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The Promise of Postsecondary Education for Students With Intellectual Disability

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The Promise of Postsecondary Education for Students With Intellectual Disability

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Despite years of investment in special education, students with intellectual disability (ID) have consistently had the lowest rates of education, work, or preparation for work after high school of all disability groups (Migliore, Butterworth, & Hart, 2009). The national employment rate for transition-aged individuals (ages sixteen to twenty-one) with ID is a meager 18%, or less than half the employment rate for people without disabilities (Butterworth et al., 2013). Lack of opportunity to participate in higher education or meaningful paid work has led to long-term inadequacy and inequality in these students' education and employment outcomes.

Historically, the education of secondary students with ID has primarily consisted of functional or life skills programs and community-based instruction in employment, community mobility, recreation, and daily living (Billingsley & Albertson, 1999). Over time, these programs were expanded to include some inclusive academic and social activities during the secondary (14–17) and transition (18–21) years (Agran, Snow, & Swaner, 1999; Tashie, Malloy, & Lichtenstein, 1998). With school-to-work initiatives and increased focus on transition to adult life more students with ID were provided with work-based learning opportunities (Benz, Yovanoff, & Doren, 1997). Despite these programmatic changes at the secondary level, the majority of students with ID still exited public school without a standard high-school diploma or GED (McFarland et al., 2017) and without the skills to get paid work or to move on to further education (Grigal, Hart, & Migliore, 2011). In many cases, students with ID exiting school receive no vocational services, and few are provided with independent living options (Noyes & Sax, 2004).

Postsecondary education has emerged as a pathway to desirable life outcomes for individuals with ID. Whether as a location for providing transition services or as a postschool outcome of secondary education, enrolling in higher education allows individuals with ID to engage in further learning, prepare for independent living, and develop skills that they can use

to gain competitive employment (Grigal & Hart, 2010). College experiences offer students an array of campus-based activities including access to typical college courses, engagement in job training and internships, and in some cases, support to attain paid employment. According to Think College, a national organization dedicated to developing, expanding, and improving higher education options for individuals with ID, there were 268 programs in the United States offering access to higher education for students with ID at the end of 2017 (Think College, 2017).

One manner in which students with ID are increasingly accessing higher education is via college-based transition services. College-based transition services, sometimes referred to as dual enrollment or concurrent enrollment experiences, provide opportunities for transition-age youth with ID between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two who receive their final 2–3 years of transition services in a college or university setting. Most college-based transition programs are operated and funded by school districts, though some have been established via federal or state grants (Grigal, Paiewonsky, & Hart, 2017). In some cases, school systems use these programs as out-of-district placements (Grigal & Hart, 2010) and in others, costs will be shared between the school system and the college (Conroy, Hanson, Butler, & Paiewonsky, 2013).

As noted by Poppen and Alverson in Chapter 5 of this issue, existing legislation clearly provides a mandate for work-based outcomes for students with disabilities. However, there is little specific guidance in these laws on supporting youth with ID to obtain postsecondary education. The passage of the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act of 1965 as the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) of 2008 addressed this need, providing unprecedented guidance related to students with ID and access to higher education (Lee, 2009).

Higher Education Opportunity Act (2008)

In 2008, the Higher Education Act was reauthorized as the Higher Education Opportunity Act (Public Law 110-315) (HEOA, 2008) and included, for the first time, provisions to increase access to higher education by students with ID. Prior to the reauthorization in 2008, students with ID were blocked from accessing Title IV student aid for postsecondary education due to two student eligibility criteria; having a high-school diploma or its equivalent and matriculating toward a degree. The HEOA (2008) removed these barriers by defining that a financially eligible student with ID can access federal financial aid if they enroll in an approved Comprehensive Postsecondary and Transition (CTP) Program. Under HEOA, a student with intellectual disability means a student—

- A. with a cognitive impairment, characterized by significant limitations in—
 - i. intellectual and cognitive functioning; and
 - ii. adaptive behavior as expressed in conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills; and

- B. who is currently, or was formerly, eligible for a free appropriate public education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [20 U.S.C. 1400 et seq.]. (20 U.S.C. § 1140 (2)).

A CTP program is defined as program to support students with ID in academic, career and technical, and independent living instruction at an IHE in order to prepare for competitive employment. As of February 2018, there are seventy-three approved CTPs. At these approved programs, eligible students with ID are able to access certain types of federal student aid (Pell Grants, Supplemental Education Opportunity Grants, and federal work-study, but not loans) to support their studies.

The HEOA (2008) also authorized a model demonstration program, Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) to create or expand inclusive higher education programs for students with ID. In FY2010, the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education awarded \$10.5 million to twenty-seven TPSID grantees. These grants were implemented between 2010 and 2015 at fifty-two colleges and universities across twenty-three states. In FY2015, \$9.8 million was awarded to a further twenty-five grantees, with TPSID projects currently being implemented between 2015 and 2020 at more than forty colleges and universities in nineteen states. The HEOA authorized the establishment of a corresponding National Coordinating Center (NCC) for the TPSID program, and this was awarded in both funding cycles to Think College at the Institute for Community Inclusion and the University of Massachusetts Boston. The TPSID NCC is charged with providing technical assistance to and evaluation of the TPSID projects.

Impact of the HEOA

Data collected by the NCC represent the largest and most comprehensive source of information on postsecondary education for students with ID in the United States. An evaluation tool developed by the NCC and approved by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) was designed to gather information on both students and programs. Student data included the characteristics of students attending TPSID programs and detailed information about their academic access, employment and career development, and campus membership. Program data included the extent to which TPSID programs are integrated into the existing policies and practices of the college, credentials that are offered to students, supports for students to obtain employment during the program and after graduation, and efforts at collaborating with internal and external partners. The tool was used to gather information annually on programs and students from the first cohort of TPSID projects (2010–2015). The tool was updated in 2015 and continues to be used to enter data by the second cohort of TPSID projects (2015–2020). In the following sections, we provide a summary of key findings from both cohorts of TPSID projects.

Comprehensive reports on findings can be found in Grigal, Hart, Smith, Domin, and Weir (2016) and Grigal, Hart, Papay, and Smith (2018).

TPSID Cohort 1, 2010–2015. Across the first 5 years of the TPSID program, the twenty-seven model demonstration projects were implemented at fifty-two colleges and universities. These consisted of fourteen 2-year institutions of higher education (IHEs) and thirty-eight 4-year IHEs. Eighteen of the programs were approved as CTPs to offer federal student aid to students with ID. Between half and two-thirds of TPSID programs located at residential campuses offered access to campus housing to students with ID. Over the course of the 5 years, 2,245 students attended TPSID programs, an average of seventeen to nineteen students per campus each year. Between one fifth and one quarter of students were dually enrolled each year, meaning that these students were still receiving special education services from their local educational agency (LEA) while also enrolling in postsecondary education. Most students were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five and slightly more students were male than female.

Academic Access. Colleges and universities serving students with ID, including TPSID programs, offer varying options for those students to access academic coursework. All TPSID programs offer access to at least some inclusive college courses—courses that are offered by the IHE for any student to enroll in. Students with ID enroll in these courses either for credit or audit. In a course taken for audit, the course requirements or evaluation might be modified to meet the goals and abilities of a student with ID. In a course taken for credit, the student with ID is expected to adhere to the same requirements as all students and is evaluated in the same manner. Some IHEs also offer specialized courses—courses that are offered only to students with ID and that teach career, independent living, or social skill instruction. In these courses, students with ID are grouped together and segregated instructionally from their peers without disability.

Across the first 5 years of TPSID funding, students enrolled in over 10,000 inclusive college courses. The percentage of course enrollments in inclusive courses ranged from 38% in year 1 to 45% in year 5. About half of all inclusive college courses were taken for standard IHE credit. The subject matter of inclusive courses taken for credit ranged widely and included topics such as Art History, Animal Biology, Game Programming, Children's Literature, Developmental Mathematics, and Tourism Management. The diversity of topics reflects the range of interest and ability of the enrolled students with ID. Almost all students received accommodations to support their access to inclusive classes. These included both academic accommodations, for example notetakers, readers, access to instructor or peer notes, advance access to materials, and alternative test formats, as well as enrollment accommodations, for example modified course loads, priority registration, and substitutes for required courses.

Employment. The stated purpose of TPSID model demonstration program is to prepare students with ID for competitive employment, thus a focus on

career development and employment is evident throughout the TPSID projects. Given that the strongest predictor of future employment is past employment (e.g., Mamun, Carter, Fraker, & Timmins, 2017), the NCC was particularly interested in the paid employment experiences that students with ID had while enrolled in postsecondary education. Across the 5 years, 846 students had paid employment while enrolled in postsecondary education. The percentage of students at TPSID programs who were engaged in paid employment increased from 30% in year 1 to 39% in year 5. The proportion of students who were paid less than minimum wage decreased during this same time period from more than 20% to 6%, a substantial improvement but still concerning given that no individual should be paid less than minimum wage. Students typically worked between 5 and 20 hours per week. TPSID programs also offered a range of unpaid career development experiences, such as volunteering and/or community service, service learning, unpaid internships either for credit or not for credit, and individual work training. The participation of students in these career development experiences increased from 52% in year 1 to 60% in year 5.

Credential Attainment. Students completing a higher education program are typically awarded a credential that provides verification of qualification or competency by the IHE. This might be a diploma, certificate, or degree. As directed by the HEOA (2008), TPSID programs are required to create and offer a meaningful credential for students with ID that can be earned upon completion of a TPSID program. The NCC provides guidance and technical assistance to programs, including TPSID programs, on developing meaningful credentials for students with ID (Shanley, Weir, & Grigal, 2014). The percentage of TPSID programs offering a credential in the first 5 years ranged from 86% to 92% and over 1,000 students earned a credential upon exit. The most frequently awarded credentials were certificates awarded by the IHE only to those students in the TPSID program. In year 5, 80% of students exiting TPSID programs earned a credential.

Outcomes. The percentage of students employed within 90 days of exit grew from 16% in year 1 to 40% in year 5. Furthermore, the percentage of students engaged in unpaid career development experiences at exit increased from 14% in year 1 to 60% in year 5¹. Combined, the percentage of students who were engaged in *either* paid employment *or* career development within 90 days of exit was 76% in year 5. Data on outcomes of students beyond the point of exit were not sanctioned in the first 5 years of funding; however, outcome data are beginning to be reported by Cohort 2 TPSID programs (see below).

TPSID Cohort 2, 2010–2015. Although data collection is ongoing, initial findings suggest that the positive trends that began with the first cohort of TPSID programs are continuing in the second cohort. In year 1 of Cohort 2 (2015–2016), the twenty-five TPSID grants were implemented at forty-four IHEs, consisting of ten 2-year and thirty-four 4-year colleges and universities. Of these, twelve were approved as CTPs, and seventeen of the thirty-four

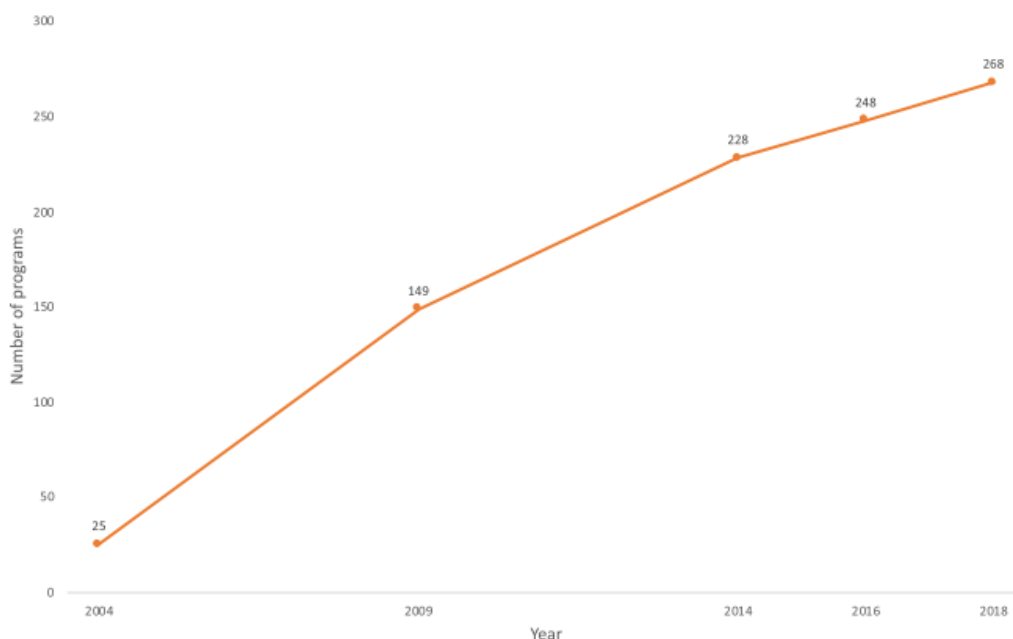
residential campuses offered access to campus housing for students with ID. These Cohort 2 TPSID programs enrolled 449 students in year 1 (2015–2016), of which 31% were dually enrolled and receiving special education services from their LEA. Overall, 43% of course enrollments were in inclusive college courses, a slight decrease from the final year of Cohort 1. However, 43% of students had a paid job, an increase from Cohort 1. In terms of credentials, a slight increase in the percentage of programs offering a certificate available to all students was noted between the final year of Cohort 1 (25% of programs) to the first year of Cohort 2 (32% of programs), suggesting that the second cohort of TPSID programs are planning for inclusive credentials from the start. For the first time, the NCC is permitted and required to report on postexit outcomes of students with ID who complete a TPSID program. Initial findings indicate that 61% of students who completed a Cohort 2 TPSID program have a paid job 1 year after program completion (Papay, Trivedi, Smith, & Grigal, 2017). This is in stark contrast to the 17% of adults with developmental disabilities in the general population who have a paid job (National Core Indicators, 2017).

Emerging Practices and Promising Research

The changes brought forth by the HEOA such as the funding and implementation of the TPSID model demonstration projects and the creation of the NCC are substantial. Greater numbers of students with ID are now being provided with pathways to and through higher education. Over 2,700 students have accessed higher education via the TPSID model demonstration program at eighty-eight college and university campuses. Additionally, significant growth has been seen in published research focusing on higher education for students with ID (Grigal, Hart, and Papay (in press). Throughout the United States, the TPSID funding has led to increased efforts to address this issue, with states agencies developing policies, scholarship opportunities, and strategic planning activities. Although the programs funded by the TPSID program represent a significant federal investment, there are many programs that have been developed outside of this funding source. While not all programs share their enrollment numbers, those that have included program enrollment information in the national directory of programs reflect that over 5,000 students with intellectual and developmental disabilities have attended higher education programs in the United States (Think College, 2017). This growth in enrollment can largely be attributed to the growth in program options, which have risen 78% since the passage of the HEOA in 2008 (see Figure 6.1).

However, program availability and student access are not sufficient to ensure that higher education offers the same benefits to students with ID that are available to students with other and without disabilities. In the following sections, we discuss critical issues that remain to be addressed including credential development, accreditation, and employment outcomes.

Figure 6.1. Growth in higher education programs for students with intellectual disability in the United States 2004–2018



Credential Development. Higher education credentials are currently experiencing their own transformation (Williamson & Pittinsky, 2016). With the emergence of subbaccalaureate credentials and the renewed emphasis on supporting access to middle skill jobs, as well as the growth of online education options, there is an evolving landscape for those seeking to go to college for something other than a degree (Gast, 2013). Additionally, the focus included in the WIOA (2014) on preparing students with disabilities for postsecondary education has tremendous implications for the field of inclusive higher education. The TPSID model demonstration projects were charged with creating and offering a meaningful credential to be earned by students with ID upon completion of the model program. A credential awarded by a postsecondary provider signifies that an individual has mastered or achieved a specified body of knowledge or acquired a specific skill set—it raises expectations by others, such as employers, that individuals who have exited a program have attained or mastered a certain level of competence (Ganzglass, Bird, & Prince, 2011).

A survey conducted by the National Coordinating Center of the TPSID model demonstration projects indicated that there was little consistency across programs regarding the name or types of credentials being offered. Some credential titles were general in nature, such as “career readiness credential,” or a “workforce credential, and certificate”—a sequential program in learning and life skills—whereas others were more specific to the career content of the TPSID program, such as “child development assistant teacher” or “office skills training certificate.” Few of the TPSID programs had conducted any kind of labor market analysis to ensure that the credential would lead to future

employment, and only about one third indicated that they solicited feedback from business leaders.

Future efforts will need to be focused on helping all programs consider what kind of culminating documentation their program affords to students and how that documentation will be perceived by employers and other IHEs. The development of an array of credential pathways at IHEs is likely to be seen in the next decade of progress in these programs—some addressing industry specific occupational preparation and others addressing more traditional academic or liberal arts credentials. Ideally, as this development occurs, these credentials will become transferrable between IHEs so that students with ID have the option to build or stack their credentials over time, as do other college students.

Advancing Toward an Accreditation Process. Typically, in order for a college or university to offer access to federal student aid (financial aid), the IHE must be accredited. The goal of accreditation is to ensure that education provided by IHEs meets acceptable levels of quality. Accrediting agencies, which are private educational associations of regional or national scope, develop evaluation criteria and conduct peer evaluations to assess whether those criteria are met. Institutions and/or programs that request an agency's evaluation and that meet an agency's criteria are then accredited by that agency. Programs that are serving students with ID currently fall under the existing institutional accreditation of their host institution if they have been approved as a CTP.

Between 2010–2015, the National Coordinating Center convened an expert workgroup and developed and sought public input on model accreditation standards for higher education programs serving students with ID (National Coordinating Center Accreditation Workgroup, 2016). These model standards were published and a report on their creation was submitted to the Secretary of Education and to Congress. Building on those efforts, the current NCC accreditation workgroup (2015–2020) sought additional input from the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI). NACIQI provides recommendations regarding accrediting agencies that monitor the academic quality of postsecondary institutions and educational programs for federal purposes. Based upon this input, the NCC has revised the model accreditation standards and is currently creating a pilot process to assess these standards and their applicability in various higher education program models throughout the United States.

Once model accreditation standards for postsecondary education programs for students with ID are finalized, it will be necessary to either identify an existing accrediting entity or develop a new program accreditor to implement these standards with IHEs. The model standards will create a quality benchmark for programs that will be useful to institutions, students, and parents. It will also provide legitimacy for programs that meet the standards and guidelines for colleges and universities considering establishing high-quality programs.

Improved Practices to Support Paid Employment. Given the poor employment outcomes for transitioning youth and adults with ID, it is imperative that any postsecondary program include in its purview a strong focus on employment. The charge from the Office of Postsecondary Education was for TPSID programs to “provide a focus on . . . integrated work experiences and career development skills that lead to gainful employment” (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The data reflect that the majority of the TPSID grantees did incorporate work experiences and career development activities into students’ programs of study. And, over time, the rate of student employment while attending the TPSID programs program has grown from 27% in 2010–2011 to 43% in 2015–2016. It is critical that these efforts continue to address employment within the context of college and that the number of student employed both during and after they leave their college program continue to grow.

There is a balance of needs that must be met to achieve this outcome, as some students entering the TPSID programs have never worked prior to accessing college experiences (Grigal et al., 2016). Therefore, most programs must put effort into career-orienting activities such as helping students establish their career interests via situational assessment and job shadowing, as well as engaging students in time-limited job tryouts. However, if these programs delay access to competitive integrated employment until students leaving the program, we may see the same subpar employment outcomes that have been experienced by students with ID as they transition out of the K-12 system. Given that paid employment history is a key predictor of future employment, students should access real employment experiences during their college program to ensure that they have the best chance of being employed not only when their program is completed but also in the following years (Carter, Austin, & Trainor, 2012; Mamun et al., 2017; Wehman, Sima, Ketchum, West., & Chan, 2015).

Many of the postsecondary education programs that existed prior to the passage of the HEOA purported to focus on employment (Grigal, Hart, & Weir, 2012); however, many of these programs implemented the same dated and ineffective practices widely used in secondary education (Grigal & Hart, 2010). Students and families approaching colleges and universities should ask about the employment component of programs they are considering, the rate of employed enrolled students, and those employed after graduation. Colleges that support students with ID must work with their partners in both K-12 transition and with adult services and rehabilitation agencies to ensure that college personnel are aware of the most relevant and effective customized employment strategies as part of their career services (Dwyre & Deschamps, 2013).

Impact on Systems Change and Future Funding. Given the promise that postsecondary education has for improving the outcomes of people with ID, it is heartening to see that this system change movement has shown an impact on state and federal policy. Although the TPSID funding has so far been limited to thirty-one states and only eighty-eight college and universities, the past 8 years have witnessed a growth in interest and engagement of state

vocational rehabilitation (VR) systems and state legislatures and the emergence of a population of parents and students who are approaching life after high school with very different expectations than those whose children left high school just a decade ago. As of June 2017, fourteen states have developed state policy, created scholarship funds, or established task forces on the topic of inclusive higher education for students with ID (Rozell & Nagaraj, 2017).

For example, in Colorado, in June of 2016, the legislature passed SB 196: Inclusive Higher Education Act. This legislation funded a pilot program at three universities (University of Northern Colorado, University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, and Arapahoe Community College) and required these IHEs to collaborate with Colorado Department of Labor and Employment to identify VR supports and opportunities. Similar bills have been introduced in Maryland and Massachusetts (Rozell & Nagaraj, 2017). The emergence of policy and legislation in states supporting access to higher education will have a large impact on potential collaboration between state and local education agencies, IHEs and the state agencies that typically provide support for students with ID as they enter adulthood. The potential to blend and braid services from each of these entities promises to enhance the capacity of each partner to better prepare students with ID to access higher education, and equally importantly, to allow students with ID to glean the most positive outcomes from their postsecondary education experiences. Aptly put by Madeleine Will, “*Postsecondary education is a most important key to shaping a new reality for people with disabilities. It has the exciting potential to create a future based not on low expectations, the can’t’s and shouldn’t, but on the high expectations of productivity and personal and economic freedom*” (Will, 2010 p.xii).

Note

1. Note that these data are descriptive as tests of statistical significance to examine change over time are currently in preparation.

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