

Report on Model Accreditation Standards for Higher Education Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability: Progress on the Path to Education, Employment, and Community Living

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



REPORT TO:

United States Secretary of Education

United States Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions

United States House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor

National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity

The National Coordinating Center Accreditation Workgroup

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ThinkCollege

NATIONAL COORDINATING CENTER

INSTITUTE FOR COMMUNITY INCLUSION, UMASS BOSTON

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

The Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) enacted in 2008 created new opportunities for students with intellectual disability (ID) to access federal financial aid, and authorized both new model programs and a National Coordinating Center (NCC). The NCC, administered by Think College at the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston, is charged with providing technical assistance, coordination, and evaluation of the model programs.

The NCC is also required by the HEOA to convene a Workgroup to develop and recommend model criteria, standards, and components of higher education programs for students with ID. The National Coordinating Center Accreditation Workgroup issues this report in response to that statutory requirement.

The first National Coordinating Center Accreditation Workgroup was established in 2011 and completed its work in 2015. That Workgroup developed, for the first time, model program accreditation standards for these programs and authored [a report](#) to Congress, the Secretary of Education, and the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity or NACIQI, as required by Congress (National Coordinating Center Accreditation Workgroup, 2016).

The second NCC Accreditation Workgroup began its work in 2016 and concluded in 2021 with this report. This Workgroup conducted a field test of the model standards developed by the first Workgroup, held sessions to gather public input, surveyed programs regarding their interest in becoming accredited, and reached out to existing accreditors to ascertain interest in using the model standards.

The updated model program accreditation standards follow, and the complete standards, guidance, and review requirements may be found at the end of this report (see page 41). These revised standards reflect a significant step forward in creating authentic and high-quality higher education opportunities for students with ID. The recommendations in the report to Congress, the U.S. Department of Education, the National Coordinating Center, and the next Workgroup will support and enhance progress in this field.

The current Workgroup, created in 2021, will focus on developing and field-testing an accreditation process and addressing issues involved in creating an accrediting agency and implementing accreditation. The implementation of model accreditation standards will move us forward on the path to inclusive higher education opportunities that lead to competitive integrated employment and community living.

Establishing and implementing model program accreditation standards will create benchmarks that will be useful for quality assurance and improvement of higher education programs enrolling students with ID. These standards will be used to validate and strengthen programs and provide guidelines for colleges and universities considering establishing high-quality programs. The model standards will be valuable for institutions of higher education and accrediting agencies, as well as students with ID and their families.

Think College National Coordinating Center Accreditation Workgroup (2021). Executive Summary of the Report on Model Accreditation Standards for Higher Education Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability: Progress on the Path to Education, Employment, and Community Living. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion.

Model Accreditation Standards for Higher Education Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability

Mission Standards

Mission Standard 1:

The program has a written mission statement that is consistent with the Higher Education Act (HEA) requirements that the program is a “degree, certificate, or non-degree program at an accredited institution that is designed to support students with intellectual disabilities (ID) who are seeking to continue academic, career and technical, and independent living instruction” in order to obtain competitive integrated employment (CIE).

Mission Standard 2:

The written mission statement is communicated to prospective and current students, families, staff, faculty, and the public, and is reviewed at least every third year or sooner if there are significant changes to the program.

Student Achievement Standards

Student Achievement Standard 1:

The program has established a Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) policy that includes criteria for evaluating student progress in academics, socialization, independent living, and career development, and the impact of such evaluation on student advancement towards program completion. The program specifies how students advance through a full course of study and maintains satisfactory academic progress.

Student Achievement Standard 2:

The program has established a program level Student Learning Outcomes (SLO) assessment plan and a process that allows it to measure student achievement in varied domains including academics, socialization, independent living, and career development.

Student Achievement Standard 3:

The program provides individualized learning plans for the student, for each college catalog course attended by the student, that identifies: what the student is expected to learn; how the student will be evaluated; and supports, strategies, accommodations or modifications that are needed for the student to master essential learning.

Student Achievement Standard 4:

The program provides students with a written report at the end of each “academic unit” (semester, trimester, etc.) understandable to the student, that clearly indicates evidence of student progress in the areas of academics, socialization, independent living, and career/employment.

Student Achievement Standard 5:

The program sets goals for student pace of completion and retention rates that are ambitious but attainable and appropriate to the mission of the program. The program monitors and reports pace of completion and retention rates.

Curriculum Standards

Curriculum Standard 1:

The program has an inclusive program of study that aligns with the statutory and regulatory requirements for a comprehensive transition and postsecondary (CTP) program in the Higher Education Act (HEA) law and regulations and is consistent with the program’s mission and program outcomes.

Curriculum Standard 2:

The program utilizes and documents a person-centered planning approach that provides for maximum choice for the student within the inclusive program of study.

Curriculum Standard 3:

Students with intellectual disabilities participate in a wide array of postsecondary level courses from multiple disciplines and departmental/college units that are part of the curriculum for degree or certificate programs.

Curriculum Standard 4:

The inclusive program of study is delivered to students physically attending the institution, with some distance learning allowable if it is applicable to and benefits students with intellectual disability.

Curriculum Standard 5:

The inclusive program of study includes instruction, internships, apprenticeships or other work-based learning, and other career development activities necessary to enable students to achieve and sustain competitive integrated employment (CIE) aligned with person-centered goals.

Curriculum Standard 6:

The inclusive program of study includes student engagement in inclusive social experiences and other campus-based activities. Individualized support, instruction or activities necessary to enhance student social competence must be included in the inclusive program of study.

Curriculum Standard 7:

The inclusive program of study includes individualized support, instruction, or other activities designed to support development of students' independent living skills and be guided by each student's person-centered plan.

Faculty and Staff Standards**Faculty and Staff Standard 1:**

Staff and other professionals that work directly for the program have education and training commensurate with their roles and responsibilities and participate in ongoing professional development and training.

Faculty and Staff Standard 2:

The program must ensure coordination of services and supports between the program and staff and other professionals who do not work directly for the institution but serve in a support or instructional capacity for the students.

Faculty and Staff Standard 3:

Program staff receive a job description that lists roles and responsibilities. Performance criteria are clear, and evaluation is conducted on a regular basis, consistent with the policies of the institution.

Faculty and Staff Standard 4:

Program management and leadership are retained for a reasonable period of time.

Faculty and Staff Standard 5:

Other individuals who work with students, such as peer mentors and pre-professionals or professionals-in-training (such as individuals training to become educators, counselors, speech and language pathologists, occupational or physical therapists) are trained and supervised.

Faculty and Staff Standard 6:

Training and technical assistance are provided to the institution's faculty and staff to develop learning environments, courses, and instruction according to the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

Faculty and Staff Standard 7:

Information and support about the impact of an individual student's disability on learning, and strategies to support, instruct, and assess the student, are offered to the institution's faculty and staff to improve and optimize the student's learning in courses taught by that faculty or staff.

Facility, Equipment, and Supply Standard**Facility, Equipment, and Supply Standard 1:**

Students in the program have access to institutional facilities, equipment, and supplies consistent with other students with the same student status.

Administrative and Fiscal Capacity Standards**Administrative and Fiscal Capacity Standard 1:**

The program is a part of a department or unit of the institution, with a recognized place within its administrative structure.

Administrative and Fiscal Capacity Standard 2:

The program seeks and considers ongoing input on program development, policies, and practices from a variety of stakeholders that includes students, alumni, and parents.

Administrative and Fiscal Capacity Standard 3:

Programs have a viable plan for current and future fiscal sustainability.

Student Services Standards**Student Services Standard 1:**

The admission policies and practices ensure that all students who are admitted meet the definition of a “student with an intellectual disability” in the Higher Education Act (HEA) law and regulations.

Student Services Standard 2:

The program provides academic, employment, personal, and other advising and counseling, based on person-centered planning and individual interests and needs, and in collaboration with existing institutional services.

Student Services Standard 3:

Students and families are included in the institution’s general orientation programs and additional orientation is provided as needed.

Student Services Standard 4:

General information regarding the institution and the program is communicated to students and families on an ongoing basis. The program has a stated process for family engagement and communication that reflects clearly defined roles and responsibilities for students, families, and staff.

Student Services Standard 5:

Students in the program have access to services and social and recreational activities, consistent with other students with the same student status.

Student Services Standard 6:

Individualized supports are provided to students designed to enable the students to seek and sustain competitive integrated employment (CIE). Supports are provided based on the student’s interests and person-centered plan.

Length and Structure of Program Study Standards**Length and Structure of Program of Study Standard 1:**

The program aligns with the college calendar and specifies the number of weeks of instructional time and the number of clock hours in the program, including the equivalent clock hours that fulfill requirements of the program credential.

Length and Structure of Program of Study Standard 2:

The program clearly describes the educational credential or credentials offered (e.g., degree, certificate, or non-degree credential) that is issued by the institution.

Student Complaints Standards**Student Complaint Standard 1:**

The program has established relationships with offices within the institution involved with student complaints or discipline, in order to facilitate communication and collaboration.

Student Complaints Standard 2:

The institution’s grievance procedures are understandable, provided to, and discussed with students in the program and their parents.

Student Complaints Standard 3:

Support is provided to students who have complaints lodged against them as well as students who seek to lodge a formal written complaint. Support is available throughout the grievance process and throughout any actions that result and if a student is at risk of being expelled or urged to exit the program.

Program Development, Planning, and Review Standards

Program Development, Planning, and Review Standard 1:

The program, along with key stakeholders, evaluates its program components, student assessment practices, student services, policies, activities, student learning outcomes, and program outcomes at a minimum of every three years. The program implements program revisions based on the evaluation for continuous quality improvement.

Program Development, Planning, and Review Standard 2:

The institution verifies that students who receive federal financial aid meet the definition of a student with an intellectual disability in the Higher Education Act (HEA) law and regulations.

Recommendations to Congress and U.S. Dept. of Education

The “National Coordinating Center Accreditation Workgroup” section of this report describes challenges and emerging issues in the field of inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE), the field test of the standards conducted by the Workgroup, public input, lessons learned, and the resulting Workgroup recommendations to Congress and the U.S. Department of Education summarized below.

Recommendations to Congress

- Fund the creation of a new accrediting agency to accredit comprehensive transition and postsecondary (CTP) programs.
- In the next reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA), substitute “competitive integrated employment” for “gainful employment” in the definition of “comprehensive transition and postsecondary program for students with intellectual disabilities.”
- Allow all students with disabilities to submit their Individualized Education Program (IEP), 504 Plan, or prior evaluation as documentation of their disability to obtain accommodations in college, so the students do not need to go to the expense and trouble of obtaining a new evaluation prior to attending a college or university. (See the [RISE Act of 2019, H.R.3086.](#))
- Fund technical assistance to provide students with all disabilities and their families information on college disability services and how to access them and to provide college faculty training and resources on best practices to support students with disabilities. (See the [RISE Act of 2019, H.R.3086.](#))
- Fund pilot programs for disability service offices to provide services for students with all disabilities beyond the minimum accommodations required by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.

Recommendations to the Department of Education (ED)

- Fund the development and dissemination of resources and strategies to use in determining what an individual student with ID is expected to learn, and how to assess progress in traditional classes, based on best practice. Such resources and strategies are needed to determine student progress in all areas (academic, career or technical, and independent living).
- Fund research on the impact of student status on access to and participation in services and social and recreational activities, and how the issue of student status may affect the development of the accreditation process and best-practice guidelines.
- Correct the misinformation provided to Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) applicants and on the Department website regarding the definition of ID. The definition needs to be in accordance with the ID definition in the Higher Education Act (HEA) law and regulations (that state how to document an ID if the student is not identified as having an ID in K–12 education).
- Develop a method to create an equitable geographic distribution and to serve underserved areas for future TPSID grants, as required by the HEA.
- Include the competitive preferences required in the HEA in the next Request for Proposals for TPSID grants.

- Review the selection of and training provided to CTP peer reviewers to ensure that there is a clear understanding and application of the definition of ID and other provisions in the law and regulations.
- Highlight and broadly share employment and other positive outcomes of comprehensive transition and postsecondary programs.
- Highlight and broadly share examples of collaboration between vocational rehabilitation agencies and programs and examples of collaboration between local education agencies and programs.

Recommendations to Both Congress and ED

- Identify and address legislative and administrative barriers to participation by postsecondary students with ID in accessing and meaningfully participating in:
 - » Vocational rehabilitation services and funding
 - » Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) dual enrollment and the use of IDEA funds for transition age students still eligible for IDEA services
 - » Higher education benefits for children of veterans
 - » Industry recognized credential programs
 - » Apprenticeship programs

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In Memoriam

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