DEVELOPING A COLLEGE PROGRAM FOR STUDENTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY

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HOW DO YOU START A COLLEGE PROGRAM FOR STUDENTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY?

This is a common question among students, families, community members, and faculty/staff. This resource is intended to provide an initial list of areas to consider when developing an inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) program with a robust course of study, a meaningful certificate, and improved employment and quality of life outcomes for non-degree seeking college students with intellectual disability (ID). We provide links to resources throughout this publication for more information.

Think College National Coordinating Center drafted the "Think College Guiding Principles for Inclusive Higher Education" and published the Model Accreditation Standards for Higher Education Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability in 2021. These comprehensive documents will give you much to consider when building a quality program. However, when you are in the early development stage of your program, consider the Guiding Principles and Accreditation Standards documents as aspirational guides. It can take several years for your program to meet all the principles and accreditation standards.

The Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) of 2008 created an alternate pathway to college for students with intellectual disability (ID). The HEOA established a set of required components necessary for institutions of higher education (IHE) to develop Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary (CTP) programs for students with ID as well as an application process for US Department of Education CTP approval. Students attending a CTP-designated program are eligible to apply for several Title IV federal financial aid funds.
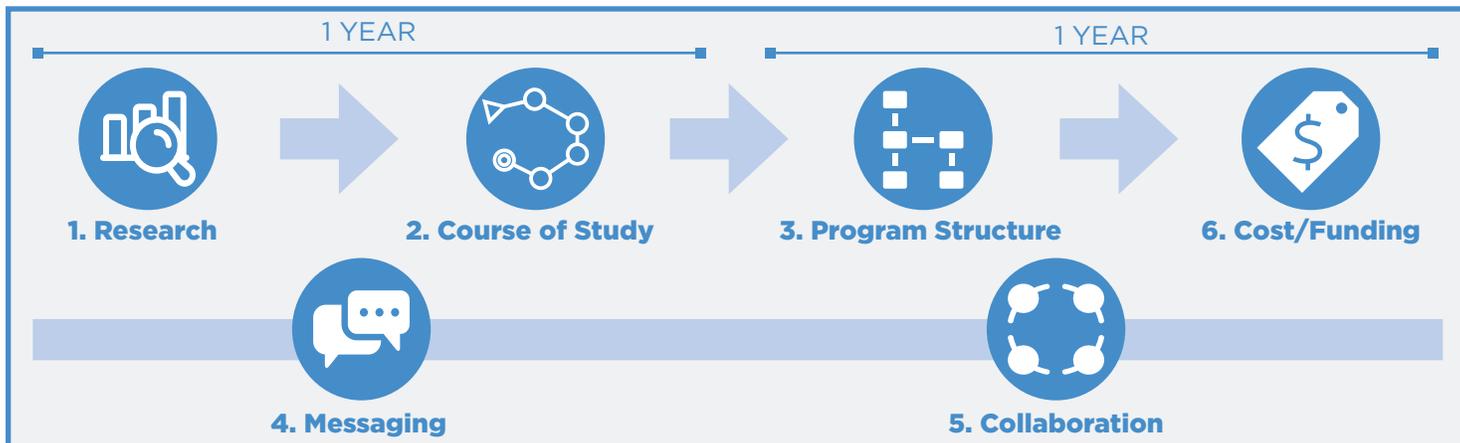
HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO DEVELOP A PROGRAM?

Program directors suggest two years are ideal to conduct research, garner campus and community support, develop a program structure and plan of study, and successfully recruit students for program enrollment and implementation. However, some IHEs have developed programs in less time, particularly if funding required it.

IS THERE A LIST OF STEPS OR A ROADMAP TO FOLLOW TO DEVELOP A PROGRAM?

We have identified six program development areas. A core group of individuals will complete these steps during the process. We list these areas in order, but program development is not necessarily a linear process. Your core development committee or workgroup may need to engage in a few areas simultaneously. Messaging (4) and collaboration (5) span the entire development process. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of this process.

FIGURE 1. THE SIX PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AREAS

1 YEAR — 1 YEAR

1. Research → 2. Course of Study → 3. Program Structure → 6. Cost/Funding

4. Messaging

5. Collaboration

1. Research

Start building a toolkit of information to lay the foundation for your program. This research will be critical for providing responses to the "why" questions you will be asked as you progress through the process. For current data, read **Think College Research and Evaluation Products.**

Begin with a Mission: Develop a mission statement. Why should your IHE embark on this journey? What is your IHE's mission and does your program's mission align? *The program's mission must align with your institution's mission.* What is the driving force to develop this program: diversity, social justice, lifelong learning, 21st century skills, equity, opportunity for all? Revisit and revise your mission as you develop your understanding of the breadth and depth of your program and those who are collaborating with you in its development. A mantra is also helpful to bring you back to your mission when questions and conundrums arise. Some have used the question *"What would we do for a degree-seeking student?"* as a mantra.

Target Student Population: Identify your target students, the compelling need, and the expected student outcomes to lay the foundation for your program development.

- » Seek input from parent, family, self-advocate, and other advocacy organizations in your region
- » Seek input from local school districts and vocational rehabilitation offices in your area
- » Identify statistics related to student graduation rates from high school; employment rates of students with ID locally, statewide, and/or nationally; housing characteristics; and quality of life outcomes
- » Identify existing postsecondary options for students with ID in your region
- » If you are planning to seek CTP program approval, your program must serve students with ID **(Read the HEOA definition of ID)**

Graduate Employment Outcomes: What will your graduates do with their newly minted and earned certificates? The graduate and their employment will reflect your program's success, particularly when they are employed in their area of study. Such employment outcomes rely on identifying where the local workforce gaps

The program's mission must align with your institution's mission

(employer needs) align or match with your IHE's program strengths. Locate metro area labor workforce analyses to identify employer needs and potential employee options.

- » Establish relationships with community business leaders, chambers of commerce, employment agencies, vocational rehabilitation, and colleges and divisions across the IHE
- » Identify IHE strengths and existing programs or colleges where development possibilities exist

Connect with Existing Programs:

- » Learn from current programs and develop relationships with other programs to identify gaps and needs.
- » Talk to the directors of current programs serving the same population in your state and across the Think College network
- » Explore program structures, student/staff ratios, faculty involvement, and cross-discipline and cross-college collaborations
- » Identify current program strengths and challenges
- » Identify gaps in service and unmet needs for students in your state or region

2. Course of Study

First, *determine the program length in years.* Most IHEs establish 2-year or 4-year programs. This depends on the type of college or university where the program will reside. Consider the length of other existing programs, the time needed for student growth, and the costs associated with this decision. Second, develop the program's course of study and culminating certificate in alignment with HEOA's CTP requirements. The HEOA requires four core components in the course of study:

1. **Academics**
2. **Career Development**
3. **Self-Determined Life Skills**
4. **Social Engagement**

» **1. Academics:** Identify what is feasible at your IHE regarding college course access. Find out if students in your program can earn course credit, audit courses, or participate for zero credit. It is ideal to provide students with the choice to take courses for college credit or to audit and earn credit only toward your program certificate, if possible. Identify student expectations for college coursework, academic supports, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and other professional development for faculty and staff.

» **2. Career Development:** Consider when students will engage in internships and paid employment and how they will be supported on the job. Identify resources and services available through the IHE's career services office to support students' career development.

» **3. Self-Determined Life Skills:** Identify methods and a structure for students to learn life skills of their choosing. Learn about potential campus services, workshops, and/or seminars from residential life, disability services, the health center, and counseling services. There are many campus services that can support students in their skills development. These relationships will be critical to student support and program sustainability. Explore and plan how students will be supported in campus housing.

» **4. Social Engagement:** Identify methods to support students to learn how to identify campus activities, clubs, and resources of interest and how to schedule and attend those activities.

Finally, identify the mechanism and metric with which students will be measured for *satisfactory academic progress (SAP)* in each of the four core areas of the program of study. Develop a program audit sheet so students can follow their progress in all program requirements.

Learn more about SAP resources and information.

> **As you build your program, continuously ask yourself and others, "How does this work for a traditional college student?"**

3. Program Structure

College or Department Affiliation: Identify where the program will reside in the IHE's structure. Programs can be in an academic department (e.g., disability studies), institutional division (e.g., student accessibility services), or a continuing education department. Each option will have its own distinct pros and cons. Where will the students' home department be? Will each student with ID be formally affiliated with an academic department aligned with their primary area of interest (like a major), or will all students be affiliated with the department where the program is located, and receive their credential from that department?

Read more about institutional department affiliation.

Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary (CTP) program designation: Explore the requirements of a federal CTP program application to enable students to access federal student aid.

Read more about CTP resources and information.

Advising and Person-centered Planning (PCP): Identify the advising and PCP processes and how they will align or work together. Identify the structure and frequency of the PCP meetings and how the program will use them to support students in decision making and tracking progress in their course of study components (career goals, self-determined life goals, social engagement goals).

Read these resources about PCP.

Staffing: Determining staffing needs for a program is unique to each program. Staffing will depend on the program structure, how it is integrated into a college or department, the level of support students receive from the IHE's support services, and the anticipated number of students in the program. A reasonable enrollment goal for the first year is a cohort of 6–8 students. Programs often support this size cohort by hiring a coordinator from outside the institution or establishing a faculty member as coordinator. In addition to a program coordinator, it is essential that a program have a faculty advisor involved during program development and implementation. As the program grows, you might consider hiring

academic, employment, and peer support coordinators.

Read more about program development resources.

Peer Supports: One of the initial tasks of any program coordinator is to identify the peer support model and recruit students. Explore other programs' mentor, partnership, or coach models. Will peers be paid, volunteer, or provide support as a component of a service-learning course offered by the institution? Identify the level of support mentors will provide students (support navigating to class, during class, after class tutoring, or social support) and the level of independence expected of students in your program. Determine the ratio of student-to-peer support. Peer support is at the core of any successful program, so choose a structure and philosophy that aligns with your campus culture.

Learn more about peer support resources.

KEY QUESTIONS TO BEGIN THE PROCESS

Next, we have included a **list of eight programmatic components** with key questions to consider as you develop a CTP program aligned with your IHE's mission, culture, resources, services, and processes. Each campus and institution has a unique culture with unique strengths and challenges. This list is not exhaustive, but presents a starting point:

1. CREDENTIAL

» What credential(s) will students be able to receive?
» Will the course of study lead to a current credential/certificate from your IHE, or will you develop a new credential to be approved by your IHE?
» Who recognizes the credential and how can it directly benefit the individual post-graduation?
» Will you include industry-specific credentials as part of the students' program?
» What is your IHE's process for approving the credential?

   Watch our webinar, A Credential Approval Journey

   Read more about credential resources

> **"How can we use college or university resources, services, and processes already available on campus instead of building specialized ones?"**

2. COURSE OF STUDY

Academics
» Will students with ID have access to the full range of undergraduate courses?
» What is included in the program's course of study? The course of study should include all the courses and activities required to obtain the credential, including course hours, career activities and employment hours, social engagement hours, and self-determined life skills hours.
» Can students enroll in coursework that will support them in working toward their career and self-determined life goals?
» Will all courses students with ID take be inclusive courses (including enrolled, degree-seeking students)?
» If not, will students with ID spend 50% or more of their coursework in inclusive courses or internships, as required for CTP programs?
» What process will the program staff use to partner with and support faculty toward the academic success of students with ID in their courses?
» How will the professor grade the students if courses are taken for audit or zero credit?

Career Development
» How will your program support students in career exploration and paid employment opportunities during the program?
» How will your program partner with campus departments and colleges and community businesses to establish paid employment opportunities?
» How will your program support students during their transition from college to post-school employment and adult services and supports?
» How will your program partner with vocational rehabilitation to support students with employment opportunities?

   Read more about employment resources

Self-determined Life Skills

» Do students with ID have the same options for living on campus as other students?

» Are there mechanisms for facilitating access to current residence life and campus resources that will support a successful living experience?

» What process will you use to explore, develop, implement, and track students' self-determined life skill goals?

Social Engagement

» How will your program support students to identify and engage in activities that align with their individual interests?

» How will your program identify growth in a student's social engagement?

» What will your program requirements be for social engagement? Will they include clubs, campus sports events, student organization membership or events, and personal scheduled activities, such as an exercise class or career services workshop?

3. ACCESS TO CAMPUS RESOURCES, SERVICES, AND SUPPORTS

» Will the students with ID register with the IHE disability services and have full access to accommodations?

» Is there a process in place for supporting students in advocating for appropriate accommodations?

» Will students have full membership in the campus community, with access to all the resources, supports, and opportunities that are afforded to other undergraduate students?

» What systems will be in place to support students in finding and engaging in the IHE's resources, services, and activities of choice?

> **The diversity of each IHE's structure and culture requires a unique set of collaborators.**

4. PROGRAM POLICIES AND PROCESSES

Does your program have a written list of policies and processes that you distribute to students and families that:

» is accessible and can be understood by the students (e.g., uses plain language)?

» states the program's philosophy and guiding principles?

» explains student expectations and requirements (including expectations in personal independence and identification of level of student support) in a student agreement that requires their signature?

» identifies parent expectations and requirements in a parent agreement that requires their signature?

» outlines the program's responsibilities (including degree of support provided), how students will be supported, areas in which they are responsible for themselves, the program's SAP policy, and consequences of not meeting SAP?

» identifies and references the IHE's policies, especially student conduct, Title IX, and residential life policies?

Read an example of a student handbook

5. CAMPUS TRAINING/AWARENESS

» Is training, guidance, and support available to instructors to incorporate UDL, accommodations, and creative modifications when appropriate?

» How will you use campus resources and key stakeholders to develop awareness of your program on campus?

» What strategies will you use to introduce your program to the community, perhaps by creating meaningful media attention?

» What strategies will you use to maximize training of campus faculty and staff to include students with ID?

» Who will reach out to your Office of Teaching Excellence and encourage UDL training, get involved with the training development, and incorporate examples with students with ID? Watch a video of UDL in college.

» How will you partner with your IHE's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Office to support them in incorporating students with disabilities (including ID) in their goals and initiatives?

» Who will review your IHE's mission to check that the program's goals are in alignment and get the message out that students with ID are a natural fit with the mission of the institution?

6. BUILD CONNECTIONS WITH UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

» What strategies can you develop to engage undergraduate students in program development, awareness, and support?

» How can you facilitate a peer mentorship model in which undergraduate students and students with ID can learn from each other through a peer-based partnership?

7. FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

» Does your program have a clear policy outlining family members' roles in supporting students while in college?

» How will the program support students in becoming stronger self-advocates and decision-makers, while also reinforcing families as continuing supporters (if the student wants)?

» How will the program support families as the family support roles change during the student's transition to college and during college?

8. POST-PROGRAM TRANSITION

» How will the program support the students in planning for life after college and in continuing to work toward their overall goals and living a self-determined life?

» How will the program help the student gain meaningful long-term employment prior to or immediately after graduation?

» How will the program support the student to connect with state agencies and resources after college?

4. Messaging

What is your 5-minute, 15-minute, and 45-minute message? Develop a focused message and the tools to support your message.

» Create a 1-page, plain language summary with bullet points and graphics that explains the proposed IPSE program for students with ID. The summary should include these basics:

  • **"What"** –the program idea and outcome goal

  • **"Who"** –the students intended for program enrollment

  • "**Where"** –the rationale for academic unit or division that would be a "best fit" and identify reciprocal benefit

  • **"Why"** –the need for the program (lack of employment and civic engagement), benefit to the IHE (meeting IHE mission), Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Office goals, and benefit to the community

» Develop presentations that target each of the collaboration groups shown in the following Key Campus Collaborations table.

» Develop a short video or use one from the Think College library that highlights how students benefit from these programs. Social media is an important tool to build support. Advocacy groups may have resources that can offset the cost of a video, or an interested professor from a potential partner IHE may have a class that could create a video as a class project.

» Tailor your message to each audience. A parent support group's priorities differ from those of a state agency or college provost. *Know your audience* and their priorities.

Spending time thoughtfully connecting with collaborators and building relationships is an ongoing process.

5. Collaboration

It is important to identify key collaborators throughout the IHE. Collaboration during program development will help facilitate understanding of the program structure and goals, build support, and lay the foundation for program sustainability. The diversity of each IHE's structure and culture requires a unique set of collaborators. The following list is a good place to begin:

Key Campus Collaborations	Support/Rationale
Academic Department/Faculty & Staff	Identify faculty and staff who can serve as effective ambassadors to encourage and support other faculty within and across departments and colleges.
Administration	College/university administrators can help by supporting student access, working through policy issues, and facilitating publicity.
Finance Office	Work closely with your finance administrator to understand the budget and financial processes.
Campus Divisions & Colleges	Consider partnering with the divisions or colleges that house psychologists and counselors for student (mental health) and program (ID designation) support.
Development & Grants Offices	Grants offices may be able to assist in identifying grants for additional program funding.
Financial Aid Office	If the program is interested in submitting a CTP application, the financial aid staff will be critical in their support, understanding, and development of the program and CTP application.
Student Services & Support Offices	Disability services, student counseling, career services, academic support/tutoring, and other student support services will be important resources for students and important to include in the process.
Student Life Offices	Student Life Offices include residence life, student centers, and student-run organizations. They are important partners in supporting student engagement.

Key Community Collaborations	Support/Rationale
Advocacy Organizations	Parent centers, resource organizations, family network providers, self-advocacy organizations, and disability associations can help share information about the new college options.
Foundations	Potential donors with missions that align with your program may be willing to support the program.
Individuals/Advocates	Families, caregivers, advocates, and donors can support the program through communication with other families as well as employer and community contacts.
Other IHE Program Directors & Faculty	Program directors and faculty from similar program models or similar IHE demographics can provide experiential support and resources.
School Systems	School counselors, staffing specialists, and special education and transition teachers can create awareness for the college program.
State Agencies	Vocational Rehabilitation, Department of Human Services, and Department of Disability Services; workforce boards; University Centers on Excellence for Developmental Disabilities; State Regents for Higher Education; local education agencies; and legislative contacts may each provide support and collaboration according to their individual missions.
Think College Technical Assistance	Request free program development support from the Think College Technical Assistance Consultants (subject matter experts)

Spending time thoughtfully connecting with collaborators and building relationships is an ongoing process. Allow them to support you in developing a vision. Learn their language and understand how the success of the program fits with their overall mission. Early connections will prove to be invaluable team members for the long haul. Work on staying in touch and regularly updating your collaborators as you move forward.

6. Cost/Funding

Consider the start-up costs for your program as well as yearly operational costs. Develop a pro forma budget that identifies an estimation of the required investment to support the program. This budget should encompass the planning period and several operational years to account for growth in student numbers and staff and reflect program sustainability. Consider possible funding sources in the budget. This pro forma budget is a financial forecast to engage with the administration and is not expected to cover every detail. Pro forma budgets are a good starting point to work on an operational budget.

Read more about budget information

Pro-Forma Budget Category Example:

Expenses	Income
» Primary personnel salaries with allowances for benefits; director, coordinator, administrative support » Career development supports (e.g., job development and coaches), in-house or contracted out » Support personnel; graduate students, resident assistants, mentors, tutors » Travel for recruitment/marketing » Professional development » Program materials	» Program fees from "x" number of students for years 1–5 » Start-up funding from donor sources » Start-up funding from grants » Start-up funding from state agencies and state councils » Investment from IHE source

College is expensive and most programs struggle to ensure that college is affordable. Programs can establish some mechanisms to help offset the college costs. Some programs may be able to support staff time through an invested academic department, grant, student services, or other campus office. Long-term planning with community partners can help students maximize available funding.

Here are four sources that programs and/or families have used to help meet the tuition, program, or support costs. The first three sources vary greatly by state or county and may require additional time to explore:

1. **Vocational Rehabilitation Agency.** SSupports people with disabilities in need of career development and employment support. This state agency can provide funding for college students with ID in many states, though it is an eligibility-based program. It is critical to identify ways your program translates into students' paid employment upon graduation.
   Learn more about VR for youth.

2. **Developmental Disabilities Agency.** Typically administers the Medicaid waiver funding and oversight for community-based services for individuals with ID and developmental disabilities. In a few states, families have been able to access this funding to pay for some college expenses.
   Read more about how Medicaid waivers can help pay for college.

3. **Scholarships.** Many states have state-funded college scholarship programs, although they may not have been written to include students with ID. A growing number of states have passed legislation recently for state-funded college scholarships for students with ID. Consider how your program's leadership can advocate for students with ID to access current scholarships or develop new ones. Private scholarships are also available for students with ID attending college.
   Read more about how to access scholarships for students with ID.

4. **Federal Financial Aid.** Once a program has applied for and received CTP status approval from the Department of Education, students will be eligible to apply for need-based Pell grants, Federal Supplemental Education Opportunity Grants, and work study that can offset the cost of attendance.
   Learn more about federal financial aid for students with ID.

Guiding Principles to consider in every decision:

- **Will the program provide improved student outcomes in paid employment and quality of life?**

- **Does the program component align with the Model Accreditation Standards?**

We welcome any technical assistance requests, questions, or resource requests from colleges, program staff, faculty, families, and K-12 educators. Email us at the Think College Help Desk ThinkCollegeTA@gmail.com.

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