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# What's the Point? A Reflection About the Purpose and Outcomes of College for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

Meg Grigal, *University of Massachusetts Boston*

Debra Hart, *University of Massachusetts Boston*



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## What's The Point? A Reflection About the Purpose and Outcomes of College for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

By Meg Grigal and Debra Hart

**A**s a part of our work with Think College, we meet with many groups of people at conferences and answer lots of questions regarding how to implement or improve postsecondary education access for students with intellectual disabilities. But a question on many people's minds, whether spoken or unspoken is: What's the point? Often it goes something like this: *"Yeah, I understand why students might want to take weight training or aerobics. But what is a kid like this going to get out of taking an art history class? Why should we waste our time setting that up?"*

This is not an unusual question. . . . Actually, it's probably one of the best places to start when having a conversation about the reason for offering students with intellectual disabilities the opportunity to access postsecondary education. What's the point? Most students with intellectual disabilities will not be going to college to get a degree. Many, if not most, will not have received a high school diploma. So then why would we "waste our time" giving students like this a chance to attend a college course—especially on a topic as esoteric as art history?

The answer to this question is that the purpose of providing students with intellectual disabilities access to PSE is not limited to simply getting a student into a class, or the student learning the content of the course. While these elements are both important, the bigger picture has less to do with the classes students take and more to do with the outcomes that are possible when students with ID are afforded the opportunity to access college experiences. And by college experiences, we are not referring solely to taking classes at a college. The college experience is comprised of a wide array of possible experiences; some social, some academic, and some employment. These experiences will likewise be unique for every individual who attends college. There is not

one right way to do it. A student's experience will reflect their personal needs and goals. Some students will take many classes, while others choose to go part-time. Some students seek skills that will lead to employment; others may want to explore a new area of personal interest. It is in this aspect that college environments provide an array of experiences that most students with intellectual disabilities are not

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afforded during their tenure in public school; the chance to explore, define, and redefine personal goals related to adult learning, employment, and social connections.

Students with and without disabilities go through their primary and secondary school years taking a prescribed course of study. High school provides a few limited opportunities for students to choose a course or an elective, but even those elective classes are designed for the young adult learner—where the student is a passive respondent. Students with intellectual disabilities will likely have even fewer choices in their course options than their peers without or with other disabilities. They may be included in a variety of general education courses, but may not have much choice in which ones they can attend. They might be limited to the life skills or functional academic courses that are provided to students with significant support needs in their school district. Regardless of the type of courses they

attend, all of these high school options come with a strict set of guidelines. They are provided in a high school setting; a bell will tell you when to go to class and when to leave class. The teacher provides a set of expected outcomes, and in most cases, will make all necessary modification or accommodations without any input or request from a student. This is how high school students with intellectual disabilities are expected to learn.

The employment experiences of students with intellectual disabilities are often just as teacher directed. Most students participate in job tryouts or training experiences that they rotate through that are not connected with the student's coursework, interests, skills, or—most importantly—to a paid job that they are trying to obtain. These employment preparation experiences prepare students for adult employment experiences about as well as their high school preparation experiences prepare them to go to college. The traditional transition experiences of students with intellectual disabilities have not been demonstrated to produce great outcomes for students in adulthood. But given the opportunity, access, and support—students with ID who receive transition services in college settings can have great outcomes. Using the college campus as the platform for their education, students can learn how to access education as an adult, learn how to connect this education to a paid job, and learn how to navigate between jobs like all other adults. The option of postsecondary education for students with intellectual disabilities is ultimately just good transition planning. It allows students to engage in adult learning and working environments within a context of supports and guidance. It also lays the groundwork for students to obtain the skills necessary for them to continue to access learning throughout their adult lives.

In today's public special education system, students with intellectual disabilities (and their families) are not provided with the expectation that students should continue to access adult learning after they leave high school. In most cases, students with ID have not been introduced to the possibility of attending college, or any kind of postsecondary

education— academic, continuing education, or otherwise. The staff person in high school who is generally the gatekeeper to college is most often a guidance counselor. However, students with ID seldom have access to a guidance counselor. As a result, it is unlikely that students with ID will be presented with information about potential postsecondary education opportunities in their community.

Instead, the transition component of the IEP under postsecondary education goals will likely say “not applicable”. The student with ID and their family will be referred to the state vocational rehabilitation center, and perhaps the state developmental disabilities agency. If the student is lucky, he or she will be assigned to an adult service provider who will find them a job in the community. But as the latest statistics on transition outcomes for youth with ID will indicate, most of these youth will remain unemployed or under employed. And most will not engage in any kind of adult learning, whether at a college or in other community adult education settings.

In our current system of education, people with intellectual disabilities are expected to stop learning in any formal way at the ripe old age of 21. Imagine, if you will, if you had stopped learning after high school. No classes at college, no professional development days, no workshops or conferences. We often lament the poor post-school outcomes of students with intellectual disabilities. However, we never seem to make the connection that the system does not support students with intellectual disabilities to learn *anything* after they leave high school.

How successful would the general population be if all learning ended after high school? The current rate of unemployment for individuals who graduated from high school is twice that of those who graduated from college. Going to college is and always has been connected to greater rates of employment and higher wages. It is likely given the opportunity, and the means to document the outcomes, that students with intellectual disabilities would mirror these trends.

The purpose of exposing students with intellectual disabilities to PSE is to provide them, for perhaps the first time in their lives, the expectation that they CAN learn after leaving high school and the opportunity to CHOOSE to learn. Due to the nature and structure of high school, students with ID are seldom provided the chance to choose what they want to learn about, nor are they given guidance about how to access knowledge as adults. Choosing to learn about something is a process that takes some skills. First, a person must identify what it feels like to want to learn about something and know that there are places where knowledge can be found. College is a great place to find out what interests you and the types of classes that are available on various topics. But it is not enough to know what is out there; you need to know how to access it.

How do you gain access to adult learning environments? Are they all the same? Is the process of registering for a basic math class at a community college the same as signing up to take a water aerobics class through your local park and recreation department? The flexible nature of a college setting allows students with intellectual disabilities the opportunity to learn about the various types of adult education and means through which each can be accessed. Students with ID can register for courses at the college for audit or for credit, or take a continuing education course, or sign up for one of the many adult classes that are available in the community through county or city programs or in local home improvement stores such as Home Depot or Michael's Arts and Crafts. It is important to recognize that students who participate in programs located on college campuses are *not* limited to taking classes at that college.

Finally, it is important to apply the learning in your life. Were the skills gained from a class useful to you on your job? Will they help you get a better job? Are you learning to be a better listener, writer, or thinker as a result of your class? Or perhaps the class was to explore a new area of interest. Are you still interested in the topic? Do you want to find out more? What other opportunities exist to do this? It is especially important not to assign judgment to the type of education that someone desires. If you want to

learn how to speak French, great. If you want to learn how to tile your bathroom floor, great. Do you know where to learn these skills and can you apply them in your life? That is the measure of a successful learner. Many might respond with "Well, what if they fail?" or "Students with intellectual disabilities aren't going to do well in college classes." And in some cases this may in fact be true. Some students will fail. And yet when do we learn more about ourselves than when we fail? Every person reading this right now has failed at something—maybe at a number of things. But you managed to rally, hopefully apply the lessons learned, and move on. As Oscar Wilde says, "**Experience is simply the name we give our mistakes**". Surely, we all have a number of college "experiences" that served to teach us a thing or two.

And so we revisit the question, "What's the point?" Why should we waste our time getting a young person with intellectual disabilities into an art history class? Let's review just some of the information that would be needed for a young woman with intellectual disabilities to take an art history class;

Where in the community do they offer art history?

- ▶ How does she register for classes?
- ▶ What is a bursar?
- ▶ Are there prerequisites?
- ▶ What is the schedule?
- ▶ Does it work with her work schedule?
- ▶ How will she get to and from class?
- ▶ What kind of help will she need in the class to be successful?

Yet the lessons learned are not limited to what is needed to access a class. Being enrolled in an art history class will also give this young woman a chance to set goals, to advocate for herself with a professor and possibly an employer. She will be immersed in a class that she finds personally fulfilling. She will meet others who are also interested in the topic, and will make acquaintances—if not friends—with a mutual interest. She will determine not only if the content of the course is right for her, but if the method in which the course is taught works for her. This knowledge may influence the type of courses she takes in the future. She will be exposed to the

ebb and flow of the college workload, the rhythm of a college class lecture, and get a feel for when it's ok to ask questions, when and how to take notes, or how to ask a friend or a professor for a copy of the notes. All of these skills will ultimately allow her to be more successful in other realms of her life—in her job, with her friends, as she makes her way in the community.

There are a great number of skills required to access adult learning opportunities. And there are very few chances for students with intellectual disabilities to learn those skills in high school or as adults. Transition services have for many years been defined primarily around employment and the transition from school to work. And this is a vital aspect of transition. We all believe in the power of integrated community employment as a hugely successful outcome for students. But none of us expect a student to exit school with a paid job with benefits if that student has never had a job tryout, some training, and some experiences in the world of work. So how can we expect a student with intellectual

disabilities to know how to access *any* kind of adult learning option, if we have not given him or her opportunity to sample what adult learning is about?

Students with ID need to be given the chance to experience adult learning while we are still in the position of providing support and guidance. Our transition outcomes do not have to be limited to “Does this student have a job?” and “Are they connected with an adult service provider?” Our goals can also include “Can this student, if he or she wants to, access the adult learning options in their community?” Just as we teach them the process of obtaining and keeping a job and the necessary process of changing jobs, we must teach them that their learning needs and desires may change as they mature. And that the skills to access learning are ones that they can use for a lifetime. We think that college doesn't give anything special to students with ID, instead we think it gives them something that everyone else that goes to college gets; the opportunity to learn about yourself, get a better job, and quite possibly grow up a little bit.

Who knew an art history class had so much to offer?

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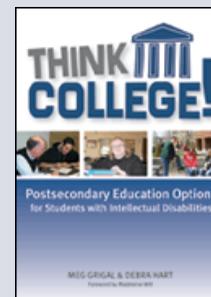
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For more information, contact Meg Grigal, PhD, Institute for Community Inclusion, UMass Boston, (617) 287-4300 • email: [megrigal@verizon.net](mailto:megrigal@verizon.net)

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## **Think College!**

### **Postsecondary Education Options for Students with Intellectual Disabilities**

**By Meg Grigal, PhD, & Debra Hart, MEd**

**Foreword: Madeleine C. Will**

"Tremendous ... will become a milestone in the field filled with both concrete information and materials as well as a vision and plan for the future."

—George Jesien, PhD, Executive Director  
Association of University Centers on Disabilities (AUCD)

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