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Building Collaborative Partnerships to Increase Postsecondary Education Opportunities for Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

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ABSTRACT: Transitioning from high school to the next phase of life can be especially challenging for youth with intellectual and other developmental disabilities (IDD). Federal mandates are in place to provide individualized transition services to students with disabilities up to age 22; however, there is variability in the location of service delivery. A growing number of school districts have partnered with institutions of higher education (IHE) in an effort to enhance postsecondary education (PSE) opportunities for individuals with IDD who are between the ages of 18-21. While there are some differences in PSE programs, the core foundational component is constant across models: establishing and maintaining collaborative partnerships between school districts and IHE. This paper describes PSE program models and highlights the necessity to continue to build partnerships in an effort to expand PSE opportunities for young adults with IDD.

NAPDS Nine Essentials: 1. A comprehensive mission that is broader in its outreach and scope than the mission of any partner and that furthers the education profession and its responsibility to advance equity within schools and, by potential extension, the broader community; 4. A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants; 7. A structure that allows all participants a forum for ongoing governance, reflection, and collaboration; 8. Work by college/university faculty and P-12 faculty in formal roles across institutional settings; 9. Dedicated and shared resources and formal rewards and recognition structures.

Graduating from high school and transitioning to the next phase of life is a time of excitement and adventure for many young adults as they embrace increased levels of independence. However, young people with disabilities often face multifaceted challenges as they navigate through this critical transitional period (Wehman, 2013). Consequently, postschool outcomes are far less favorable for young adults with disabilities in comparison to their typically developing peers (Test et al., 2009a). To demonstrate, in analyzing employment-population ratios, the U.S. Department of Labor (2019) reported only 19.3% of individuals with disabilities were employed, compared to 66.3% of persons without an identified disability. Across categorical labels, those diagnosed with intellectual and other developmental disabilities (IDD; e.g., autism spectrum disorder) are faced with increased postschool challenges, particularly in the area of employment (Test et al., 2009a; Walker et al., 2010).

In an effort to better prepare transition-age youth with disabilities, federal mandates are in place to ensure students with disabilities begin receiving individualized transition services no later than age 16. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004), transition services are defined as:

A coordinated set of activities for a student with a disability that is designed to be within a results-oriented process that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child's movement from school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education, vocational education, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation. (300.42[a][1])

Under IDEA, students with disabilities are eligible to receive special education services up to the age of 22 and the law further stipulates the necessity to educate students with disabilities in educational settings with their typically developing peers to the greatest extent possible (IDEA, 2004). However, finding an appropriate educational placement for students who continue to receive special education services beyond their eighteenth birthday can be a challenge (Papay & Bambara, 2011; Zager & Alpern, 2010). In an effort to ameliorate this problem while staying in compliance with the federal law, a growing number of school

districts have begun collaborating and developing partnerships with institutions of higher education (IHE) to provide postsecondary education (PSE) opportunities for students with IDD (Cranston-Gingras et al., 2015; Grigal et al., 2001; Zager & Alpern, 2010). Community colleges and universities can serve as unique learning environments for all involved when young adults with IDD interact with college-aged peers and simultaneously have access to many application-based job skill opportunities across campus (Cranston-Gingras et al., 2015). These PSE programs are premised on community inclusion and inclusivity in higher education (Grigal et al., 2011).

Collaborative Partnerships Between K-12 Schools and Institutes of Higher Education

Developing collaborative partnerships between school districts and IHE to meet the educational needs of students with disabilities between the ages of 18-21 is not a novel idea; PSE programs for students with IDD emerged in the 1970s (Papay & Bambara, 2011). Over the past several decades, a growing number of school districts have partnered with two- and four-year IHEs to increase transition opportunities for students and promote inclusion across college campuses (Cranston-Gingras et al., 2015; Grigal et al., 2001; Papay & Bambara, 2011). In the spirit of IDEA and its requirements for individualization, it is not surprising that there are notable differences across various program models and goals within (Zager & Alpern, 2010). In fact, PSE programs, as a whole, are defined rather loosely. For instance, some PSE programs include daily travel to campus settings for community-based instruction with the primary educational placement remaining in a separate location (e.g., high school; Grigal et al., 2012).

On the other hand, PSE programs have also been described as arrangements in which young adults who are no longer enrolled in K-12 education are enrolled at an IHE (Grigal et al., 2012). While there is some overlap between the described programs (Grigal et al., 2012), this article focuses on campus-based PSE programs for students who still receive special education services under IDEA. In addition to clearly defining PSE options for students with IDD, we will explain the rationale behind offering such programs and the essential collaborative partnership that must exist to ensure success between public schools and IHEs.

According to Cranston-Gingras et al. (2015), when school districts and community colleges or universities come together to collaboratively build a PSE program, the purpose is threefold. The first purpose for collaboratively developing PSE programs is to increase levels of independent functioning in students with IDD. The second purpose is to support inclusive education, communication, and social opportunities with same-aged peers. Finally, the third purpose is to increase natural, community-based experiences with a heavy emphasis on employment training (Cranston-Gingras et al., 2015). Exposure to hands-on work experiences during transition years has been shown to

result in more favorable postschool outcomes in young adults with disabilities (Test et al., 2009b).

Postsecondary Education Options Driven by Collaborative Partnerships

An explanation of the various types of PSE programs is warranted in order to distinguish one program type from another. One model of PSE programming follows guidelines and instills quality indicators to ensure compliance with the eight Think College (TC) Standards (please see below) developed by the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston (Grigal et al., 2011; Lynch & Getzel, 2013).

1. Standard 1: Academic Access
2. Standard 2: Career Development
3. Standard 3: Campus Membership
4. Standard 4: Self-Determination
5. Standard 5: Alignment with College Systems and Practices
6. Standard 6: Coordination and Collaboration
7. Standard 7: Sustainability
8. Standard 8: Ongoing Evaluation

Following the inclusive TC framework, transition-age students (18-22) with disabilities attend college classes and are immersed in the campus community and experience an authentic college experience (Lynch & Getzel, 2013). This type of PSE program includes dually enrolled students with IDD, meaning students are registered in both credit-bearing and non-credit bearing university courses (i.e., attend a college course for socialization purposes) while simultaneously receiving special education services through K-12 education (Grigal et al., 2012; Lynch & Getzel, 2013).

A second model of PSE programming involves a partnership between a school district and a local community college or university whereby the K-12 program has a transition classroom located on a college or university campus and students with IDD receive transition services in various settings across the location (Cranston-Gingras et al., 2015). This model concentrates more on pre-employment training while also focusing on natural and age-appropriate social experiences with same-aged college students. Premised on many of the same principles, both PSE models are driven by self-determination and inclusion with an outcome goal of increasing competitive employment in young adults with IDD. When implementing the partnership model, students with IDD receive transition services under IDEA at the IHE.

However, unlike programs following the TC framework, the extent of inclusivity in the partnership model typically does not include Standard 1: Academic Access or Standard 5: Alignment with College Systems and Practices. Instead, students work on individualized goals with school-employed staff in a classroom setting in addition to campus-based community settings. Similar to the TC model, the partnership model is a student-centered approach to learning that values community inclusion and strives

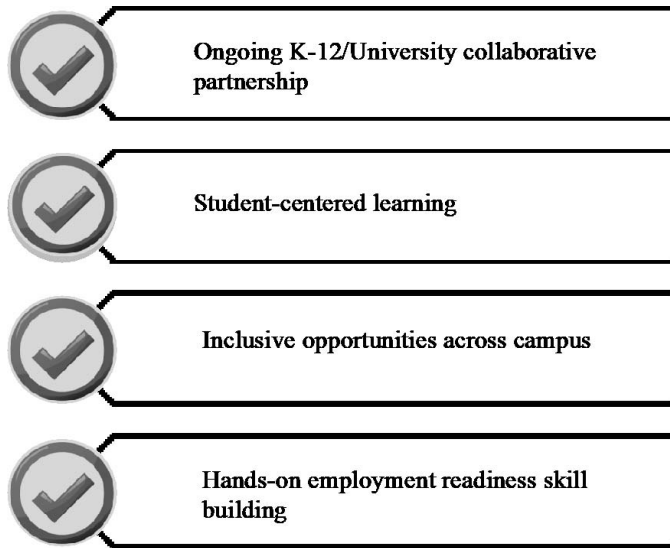


Figure 1. Postsecondary Education Program Recommendations

Note. Postsecondary education program recommendations target students with intellectual and other developmental disabilities.

to prepare students for competitive employment. With a variety of PSE program options available, it is essential for school districts to consider all options and available opportunities for students with IDD during the critical postsecondary transition period and make informed decisions based on individualized student needs.

Establishing School District-Higher Education Partnerships

Initiating a PSE partnership between a school district and an IHE begins with a formal agreement between the two parties (Cranston-Gingras et al., 2015). Both the school district and the community college or university must be open to engaging in a collaborative partnership that revolves around the core ideals of inclusion and continuing education, regardless of where the learning takes place (e.g., college classroom, campus-based work environment). In order to maintain this partnership, school district and university personnel must establish and maintain ongoing lines of open communication. As needs change at the university and district level, both partners must be able to collaborate to make necessary adjustments to ensure continuous program improvement. Figure 1 offers recommendations for successful implementation of PSE programs for young adults with IDD.

Concluding Thoughts

Individuals with IDD are vastly underrepresented in the area of postschool employment (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019). Skills developed during the transition years help build a strong foundation that can last a lifetime. Community college and university campuses offer countless application-based job skill opportunities for young adults with IDD in an integrated environment (Cranston-Gingras et al., 2015). Increasing collab-

orative partnerships between school districts and IHEs may be the key to improving postschool employment rates in individuals with IDD. Campus-based learning environments foster age-appropriate social interactions, employment-related skill development, and continuous implementation opportunities in the natural environment. Extending transition services to include placements at IHEs increases opportunities provided by public school systems. PSE programs open doors for young adults with IDD and have the potential to offer life-changing experiences to students while simultaneously improving postschool outcomes.

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