

Supporting Student Storytelling as a Form of Advocacy for Inclusive Postsecondary Education

By Ty Hanson and Maria Paiewonsky

INTRODUCTION

Since 2007, when the Massachusetts Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment Initiative (MAICEI) was launched, college students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) have been involved in advocacy efforts to promote inclusive postsecondary education. These efforts include informing legislators, higher education personnel, school administrators, and school individual education program (IEP) team members, as well as parents and prospective students, that inclusive postsecondary education is not only possible but an effective transition services model.

The message has been simple and direct: students with IDD who are participating in college-based transition services (CBTS) are meeting transition and postsecondary goals by taking college classes, using accommodations, learning to manage their

own schedule, traveling to and from and around college, and expanding their social network. Given their direct knowledge and experience with CBTS, students are often the most compelling speakers at advocacy events and are able to offer a perspective about college experiences that professionals cannot.

By sharing their personal accounts of college, students supported through MAICEI partnerships have broadened awareness of this opportunity in their schools and local communities, advocated for funding at local school committee meetings, and promoted expansion of MAICEI programs throughout the Commonwealth to state legislators.

In this brief, we outline recommendations to increase opportunities for students with IDD to engage in advocacy efforts for inclusive postsecondary education. These include:

- Recognizing advocacy opportunities
- Supporting presenters' preparations
- Choosing a presentation format
- Rehearsing effectively
- Getting started with storytelling
- Developing student-directed stories

“It was really cool to share my story at the State House. I met Dan Carey (MA State Representative) and Tom Sannicandro (Former MA State Representative and Chairperson of the Joint Committee on Higher Education). I felt happy about myself because I got to share my experiences and my story. It can open a lot of doors [for other students to go to college].”



- Allison Rohan, Holyoke Community College Alumna

RECOGNIZING ADVOCACY OPPORTUNITIES

Since MAICEI began in 2007, advocates have recognized that students' testimonies about their college experiences compel their audience to listen. Whether they are testifying in legislative hearings to advocate for funding or speaking to a special education parent advisory council, hearing about their direct experiences and the influence college is having on their lives encourages their audience to not only pay attention to their words but also to speak to them and ask follow-up questions.

When looking for advocacy opportunities, consider all the potential opportunities where students can directly speak to stakeholders about their experiences and what specific information they can contribute. Their insights are instrumental as schools consider special education budgets, as IEP teams assess student progress in transition services including inclusive dual enrollment, and as employment specialists advocate for more youth internship and paid employment opportunities.

When members of college-based transition services are determining student and program goals, they can begin to plan for ways students can advocate for inclusive postsecondary education. Table 1 identifies

the wide range of opportunities students have had to inform others of inclusive higher education, CBTS models, and the many benefits of post-school outcomes, including increased self-determination and employment opportunities.

SUPPORTING PRESENTERS TO PREPARE

Inviting a student to speak about their college experience might seem easy enough for school and college staff, however students might need encouragement and support along the way. Don't be surprised if some students decline the offer outright. No student should be excluded from an

Table 1: Student Advocacy for Inclusive Postsecondary Education

Event	Purpose	Audience	Highlighted Outcome
IEP Meeting	CBTS overview, individual student outcomes	Students, families, transition staff, adult service providers	Students highlight how CBTS support IEP and transition goals
College Open House	CBTS overview, student recruitment	Students, families	Students co-host event from their new educational setting
Transition Resource Fair	CBTS overview, student recruitment	Students, families, transition staff, adult service providers	Students answer questions about their college experience
Department or Faculty Meeting	CBTS overview, student outcomes, campus buy-in	College faculty & staff	Students demonstrate how they are benefitting from classes
Conference Presentation	CBTS overview, student outcomes, best practices	Students, families, transition staff, college staff, adult service providers	Students present and answer questions about college
Legislative Hearing	CBTS overview, student outcomes, testimonials	Lawmakers	Students provide compelling testimony
School Committee Meeting	CBTS overview, cost effectiveness, student outcomes	School committee members	Student presentations highlight educational and career benefits
Special Education Parent Advisory Council (SEPAC)	CBTS overview, student outcomes	Parents	Students raise post-school expectations
City Council Meeting	CBTS overview, need for access to competitive employment opportunities	City council members	Students highlight need for competitive paid employment opportunities
Regional Workforce Development	CBTS overview, need for access to competitive employment opportunities, invitation to join CBTS partnership	Business leaders, vocational rehabilitation, economic development, housing organizations	Students' testimony raises awareness
Adult Service Providers	CBTS overview, need for access to competitive employment opportunities, invitation to join CBTS partnership, collaboration	Vocational rehabilitation, mental health, developmental services, independent living centers, Social Security Administration	Students highlight benefits of post-school outcomes
Media	CBTS overview, student outcomes	Local news outlets, campus marketing & communication department, social media	Students raise awareness

invitation, but some might feel more comfortable in an advocacy role than others.

In a recent survey of college program coordinators who supported students to speak at events (MAICEI, 2020), the majority of respondents indicated students who agreed to present often had public speaking training or experience through college classes or previous speaking engagements. Previous experience may help students understand what may be expected when advocating such as speaking in front of an audience, sharing personal experiences, using technology such as a computer for slide presentations, confidence using a microphone, and being prepared to answer follow-up questions.

Regardless of previous experience, all students will benefit from some preparation including a discussion about the purpose of the event, what role the student will have, how long the student is expected to present, and what supports will be provided to prepare for the presentation. It is helpful to offer students a timeline of activities that will lead up to the event.

It is also important to consider if a student is available to participate at an event. Students in college-based transition programs are often balancing classes and activities, along with work and family obligations. Like many students their age, they are learning to juggle many commitments. It is important to communicate with potential student presenters information about the anticipated time commitment to prepare for an event as well as to participate in the event.

CHOOSING A PRESENTATION FORMAT

Often the setting for an event will, by default, dictate the presentation format. For instance, student advocates for some events, such as transition fairs and college open houses, might be asked to prepare answers for informal questions posed to them about their experiences. In these cases, students might work with a co-presenter to brainstorm questions they might be asked and then rehearse their answers to those questions. Students can also use these venues to share copies of their published stories.

For other events, such as conference presentations, state house testimonies, and city or town meetings, such as school committee meetings or city council meetings, students may be asked to prepare a slideshow with a time limit. In these cases, students

might benefit from some instruction on the number of slides and the amount of text they should use and then rehearse their presentation with a timer. In some cases, students might collect their own data about their experience and present their findings in a public exhibit such as a PhotoVoice event.

Some examples of presentation formats include:

- Short prepared statements
- Slide presentations
- Fact sheets
- Student stories
- Rehearsed oral presentations without notes

REHEARSING EFFECTIVELY

Practicing and rehearsing presentations will help prepare students to be more relaxed and confident as they present their speech or slide deck. Practice opportunities should be built into the timeline when inviting a student to present.



This photo of three students providing testimony before a higher education panel at the MA State House has proved useful in preparing students for the experience.

Sharing photos from previous student presentations can help paint a picture of what the student can expect. For example, a photo of a student presenting at a public hearing allows the support person to point out details such as the table where a presenter sits as well as where the stakeholders (e.g. state legislators, school committee members, city council representatives) will be located and any technology that might be used such as a laptop or microphone. Taking the time to review the setting can also provide the student the opportunity to ask logistical questions. If it is at all possible, visit the setting where the presentation will take place.

GETTING STARTED WITH STORYTELLING

When developing a presentation, invite a student to use a storytelling format. Storytelling can be a meaningful and effective method to engage students in developing presentations about their college experiences as well as to highlight positive outcomes of college-based transition services. This presentation style offers the audience unique insights into college life, as well as an understanding of the complexities surrounding these experiences (e.g., working with educational coaches, academic challenges, developing new relationships). Student stories can also shed light on how they perceive inclusive transition practices, especially when reflections include how college differs from their high school experiences.

Storytelling is a unique way for students to share their personal journey and advocate for inclusion. Personal and collaborative narratives of students, families, transition staff, and college program staff can be compelling and informative. When helping a student develop their story, consider the audience, format, and time needed for preparation. Consider if using an interview format with the student might be the best way to capture their college experiences.

DEVELOPING STUDENT-DIRECTED STORIES

Student-directed storytelling allows CBTS program staff to gather rich stories of college experiences from students, using thoughtful prompts and guiding questions during the storytelling process.



Maximo Pimentel, who attended Roxbury CC and graduated from Bunker Hill CC, has advocated many times for inclusive postsecondary education and authored a vignette about his experiences for a book chapter (Sheerin & Curtis, 2019).

Providing writing prompts or an outline is an effective way to support students getting started. Begin by explaining that a story structure is the order of events that happen. It includes the beginning, where the setting and student are introduced. The middle of the story highlights the student's college experiences, and everything is wrapped up with the ending.

Beginning

Have students introduce themselves and give details about themselves as a college student (e.g., college goals, favorite classes).

Middle

Encourage students to give details about their college experiences. How has college been different from high school? What unexpected events occurred? How did they feel? What are they proud of? How did college change them? What could improve?

Ending

Ask students to summarize their experiences and offer final thoughts (e.g., give advice to future students and families, advocate for systems change with educators and lawmakers).

AS-TOLD-TO STORIES

An as-told-to story captures the voice of a student, written by staff, when a student might need support to tell it. When a story is told in the first person, it often comes to life with more emotion and captures the reader's attention.

The first step when writing a first-person narrative is to interview the student. Using broad, open-ended questions will help draw out the story better than narrow time-and-date or yes-and-no questions. You can use follow-up questions later to discover more of the details. Take caution not to interject your own thoughts or feelings during the interview—let the student speak.

If the student's focus seems to drift, you can nudge them back on track, just as you would in a social conversation (e.g., "That's really interesting, but I can't stop thinking about something you mentioned earlier. Can you tell me more about...").

In an as-told-to story, the support person serves as both the writer and editor. This individual



Adriana Isham, Westfield State, with Ned Pavlak and Tatum Jordan, Holyoke CC presented their research as keynote speakers at the State of the Art Conference on Postsecondary Education and Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities.

needs to pull together the student's accounts into chronological order and follow up with questions to clarify any missing details. Most people do not tell stories in a linear fashion. By weaving together the pieces and using the student's own words, an organized first-person narrative will result.

Before finalizing the story for sharing or publishing, let the student review the final copy. Allowing the student to review their story ensures any good-faith mix-ups, which may have occurred in the course of editing, are corrected.

REACHING YOUR AUDIENCE

Stories have the power to inspire and connect us in ways that few other mediums can. When students share their own successes and unique challenges, they become more than academic subjects or faceless statistics; they become advocates for systemic change (Glover, 2014).

Students who share their stories are given an opportunity to offer their insights to other students, families, K–12 educators, college faculty and staff, lawmakers, and adult service providers. Storytelling offers a medium for students to express their self-determination and educate others about the value of inclusion.

STORIES ABOUT STUDENTS

To see some example of various forms of student story telling, check out the Think College Student Stories and Think College Transition Student Profiles

which feature student experiences and plans for college success. Topics include transition planning and goal setting, self-determination, application and acceptance, getting acclimated to college life, academics, work experience, residential life, and developing friendships. Visit <https://thinkcollege.net/resources/think-college-publications> for examples of student stories.



Wilson Lee, MassBay CC and Grace Quiah, Quinsigamond CC share their participatory action research findings while preparing a presentation for a statewide parent conference.

FINAL THOUGHTS

We hope this brief will serve as a useful tool for the creation of more student stories highlighting inclusive college opportunities and related transition issues that concern students. There are more stories still waiting to be told and many students who deserve the opportunity to share their stories.

Recognizing opportunities to include students in a range of advocacy activities is important and well worth the time it may take to prepare them. Stakeholders benefit from their first-hand accounts and then have the opportunity to follow up with students directly. Students benefit from participating in advocacy efforts that are meant to expand beyond their own individual needs to systems change.

Student stories inform legislators, higher education personnel, school administrators, and IEP team members, as well as parents and prospective students, that inclusive postsecondary education is not only possible but an effective transition services model.



Students presented their Photovoice findings to the city mayor and discussed the need for more employment opportunities.

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TY HANSON serves as an inclusive higher education specialist for the Think College National Coordinating Center. Ty supports students, families, and professionals as they navigate the transition from high school to college. She believes in the importance of using a student-centered and collaborative approach to transition planning while reinforcing the expectation that all students, including those with IDD, have the right to achieve their college dreams.

MARIA PAIEWONSKY has coordinated numerous projects that promote college-based transition services and for many years has included inclusive research with students with IDD who participate in these transition services. This work has included supporting students to use their own research and stories to advocate for improved transition services through a range of activities including conference presentations, exhibits, legislative testimonies, and city council meetings.

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