

Postsecondary Education and Employment Outcomes for Transition-age Youth with and Without Disabilities: A Secondary Analysis of American Community Survey Data

By Frank A. Smith, Meg Grigal, and Jennifer Sullivan Sulewski

INTRODUCTION

The transition from adolescence to adulthood can include employment, postsecondary education, or both. For youth with disabilities, this period can also include transitioning from receiving services and supports from their school district or another youth-oriented service agency to adult services providers such as state vocational rehabilitation (VR) and intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) agencies. The outcomes targeted by these agencies may depend upon a number of factors, including the goals of the youth being supported, local resources, and these professionals' expectations for these youth (Thacker & Sheppard-Jones, 2011). This brief highlights some recent findings on the impact of postsecondary education on employment outcomes and how this impact differs by disability status, using data from the 2010 American Community Survey (ACS).

The American Community Survey

The ACS is a national survey used by the U.S. Census Bureau to better understand changing communities. It reflects information above and beyond that gathered by the decennial census from all 50 states and the District of Columbia on topics such as disability, education, and employment, as well as other demographic and personal data (www.census.gov/acs/www/).

In this brief, we focus on people with any disability, people with no disability, people with cognitive disability, and people with cognitive disability with Supplemental Security Income (SSI) as defined by the ACS. Descriptions of these groups are provided herein.

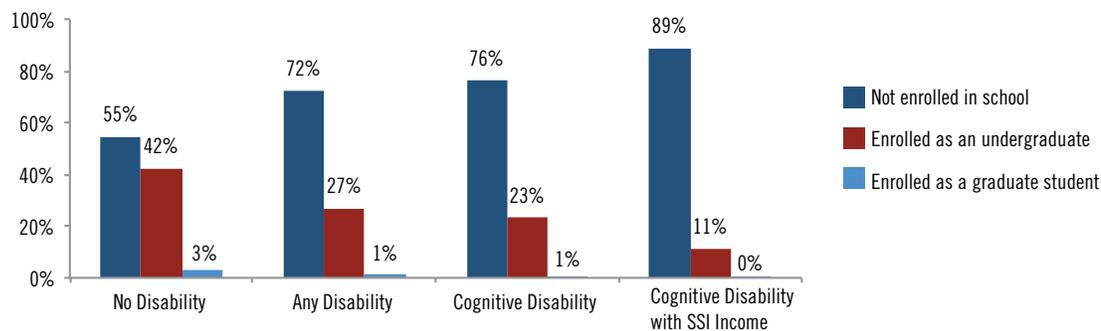
- **Any Disability** - People included in this group are those who responded "yes" to at least one of the six disability questions on the ACS. Specifically, these questions ask about hearing impairment, visual impairment, physical disability, self-care disability, "go outside the home" disability, and cognitive disability.
- **No Disability** - People included in this group are those who did not respond "yes" to any of the six disability questions on the ACS.
- **Cognitive Disability** - People included in this group are those who responded "yes" to a question asking if, because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition lasting six months or more, they have difficulty learning, remembering, and concentrating. This group may include people with intellectual/developmental disability, traumatic brain injury, or dementia. Individuals who responded "yes" to this question are also included in the "any disability" category.
- **Cognitive Disability with SSI** - This is a subset of all people with a cognitive disability. It includes all people who responded "yes" to the cognitive disability item on the survey and reported receiving SSI in 2010.

FINDINGS FROM THE ACS

Postsecondary enrollment of transition-age youth

Transition-age youth with disabilities, including cognitive disabilities, access postsecondary education at lower rates than their peers without disabilities (see Figure 1). This finding is consistent with previous studies (e.g., Newman, Wagner, Cameto, & Knokey, 2009).

Figure 1. Educational enrollment status among individuals ages 18-25.



Source: 2010 American Community Survey

Transition-age youth and employment concurrent with postsecondary enrollment

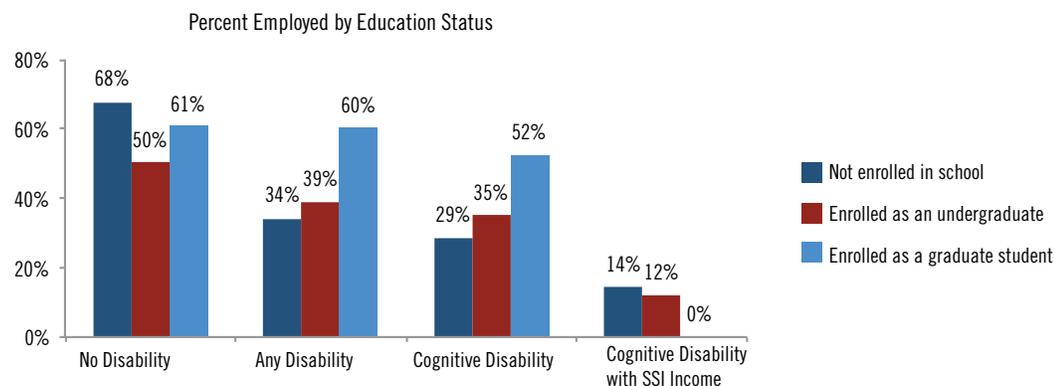
For many students, postsecondary education is a full-time occupation; they forego employment while enrolled. Some 11 million undergraduate students attended institutions of higher education full-time in fall 2010, while 7 million attended part-time (NCES, 2012). Recent high school graduates not enrolled in college in fall 2011 were more likely than enrolled graduates to be in the labor force (68.7% compared with 38.8%) (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). Given the lower likelihood of employment among youth enrolled in postsecondary education, in the ACS data we would expect the employment rate for enrolled youth to be lower than for youth who are not enrolled across disability categories.

This pattern was evident for youth without disabilities (see Figure 2): —youth without disabilities who were not enrolled in postsecondary education had a higher employment rate than those who were enrolled. However, the inverse was true for youth with any disability or a cognitive disability:

rather than having a negative relationship to employment, enrollment in postsecondary education had a positive association with employment. That is, youth with any disability and youth with cognitive disabilities who were enrolled in postsecondary education were more likely to be employed. However, this did not appear to be true for youth with cognitive disabilities who received Supplemental Security Income (SSI), a program that pays benefits to adults and children with disabilities with limited income and resources. Caution should be used when interpreting this finding, as employment data for individuals on SSI may be impacted by perceived and actual employment disincentives related to receiving SSI. For instance, earnings restrictions may cause people on SSI to not seek employment, therefore mitigating the effects of forces that would normally predict better employment outcomes, such as postsecondary education.

Chi-square tests were conducted for each disability subpopulation to determine if there is was a statistical relationship between postsecondary enrollment and

Figure 2. Percentage of individuals employed with postsecondary enrollment status among individuals ages 18-25.



Source: 2010 American Community Survey

employment. The correlation between employment and enrollment in postsecondary education was statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) for all groups. This finding merits further exploration of the relationship between postsecondary enrollment and employment to determine its directionality and causality.

While it is promising to see a positive relationship between enrollment in postsecondary education and employment for youth with any disability or a cognitive disability, it should be noted that the postsecondary enrollment question on the ACS asks only whether or not an individual is enrolled and at which level (undergraduate or graduate school). The ACS does not provide any more detailed information about the student's postsecondary experience, such as whether the student is enrolled full-time or part-time or whether the student's goal is a degree or a certificate. While the data in Figure 2 suggest that postsecondary education has an impact on employment for youth with disabilities, having more information about the postsecondary experiences of youth with disabilities would help researchers and disability services professionals better understand which elements of postsecondary education (e.g., full-time versus part-time enrollment) affect employment outcomes.

Employment outcomes for transition-age youth by educational attainment

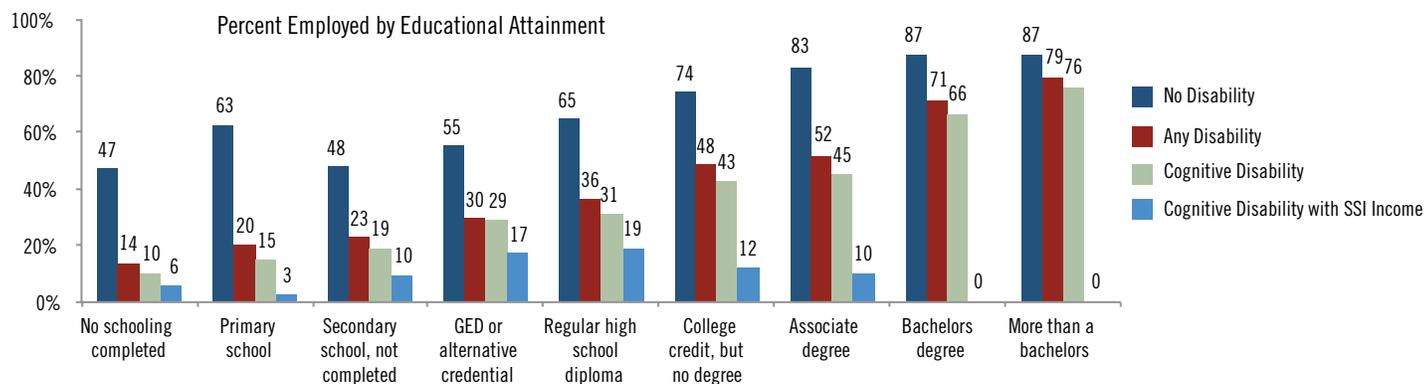
Population subgroups with higher educational attainment have higher employment rates. As shown in Figure 3, for people without a disability, with any disability, and with a

cognitive disability, we see higher employment rates from one educational attainment category to the next. There are some exceptions—e.g., people without a disability with primary school as their highest attainment are employed at higher rates than people with some secondary education or a GED or alternative credential. Overall, though, the bottom line is that people with more education are employed at higher rates.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

These findings from the ACS, that higher educational attainment is associated with higher employment rates for students with any disability or a cognitive disability, mirror findings from previous studies looking at other datasets such as the RSA 911 Vocational Rehabilitation rehabilitation (VR) data and the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (Migliore et al., 2009; Newman et al., 2011). Other studies have also found that individuals who take college courses but do not graduate from college have better employment outcomes than those without any postsecondary education (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2003; Marcotte, Bailey, Borkoski, & Kienzl, 2005). Moreover, the positive relationship between concurrent postsecondary enrollment and employment for some disability subpopulations further supports the utility of postsecondary education in terms of promoting employment outcomes. Such findings suggest that Community Rehabilitation Providers, VR counselors, and transition coordinators should consider postsecondary education as they develop individual service plans for their clients.

Figure 3. Employment rate by educational attainment for those not enrolled in any sort of schooling.



Source: 2010 American Community Survey

These findings suggest that creating or supporting programs that increase access to postsecondary education for people with disabilities, including those with cognitive disabilities, could have a positive impact on longer-term employment and economic outcomes for these individuals. This increased access to postsecondary education could then result in more working individuals with disabilities contributing to payroll taxes and fewer people with disabilities participating in poverty prevention programs such as SSI, thus making such programs more cost-effective in the long term.

These findings also reflect the need for further research. While these data establish correlation between employment and education for people with disabilities, they do not establish causation or provide insights into the mechanisms linking these two factors. Researchers should continue to explore how postsecondary enrollment is related to concurrent and subsequent employment outcomes for disability subpopulations and the implications of those linkages for policy and service provision.

REFERENCES

- Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2012). College enrollment and work activity of 2011 high school graduates. Economic News Release, USDL-11-0462. Retrieved from <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/hsgsec.nr0.htm>
- Carnevale, A.P., & Desrochers, D. M. (2003). Standards for what? The economic roots of K-16 reform. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.
- Marcotte, D. E., Bailey, T., Borkoski, C., & Kienzl, G. S. (2005). The returns of a community college education: Evidence from the national education longitudinal survey. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 27(2), 157–175.
- Migliore, A., Butterworth, J., & Hart, D. (2009). Postsecondary education and employment outcomes for youth with intellectual disabilities. *Think College Fast Facts*, Issue No. 1. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion. Retrieved from http://www.thinkcollege.net/component/docman/doc_download/8-fast-facts-issue-1-pdf
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2012). Enrollment in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2010; Financial Statistics, Fiscal Year 2010; and Graduation Rates, Selected Cohorts, 2002–07.
- Newman, L., Wagner, M., Cameto, R., & Knokey, A. M. (2009). The post-high school outcomes of youth with disabilities up to 4 years after high school. A report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) (NCSE 2009-3017). Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.
- Newman, L., Wagner, M., Knokey, A.-M., Marder, C., Nagle, K., Shaver, D., & Wei, X., with Cameto, R., Contreras, E., Ferguson, K., Greene, S., & Schwarting, M. (2011). The post-high school outcomes of young adults with disabilities up to 8 years after high school. A report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) (NCSE 2011-3005). Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.
- Thacker, J., & Sheppard-Jones, K. (2011). Research brief: Higher education for students with intellectual disabilities: A Study of KY OVR counselors. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky, Human Development Institute. Retrieved from http://www.hdi.uky.edu/SF/Files/ResearchBrief_Summer2011.pdf

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Frank A. Smith, MA, is a Research Associate at the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) at the University of Massachusetts Boston and the Evaluation Manager for the TPSID National Coordinating Center.

Meg Grigal, PhD, is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI), University of Massachusetts Boston and the Co-Principal Investigator for the TPSID National Coordinating Center and other Think College projects.

Jennifer Sullivan Sulewski, PhD, is a Research Associate at the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI), University of Massachusetts Boston and is involved in data collection, analysis, and writing for the evaluation of the TPSID National Coordinating Center.

INSIGHT, Issue No. 15, 2012

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 National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (CFDA #H133A80042), the Administration on 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: Smith, F.A., Grigal, M., Sulewski, J. (2012). *The Impact of Postsecondary Education on Employment Outcomes for Transition-age Youth with and Without Disabilities: A Secondary Analysis of American Community Survey Data*. Think College Insight Brief, Issue No. 15. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion.

This publication will be made available in alternate formats upon request.



www.thinkcollege.net

www.facebook.com/thinkcollege