential that students received when they left our program to mean something to employers--to signify that the individual leaving our program had skills that would be valuable in securing a job.

—Program administrator, Transition Program for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID)

FORMALIZE THE COURSE OF STUDY UPON WHICH THE CREDENTIAL WILL BE BASED

To ensure the credential or credentials offered by a program reflect the content that is provided within the program, the planning team should review the program goals and any formal or informal course of study that has already been developed. If a formal course of study is not in place, developing one is an essential step. This course of study forms the foundation for the credential by outlining the required academic courses and other activities.

REVIEW GUIDANCE FOR CREDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION ACT

The Higher Education Act lists statutory requirements for college programs for students with ID to be eligible for federal financial aid. It benefits programs to strive to meet these requirements in their courses of study and resulting credentials.

According to HEA requirements, the course of study must include academics, employment, and independent living skills development. The credential should reflect skill acquisition that will enhance the employability of students when they

leave the program. To meet HEA requirements, the course of study must involve taking academic classes with students without disabilities, and cannot depend solely on special courses only for students with ID.

The HEA also requires person-centered planning to be a key factor in the development of each student's individual course of study. However, in order to offer a standard credential, students must follow a prescribed course of study. Due to the focus on person-centered planning and individualized goal setting, the course of study must be flexible enough to allow for the individual goals of each student while still providing a common experience.

The credential for a program for students with ID may resemble an "independent study" curriculum. It will contain a limited number of required courses, certain skill areas that must be met, and a number of electives and choices. These options allow for the student to determine their own specific course of study that is aligned with their career and life goals.

CONSIDER ADAPTING EXISTING CREDENTIALS AVAILABLE TO ALL STUDENTS

The credential planning team should look at the current credentials offered by the IHE. If an existing credential can be modified or adjusted to fit the program for students with ID, it should be used. The use of existing credentials that have already been approved by the IHE offers credibility, as the institution and the community are already aware of what these credentials mean.

One example of this is the use of a continuing education certificate. This certificate was available to all students at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, VA, and is now also available to students with ID who attend that college. At Taft College in Taft, CA, a student with ID can choose to attain a certificate in "Child Development: Assistant Teacher." The coursework includes earning six college credits (two courses). Students can choose these two courses from the four that the program offers. This certificate is not specific to the program, and is available to all students at the two-year institution.

Typically, credentials are awarded based on credit hours

attained. However, for most students with ID, many of the college classes that comprise their course of study will be non-credit or credit courses taken as an audit. For example, if a student with ID audits a three-credit course, this student will earn three credits that apply to the program's specific credential. However, these credits cannot be applied to other college credentials.

ALIGN CREDENTIALS WITH INSTITUTIONAL AND PROGRAMMATIC MISSION, VALUES, AND POLICIES

Institutions of higher education have unique missions that are reflected in the various programs they offer. A mission connotes the values of an institution and its corresponding programs, and the credentials achieved through these programs should reflect these same values. The team should be able to articulate how the credential and the courses and experiences that students must complete to attain the credential are aligned with the mission of the institution and program.

The planning team must also familiarize itself with the institution's policies and procedures for development of a new credential. Determine the college offices that provide support for credential development and seek their input and guidance. To benefit from their experience, speak to colleagues in other departments and fields of study that offer program-level credentials.

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 We held monthly meetings with the faculty across campus, early in the program, to identify the credential would be aligned with other credentials offered at my institution

—Program administrator, Transition Program for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID)

CONSIDER THE CREDENTIAL TITLE

The title of a credential reflects the intended outcomes of a particular course of study. Therefore, this name has important implications on how the program is perceived. Teams should solicit feedback from university colleagues, students, and employers regarding what different credential names would imply. Some credential titles suggest a broad general studies program, such as Career and Community Studies or Integrative Community Studies, while others reflect a more

vocational focus such as Office Skills Training or Occupational Life Skills.

The planning team could also seek input regarding what kinds of jobs employers would expect an individual with this credential to be qualified for. Finally, the team should also consider how their credential title aligns with other titles offered at their institution.

The only way to know if a credential is meaningful is to evaluate the outcomes of the students who achieve it.

DEVELOP A MARKETING STRATEGY TO PROMOTE THE CREDENTIAL

Once the credential is finalized, the team should determine the best way to market it, both within the college or university and within the community. Whenever possible, teams should embed information about the credential into areas where other credentials are already marketed, such as websites, brochures, and other print materials. Teams can consider more targeted opportunities to share information about the credential and its requirements with community organizations, prospective students, and families.

EVALUATION AND FOLLOW-UP

The only way to know if a credential is meaningful is to evaluate the outcomes of the students who achieve it. Therefore, once implemented, teams should determine a schedule and a process for evaluating the outcomes of credential completers and use this information to adapt the program or course of study. Students with ID who exit a program with a credential, as well as their families, are important sources of feedback regarding the impact of the credential.

Document how many students were able to use the credential they earned to obtain employment in their designated career area, and how earning the credential has impacted growth or achievement in other areas of students' lives. Each program should be able to capture data on how the credential changes students' opportunities for employment, continued education,

or living independently.

While the immediate beneficiary of a credential is the student, over the long term, these new credentials also could have a positive impact on the local community of the college. This impact could be economic, resulting from improved employment outcomes. This positive impact could also manifest in better awareness of higher education opportunities for people with ID. Teams should discuss the kinds of impact their program and its associated credentials may have on their community and determine some measures to capture those changes.

Employers, K-12 schools, and other community members are important in determining the value of a credential. Demonstrating that students who left the program and attained a credential were contributing to economic growth by procuring jobs would be a powerful finding to share with higher education leaders as well as state and local government officials.

SUMMARY

Higher education programs that are designed for students with intellectual disability can and should result in the attainment of credentials. To ensure that credentials hold value both within and outside of the IHE, considerable planning and collaboration must occur.

Once a credential is established, the IHE should monitor the impact of its attainment on students' lives and employment outcomes. Ultimately, all credentials earned by youth and adults with intellectual disabilities at colleges or universities should reflect skills and knowledge areas that are universally valued, and thus meaningful outside of the world of disability.

WORKS CITED

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INSIGHT, Issue No. 25, 2014

INSIGHT 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 Administration on Intellectual and 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: Shanley, J., Weir, C., Grigal, M. (2014). *Credential Development in Inclusive Higher Education Programs. Serving Students with Intellectual Disabilities*. Think College Insight Brief, Issue No. 25. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion

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