

Transition and Postsecondary Education Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability: A Pathway to Employment

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Higher education leads to a variety of personal and financial benefits, and is an integral part of establishing a successful career path and enhancing earnings over a lifetime (Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah, 2011). However, up until recently, low expectations coupled with minimal opportunities have prevented people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) from receiving the benefits associated with higher education.

The current landscape of education and employment for adults with I/DD is bleak. Students with I/DD have the lowest percentage of postsecondary enrollment of any category of people with disabilities (Newman, Wagner, Knokey, Marder, Nagle, Shaver, Schwarting, 2011). Only 23% of high-school students with I/DD go on to attend a two-year or four-year college (Grigal, Hart, & Migliore, 2011). The employment outcomes for people with I/DD are equally appalling. In 2011, 81% of people with I/DD were being served in facility-based and non-work settings (Butterworth, Hall, Smith, Migliore, Winsor, Domin, & Sulewski, 2013). These individuals were not afforded the opportunity to access further education as adults and have little hope of ever obtaining a real job or making minimum wage.

Despite years of investment in special education, the poor outcome choices afforded to people with I/DD have prevented any substantial change in their transition and adult life outcomes. In 2011, the employment rates for transition-aged individuals (ages 16-21) were 18% or less than half the employment rate for people without disabilities (Butterworth et al., 2013). This gap becomes worse as people with I/DD age with only 32% of adults ages 20-30 having employment compared to 74% of people without disabilities (Sulewski, Zalewska, Butterworth, & Migliore, 2013).

Getting a job that pays a living wage is the basic standard for all Americans. However for Americans with intellectual and developmental disabilities sheltered work and subminimum

wage is often the only option given to them. A recent survey of 11,599 adults with I/DD in 16 states found that only 14.7% were competitively employed (Human Services Research Institute, 2012). These abysmal outcomes may soon change due to recent positive changes made in the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act.

The Higher Education Opportunities Act of 2008 contains several new provisions aimed at increasing access to higher education for youth and adults with intellectual disabilities. In 2010, Congress authorized the creation of new model demonstration programs via the Office of Postsecondary Education (OPE) and awarded grants to 27 institutes

of higher education (IHEs) to fund Transition and Postsecondary Education Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability (TPSIDs). The goal of the TPSID program is to create, expand, or enhance high-quality, inclusive higher education experiences to support positive outcomes for individuals with I/DD. The OPE also awarded a TPSID National Coordinating Center (NCC) grant to the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston. The TPSID NCC has developed and implemented

a comprehensive evaluation system to capture how these inclusive higher education programs are serving youth and adults with I/DD.

In just two years, this program has supported the creation or expansion of programs at 42 colleges and universities serving 792 students with I/DD (Grigal, Hart, Smith, Domin, & Sulewski, 2013). These students, who would otherwise have been written off to a lifetime of sheltered work or day habilitation, have been supported to take inclusive college classes, obtain career experiences through internships, and in some cases access integrated paid employment.

These programs demonstrate that given the opportunity, people with I/DD can and will benefit from higher education. In year two of the project, students with ID enrolled in 4,806 courses and the majority of students who

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were enrolled in inclusive courses were enrolled for standard IHE credit (58%) (Grigal et al., 2013). This unprecedented investment has allowed these individuals the chance to access higher learning and sets them on a path to a better future. This is a stark contrast to the outcomes experienced by those not afforded these opportunities.

Access to higher education via the TPSID initiatives has also demonstrated the potential impact that further learning can have on integrated competitive employment for these individuals. Balancing work and course responsibilities is a common experience for most college students, and the students with I/DD attending TPSID initiatives are finally having the chance to show that they too are up to the challenge.

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According to the TPSID Annual Report, during year two of the grant, 282 participating students were involved in career development activities and internships. An additional 236 students held paid jobs, and some students held 2 or 3 jobs while they were going to college (Grigal et al., 2013). The majority of students (74%) worked between 5 and 20 hours per week at their job. Eighty-two percent of the students who held jobs were paid at or above minimum wage. During year two, 45% of employed students had never held a paid job prior to entering the TPSID program (Grigal et al., 2013). Given the choice between sitting in a sheltered workshop and doing meaningless piece work for pennies a day, these students with ID now have the chance to attend inclusive college classes, expanding their minds and their social networks by engaging in all aspects of the college community. At the same time, they have begun to access real jobs and earn real wages.

Congress's continued support for these programs and others like them demonstrate a real commitment to having the highest expectations for all youth including those with intellectual disabilities. The legacy of the investment made in the TPSID

program will exceed the sum of its parts. These programs serve as an emblem of possibility, not only demonstrating that students with I/DD can be college students who benefit from higher education but also contributing to the continuing evolution of higher education on a path toward equity and diversity for all Americans.

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