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The Think College Transition Model: Developing Inclusive College-based Transition Services for Students with Intellectual Disability and Autism

By Meg Grigal, Maria Paiewonsky, & Debra Hart

Think College, a project of the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston, has developed and implemented an innovative transition model for students with intellectual disabilities and autism. Using funds from the US Department of Education's Investing in Innovation Fund, the Think College Transition (TCT) Model provides students with intellectual disabilities and autism access to inclusive college-based transition services between the ages of 18 and 21.

This brief provides background on students with intellectual disability and autism, describes college-based transition services, and presents an overview and conceptual framework of the TCT Model key components.

BACKGROUND

While significant efforts have been put into college and career readiness for youth in the United States, seldom are these efforts directed at youth with intellectual disabilities and autism (ID/A). High school students with ID/A have the least inclusive educational experiences, the lowest levels of academic achievement, and the fewest postsecondary education goals reflected on their transition plans (Grigal, Hart, & Migliore, 2011; Newman, Wagner, Cameto, Knokey, & Shaver, 2010). Students with ID/A also have the poorest college and employment outcomes of all disability groups (Windsor & Butterworth, 2007; Newman, Wagner, Cameto, & Knokey, 2009).

Many students with ID/A remain in high school and receive special education services until the age of 21 or 22 (Wehman, 2012). Students with ID/A who choose to stay in school past age 18 typically participate in life-skills or community-based vocational programs, often only with other students

with disabilities (Chiang, Ni, & Lee, 2017). Fewer students are supported to access postsecondary education environments or engage in paid employment in their communities. The majority of youth with ID/A exit high school and enter into a lifetime of under- or unemployment, sheltered employment, and day habilitation (Sulewski, Zalewska, Butterworth, & Migliore, 2013; Gidugu & Rogers, 2012).

COLLEGE-BASED TRANSITION SERVICES

College-based transition services build upon community-based transition services (Grigal, Paiewonsky, & Hart, 2017), but transfer the educational context onto a college or university campus. These services mimic standard dual enrollment experiences that allow high school students to simultaneously be enrolled in high school and college (Barnett & Stamm, 2010).

Typically, dual enrollment experiences are offered to students in advanced placement courses, allowing them to seek high school and college credit simultaneously. This approach has emerged as a promising practice for students with disabilities, including students with ID/A (Grigal et al., 2017; Kleinert, Jones, Sheppard-Jones, Harp, & Harrison, 2012), providing the opportunity to receive community-based transition

This approach has emerged as a promising practice for students with disabilities, including students with ID/A providing the opportunity to receive community-based transition services on a college campus with same-age peers instead of remaining in high school.

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The programs for students with ID/A are sometimes called “dual enrollment” or “concurrent enrollment” programs, depending upon the states and systems involved. According to the Think College program directory of institutions of higher education serving students with intellectual disability, 35% of current options are serving transition-aged youth with intellectual disability and another disability (Think College, 2017).

College-based transition programs serving students with disabilities vary significantly in their practices, including in their commitment to offering access to college courses or support for paid internships or employment (Grigal & Hart, 2010). There is little legislative guidance or oversight of the dual enrollment transition programs in the US, and few studies have addressed the efficacy or outcomes of these practices.

THE THINK COLLEGE TRANSITION MODEL

The Think College Transition (TCT) Model builds upon knowledge of effective and evidence-based practices from special education, college and career readiness, dual and concurrent enrollment, career and technical education, supported employment, and school counseling. The model reflects guidance from the Higher Education Opportunities Act regarding students with intellectual disability.

A Delphi study was conducted with experts in these evidence-based practices to refine and confirm what TCT project staff hypothesized to be the eight essential TCT Model components:

- Community-based transition services
- Self-determination and self-advocacy
- Family engagement and partnerships
- Advising, course of study, and enrollment
- Student support for college success
- Dual-enrollment staff development
- Integrated paid employment
- Evaluation

EVALUATION AND TRAINING ACTIVITIES

The TCT project focuses on implementing, evaluating, and refining the Think College Transition Model, building upon an existing state transition initiative called the Massachusetts Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment Initiative. This initiative supports partnerships between local education agencies and colleges and universities to provide transition experiences to youth with various developmental disabilities.

The TCT project works with these existing partnerships to refine their practices and align them with the TCT Model. Evaluation activities are being conducted to determine the impact of participation in the TCT Model on students’ levels of self-determination, career readiness, college self-efficacy, and employment outcomes.

The conceptual framework of the model is presented in Figure 1. The TCT Model relies on a collaborative multi-system approach. This includes partnerships between local education agencies, institutions of higher education, and adult agency partners. Together they engage in mutual outreach efforts to promote regular communication and collaboration which, in turn, leads to enhanced inclusive college-based transition services for students with ID/A.

The TCT Model also builds on a foundation of community-based transition services; supports ongoing training, planning, and evaluation; emphasizes student self-determination and self-advocacy; and supports family engagement. The model addresses four domains of practice, Plan, Support, Learn, and Work, with critical benchmarks defined for each area.

As a result of participation in the TCT Model, students will:

- enroll in inclusive college classes (related to their career and personal interests)
- access campus career services
- work at a paid job (that aligns with career goals)
- advocate for and use academic accommodations
- spend free time on campus with college peers
- schedule a minimum of 3 full days on campus

The model creates opportunities for students to be included on campus in all aspects of a college experience, receiving supports as necessary (e.g., coaching and/or peer mentoring, disability services support). The student's day consists of course participation, social events, and career development activities and competitive integrated employment. The result is to move the student's transition services away from a high school-based setting to a college-based setting that is more natural for peers of this age and is more inclusive of peers without disabilities.

As demand grows to improve postschool outcomes for students with intellectual disability or autism, models of postsecondary services that mirror the experiences of their peers without disabilities emerge as innovative and appropriate alternatives to more traditional transition services (e.g., independent living or life skills programs). The Think College Transition Model has the potential to serve as a blueprint for staff at secondary schools and colleges who want to develop inclusive college-based transition options for students with ID/A.

FIGURE 1

THINK COLLEGE TRANSITION MODEL FOR INCLUSIVE DUAL ENROLLMENT

DRIVEN BY COLLABORATION

- Interagency communication
- Mutual outreach efforts
- Evaluation of transition services

TCT MODEL COMPONENTS

PLAN

- Person centered planning
- Inclusive course access
- Internships/employment
- Inclusive campus activities

SUPPORT

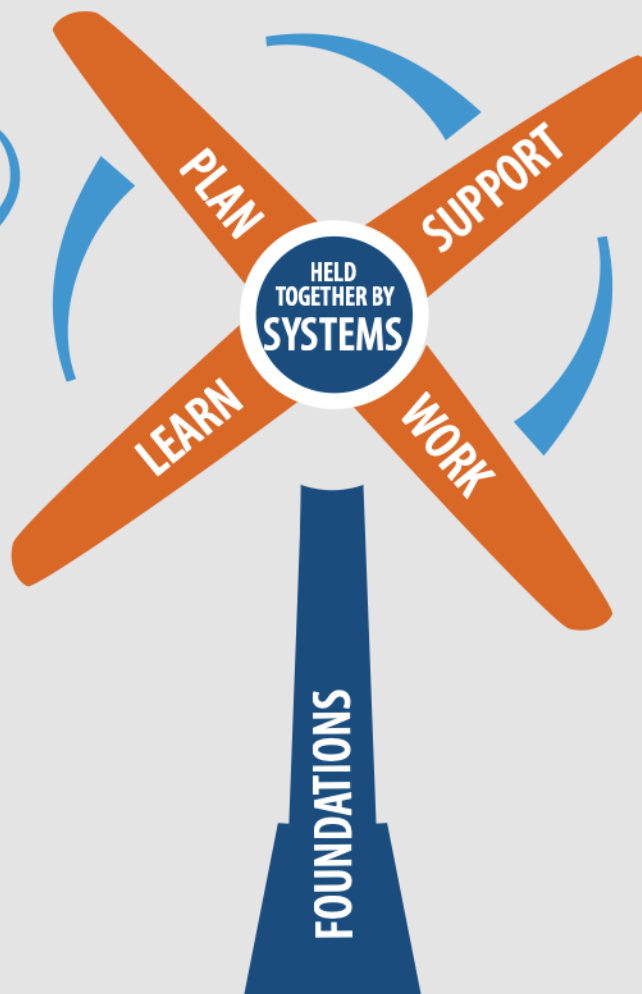
- Disability services
- Peer mentor/educational coach
- Career & Employment supports

WORK

- Integrated competitive employment
- Paid internships
- Work-based learning plan

LEARN

- Priority registration
- Courses identified in PCP
- Courses related to employment goals



SYSTEMS

- Institutes of Higher Education
- School systems
- State and Community agencies

FOUNDATIONS

- IHE and Community-based transition services
- Ongoing training and planning
- Existing dual enrollment partnership
- Transition services provided to students with ID/Autism ages 18-21
- Student self-determination and self-advocacy
- Family engagement and partnerships

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ThinkCollege TRANSITION PROJECT



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Please visit www.thinkcollege.net/tct

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