

The Inclusive Higher Education Imperative: Promoting Long-Term Postsecondary Success for Students with Intellectual Disabilities in the COVID-19 Era

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Despite a growing societal commitment to include students with intellectual disabilities (ID) on college and university campuses, including a robust proliferation of programs in recent years, postsecondary outcomes for these students lag far behind those of non-disabled students and students with other types of disabilities. This article establishes the need for inclusive higher education programming for students with ID, examines current best practices among colleges and universities in preparing students with ID for adult life roles such as independent living and employment, and describes an innovative statewide support model that is currently being implemented in Kentucky. Implications for delivering inclusive higher education programs in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic are emphasized throughout the article.

Keywords: *poverty, race, disability, vocational rehabilitation*

Increasing emphasis on higher education reflects a shift in the future occupational outlook in the United States. Advances in technology will result in fewer jobs in manufacturing and other customer support occupations, but they will lead to growth in business, science, and other professional fields (Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2020). The importance of postsecondary education for obtaining employment among transition-aged youth was clearly demonstrated in 2019 U.S. Department of Education data, which showed that the employment rate for 25 to 34-year olds with a Bachelor's degree or higher was over 87%, compared to only 74% among those who had only completed high school.

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For persons with disabilities, who are significantly less likely to have completed a bachelor's degree than those with no disability (BLS, 2019), this situation has dire implications. In 2019, only 19.3% of adults with disabilities (ages 25 and over) held a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 38.5% of individuals without disabilities (BLS, 2019). This lack of engagement and achievement in postsecondary education is directly reflected in disparities in employment for people with disabilities. For example, in 2019, only 19.3% of people with disabilities ages 16-64 were employed, compared with 66.3% of those without disabilities (BLS, 2019). Further, the jobless rates were higher for persons with disabilities in all educational attainment groups, and 32% of workers with disabilities were employed part-time, compared to 17% for those with no disability (BLS, 2019). Employment rates for individuals with disabilities have been significantly impacted during the COVID pandemic, as they have for everyone, but there are differences in

how employment has been affected for individuals with and without disabilities. For example, the greatest decline in employment for individuals with disabilities during the pandemic occurred within the professional and business service industries, job sectors in which one might expect there would be significant opportunity to work remotely (Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2020).

In Kentucky, the employment rate of individuals with disabilities stands at 29.4% compared to a 75.7% employment rate for individuals without disabilities (Boege et al., 2020). For persons with intellectual disabilities (ID), the education and employment gaps are even wider, particularly with respect to competitive employment. According to the 2020 National Core Indicators (NCI) Report, only 19% of adults with ID nationally held a paid job in the community; for Kentucky, the paid, integrated employment rate was only 7%.

In Kentucky, students with ID are significantly underrepresented in higher education. In school year 2017-2018, while 1,087 students with ID exited Kentucky school districts, only 7% of those students enrolled at a college or a university (Kentucky Post School Outcomes Center [KYPSO], 2020). This lack of equitable access and opportunity to be successful in higher education is a longstanding and pervasive problem, and this reality for students with ID stands in stark contrast to what we know about postsecondary education and the job market (Carnevale et al., 2013), with the greatest growth occurring in careers requiring advanced preparation, interpersonal, written and spoken communication, and leadership skills (DeSilver, 2016).

Although an intention to pursue higher education is the strongest predictor of actually going on to college (LoBianco & Kleintert, 2013), unfortunately, the expectation that students with ID will attend college has often not been shared by families, teachers, or other education and rehabilitation professionals (Sheppard-Jones et al., 2015). When combined with a lack of awareness about existing programs or opportunities, the result is a transition process that is fragmented and inconsistent across systems. Yet, despite the challenges faced by many students with ID seeking to access higher education, research clearly shows that many of those students who do ultimately experience success (Grigal et al., 2019).

However, students with disabilities, particularly students with ID, continue to lag behind their non-disabled peers in terms of post-school outcomes, including postsecondary education (PSE) and employment (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019; Qian et al., 2018). Southward & Kyzar (2017) found that PSE was one of the most powerful predictors of obtaining employment for students with ID. Yet, in a review of National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS-2) data, Lipscomb et al. (2017) found that only 50% of students with ID expected to attend college, and only 30% of their families expected them to attend. The percentage of students with ID who actually attend college is much lower— at 8% nationally (Qian et al., 2018).

For students with ID, college is an important, albeit underutilized, place to develop academic and personal skills, self-advocacy, and increase self-confidence (Grigal et al., 2019; Griffin & Papay, 2017). College is also where students can learn skills and

gain experiences to support their career goals. In a survey of parents of culturally diverse 18 to 22-year-olds with ID who attended a two-year comprehensive transition program (CTP) at Virginia Commonwealth University, Yarbrough (2019) found that students were successful when they had access to (a) technology, (b) appropriate supports, and (c) professors who had training on how to teach to diverse learners. Many parents noted that the lack of college goals on IEPs was a barrier to college transition; students, parents and teachers often were not aware of college opportunities in their community or state. Parents in this study suggested that information on college programs for students with ID should come from the college to their local school districts (Yarbrough, 2019). Other research supports these findings. In a 2018 study, Kentucky-Works found that one of the most significant barriers to students with ID enrolling in postsecondary education was lack of knowledge, information, and communication about higher education options. Other identified barriers were lack of funding along with a lack of available programs. Thus, more intentional effort must be made to, among other things, increase awareness of postsecondary options and opportunities for students with ID.

The lack of opportunity to be successful in higher education for individuals with ID is a longstanding and pervasive problem in Kentucky. However, a combination of initiatives and priorities that have strong themes around equity and access are present in the state. These efforts include Kentucky's designation as an Employment First state, Kentucky's strategic plan for education and workforce development, and multiple statewide stakeholder groups that focus on disability and employment. The emergence of concerted information sharing and awareness cuts across systems and sectors, including education, higher education, workforce development, and disability service systems.

The development of a statewide, cross-systems approach that is implemented around employment can deliver on the promise of increasing higher education opportunity and success for students with ID, many of whom live in economically distressed communities, and, thereby, improve their employment outcomes, the trajectory of their lives, and the next generation of their families. In a time when the novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is reshaping how work and learning take place, there is no better opportunity to further explore how to reap the rewards of higher education for all.

A National Perspective on Inclusive Higher Education

The Higher Education Opportunities Act (HEOA) of 2008 created Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary Programs (CTPs). CTPs opened the door to higher education for students with ID and set expectations for colleges and universities around ensuring that a meaningful credential was awarded at the completion of a student's course of study. CTPs provide a framework for higher education for students with intellectual disabilities (ID). Administered through the Federal Student Aid Office at the US Department of Education, CTPs enable eligible students to access federal and state financial aid. Financial assistance may include Pell grants, Supplemental Education Opportunity grants and work-study opportunities. Of potentially greater importance, when

considering continuing education options after high school, is the opportunity for students with ID to continue their academic, career and technical, and independent living instruction at a college or university in preparation for employment. The CTP structure serves as a map in this next step into postsecondary education for students with ID.

Just as no one college or university can meet the needs and interests of all students, CTPs have become operationalized in different ways. An understanding of the various models of postsecondary options is needed to better understand the different approaches that have been undertaken. States and institutions of higher education (IHEs) have developed model programs that reflect varied approaches. Through federal funding tied to 2008's HEOA, approximately 300 programs for students with ID exist across the United States (Think College, 2021). This figure is at least 10 times greater than the number of programs that were in existence in 2004 (Griffin & Papay, 2017). Program models, in terms of the classes that students with ID take on campus, fall into one of three types: wholly segregated, wholly inclusive, or hybrid (Grigal & Hart, 2009). All campus-based programs for students with ID are intended to provide opportunities for interaction with non-disabled students in activities outside of class. Levels of cross systems collaboration can also vary widely.

Research has continuously shown a positive link between PSE attendance and the post-college employment rate and earnings of individuals with ID (Grigal et al., 2019; Prohn et al., 2018; Qian et al., 2018; Southward & Kizer, 2017). However, there are also specific characteristics that can be identified to predict desired employment statuses (i.e., earning at or above minimum wage in a competitive integrated setting). For example, Qian et al. (2018) found that students who took *only* inclusive classes (with non-disabled students), had paid work experience before attending college, and/or participated in volunteering or community service were the most likely to be earning at or above minimum wage upon subsequent employment. Prohn et al. (2018) found that students with ID who lived on campuses that were fully inclusive, with no separate facilities, housing, or classes, other than individualized tutoring sessions addressing specific skills, displayed more adaptive skills and had fewer support needs in their daily lives than students who did not have those same opportunities (Prohn et al., 2018).

Postsecondary education for students with ID yields a solid return on investment. In a national study of over 9,400 transition age supported employees with ID served by vocational rehabilitation, Cimera et al. (2018) found, that "individuals who had completed at least some postsecondary education were more likely to be employed, work more hours, earn more per hour, and were employed in a wider range of vocations" (p. 97) than those individuals with ID who did not. Most recently, Grigal et al. (2019) found that 64% of students who had attended a post-secondary education Transition Program for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) were employed one year after college exit. In a second, smaller sample, these authors found that 72% of former students were employed two years after exit.

In addition to the implications for employment, postsecondary education is also associated with enhancing opportunities for full

participation in the community, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (Turnbull et al., 2003). As a further example, in a pilot study comparison of quality of life outcomes of students with ID who had and had not participated in higher education Shepard-Jones et al. (2018) found significant differences in favor of young adults with ID who had attended at least two semesters of college. Improved life outcomes included significantly higher reported rates of integrated employment; more involvement in health and wellness activities; greater levels of community participation in such areas as volunteering and attending religious and faith-based activities; and more autonomy in routine decision-making.

Finally, for students with ID, attending college means breaking through a cultural barrier. Historically, students with disabilities have watched as their non-disabled peers go on to continue their education at colleges and universities, while they are left behind. There have been many gains in reversing this historical trend in the last twenty years. Now, students with ID transitioning out of secondary education are seeking inclusive college opportunities, as this represents a natural progression for students who have participated in inclusive education through elementary and secondary school (Grigal et al., 2019; Papay et al., 2018). Moreover, it is clear that college students *without* disabilities on campuses that include students with ID are also very supportive of this movement, and report gains for themselves in terms of acting as friends, mentors, study partners and supports to students with ID on campus (see Carter & McCabe, in press, for a comprehensive review of this literature).

Toward a Statewide Model of Inclusive Higher Education: An Initiative in the Commonwealth of Kentucky

In this section we describe current efforts in Kentucky to develop a statewide model of inclusive higher education. Stakeholders in creating sustainable, inclusive higher education for students with ID include state and community level partners both within and outside of the higher education system itself. At a state level, these include the state department of education, state rehabilitation agency, state developmental disability authority, state developmental disability council, and state council on postsecondary education. Community level partnerships happen 'on the ground' with local schools and school boards, colleges and universities, our state's University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (Human Development Institute [HDI] at the University of Kentucky), disability service providers, and transportation providers. At the center of all the partnerships are students with ID and their families.

We believe that the surest and most sustainable way to improve individual students' academic performance and better prepare them for successful career outcomes, responsible citizenship, and fulfilling lives is to engage with partners in efforts that lead to statewide, multi-systems and transformational change. This approach will not only improve outcomes at the student level, but will also increase the likelihood of sustaining system-wide improvements that will positively impact generations of students to come. As a result, efforts underway in Kentucky are intended to

maintain a dual focus on supporting the success of each student with ID *and* improving the system(s) in which students engage, learn, and prepare.

Given that it has been more than a decade since the 2008 reauthorization of the Higher Education Opportunities Act, the time is now to assess not only how individual pockets of inclusive higher education can be nurtured, but also how a multi-systems approach must be utilized to sustain the efforts that have made since the initiation of the national network of CTPs. The authors posit that a truly inclusive model of higher education includes features that will provide for transition from high school to postsecondary education and to the workforce. A commitment from the state General Assembly has provided funding to support development of a statewide inclusive higher education model that recognizes the need for individualized technical assistance (TA) to expand the CTP footprint across the state while also strengthening cross-system collaboration and supporting increasing numbers of students with ID to move from school to higher education to employment. The combination of individual, community, and systems level work happening simultaneously is all needed to achieve true sustainability.

At the heart of this model, we identify a set of best practices to guide the work, and we will elaborate on each in turn. These practices include: (a) development of statewide guidance driven by cross system communication; (b) expansion of a viable network of CTPs throughout the state that leverage a variety of funding mechanisms and provide diverse and multiple pathways to student success; (c) development of person centered planning and supports for every enrolled student to meet their individual academic, social, work, and other related life goals; (d) creation of a statewide mentoring network and (e) development of an inclusive higher education workforce. In the following paragraphs we describe each practice, and identify how we have adapted these practices within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Cross-System Communication

The notion of students with ID succeeding in higher education requires an expansion in thinking and practice for educators, families and students, as well as key decision-makers at every level who have both opportunity and influence related to ushering in needed change. Drawing upon strong and collaborative relationships with systems level decision-makers across nearly every sector of the state, a leadership communications network exists across the previously mentioned partners. The advocacy of these leaders within their own systems to promote increased higher education access and success for students with ID will enable a reach within their spheres of influence that would otherwise not be readily available. We enjoy open lines of communication with leaders in state government, including state lawmakers, some of whom have a deep interest in expanding opportunities for postsecondary education and employment success for students with ID and ensuring that Kentucky continues its status as an Employment First state. The urgency of the pandemic has increased these lines of communication as we work with state leaders to address the needs of individuals with ID in services and supports throughout the life span, including post-secondary education.

Although Kentucky has had some success in establishing CTP programs, with three active CTPs recruiting students at the time of this writing, maintaining the *status quo* is not sufficient to address the need for students with ID to enroll and succeed in higher education. In order to right systemic inequities, improve opportunities and success for students with ID in postsecondary education, and to achieve what Kentucky's Lieutenant Governor referred to as "lasting and transformational change", change must occur at both the student and systems levels.

Expansion of a Viable Network of CTPs

CTPs determine approaches in programming that are consistent with the missions of Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) and reflect a variety of options around the state. To further enhance capacity building efforts, leaders at existing CTPs should serve as a resource to new CTPs that are establishing programs and planning for sustainability. As one example, in Kentucky, one partner community college will provide training and support around options for partnerships with secondary schools and businesses, dual credit pathways (in which high school students are enrolled in college courses) and work-based learning opportunities in recognition of the different experiences that students with ID can attain through Kentucky's network of community and technical colleges.

Funding made available through state appropriation allows for providing TA and training for CTPs and IHEs exploring the idea of providing this opportunity. Training and implementation guidance are available on topics including (a) individual academic and social supports and services including internships and practica, extracurricular activities and other aspects of IHE 'regular' post-secondary program, (b) person-centered planning, (c) evaluation of components of the model program, (d) understanding of various pathways for participation (including opportunities for partnering with local school districts), (e) mentoring and work opportunities at IHEs, (f) elements around course delivery (including course modifications) that ensure understanding of Satisfactory Academic Progress and meaningful credentialing, and (g) embedding the CTP within the IHE for ongoing sustainability.

Direct and customized support to existing and prospective CTP programs is needed to promote a high quality and sustainable program. This includes support around continuous quality improvement as a mechanism for sustainability. Prospective IHEs also need guidance in establishing CTP programs, including information related to the benefits of CTP programs, TA in the process of applying to become an approved CTP, and the creation of a meaningful credential for students upon completion. Established CTP needs for technical assistance includes many topics, including student-centered plans of study; social and academic integration of students; building needed independent living, advocacy and work readiness skills of students; providing student accommodations, modifications to curriculum, the Summary of Academic Performance; and other identified TA needs.

Development of Person-Centered Planning and Supports

The importance of the individualized, person-centered planning process cannot be overstated. As Rubin, Roessler & Rumrill (2016) have noted, the highest leverage approach in the process of person-centered planning is to begin with a comprehensive assess-

ment of the individual's characteristics, functional capacities, values, interests, personal and social resources, and goals. The "Crux model" posited in their work emphasizes the sacrosanct ideals of consumer empowerment, self-determination, and social justice. In Kentucky, this well-validated model informs project efforts to support IHEs in developing (with students) and implementing individualized, person-centered plans designed to both articulate and facilitate the development, independent performance, mastery and maintenance of the skills students need to be informed, thoughtful, and productive individuals and citizens. Facilitated by individualized, person-centered plans and supported through mentoring, students benefit from both individualized support and the opportunity to practice and master skills included in their person-centered plans, including problem-solving, goal setting, and decision-making.

Creation of a Statewide Mentoring Network

Mentoring is an essential component of success in higher education, and one that helps to facilitate student adjustment to college life and expectations, including the development of problem-solving and other practical skills, and contributes toward students with ID being academically, functionally and socially prepared for successful career outcomes upon exit from their program. Statewide efforts can provide training and TA to increase participating IHE capacity to develop mentoring programs. The notion of a statewide mentoring network represents an elevation of mentoring and peer supports that exists when led by people with ID themselves. As is the case in many states, the Kentucky DD Network Partners (KY Protection & Advocacy, our State Developmental Disabilities Council and HDI) have identified a lack of leadership in Kentucky by individuals with disabilities as a statewide weakness (Shepard-Jones, 2019). To make strides in this area, it is necessary to utilize the skills and experiences of individuals with ID who are alumni of postsecondary education in the state, using technology to connect with mentees. This strategy has developed as a result of the COVID-19 era, in an effort to foster connections between students even as colleges and universities throughout the state and the nation continue to change their academic delivery modalities based on the still-surging incidences of new COVID-19 cases in most states.

In recognition of the diverse learning and communication preferences of mentors, different participation options will be available. Information sharing will take place through meetings, digital storytelling and resource development. This network has a built-in sustainability mechanism, as all current CTP students will have the opportunity to receive mentoring from the state mentoring network (in addition to mentorship at their IHE provided through the CTP). These students may then become mentors upon their postsecondary exit, thus further expanding the leadership network of underserved populations in Kentucky, and raising expectations for future generations of college students.

Development of an Inclusive Higher Education Workforce

A truly unique opportunity that can be highlighted through the expansion of CTPs involves training for higher education recruiting organizations. These national non-profit coalitions of colleges, universities, hospitals, research labs, and government agencies are committed to diversifying the pipeline of staff and faculty

in academia. These consortia can serve as a national information portal for trainings related to both inclusive higher education for students with ID, and to inclusive hiring, retention and advancement in higher education. State Chambers of Commerce can also play a pivotal role in ensuring that students with ID who continue on to higher education then move on to subsequent competitive integrated employment. A real job of one's choosing is the promise to be realized at the end of the postsecondary journey for students with ID. As such, higher education institutions can not only serve as models of inclusion for students with disabilities, but as model employer of staff, co-researchers, and co-instructors with ID.

Considerations for Inclusive Higher Education During and After COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed our existence across nearly all facets of daily life. The disability population may experience more negative outcomes than those without disabilities, if additional considerations are not addressed (WHO, 2020). For a population that has been historically disadvantaged across all major indices of life, this worldwide pandemic is exacerbating existing inequities (Bishop, 2020). Although there is much to be learned about the long-term implications of COVID-19, the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on the lives of people with ID is already evident. It is estimated that people with ID and other developmental disabilities (DD) are more likely to die from this airborne virus, and have significant risk factors for contracting the virus (Ervin & Hobson-Garcia, 2020). There are a variety of reasons for this. Many adults with ID/DD have underlying health conditions and rely on services provided by paid staff. Many adults are living in congregate settings with shared spaces. This results in contacts with a larger network of people, further increasing the potential to come into contact with an infected individual. If a person with ID does contract the virus, access to appropriate healthcare may be compromised. The US Office of Civil Rights has issued multiple guidance documents to advise healthcare providers and state and local government agencies that anti-discrimination legislation still applies in the COVID-19 era. Despite ongoing and concerted efforts to provide advocacy and share information about staying healthy and safe across federal and state agencies, as well as advocacy organizations, current estimates, as we have noted above, indicate the higher fatality rate for individuals with ID/DD who become infected, especially at younger ages (Turk et al., 2020). Complex and interconnected stresses on service delivery systems (including healthcare) present challenges but can also provide a foundation for innovative opportunity moving forward (Bradley, 2020).

There are undoubtedly valuable insights to glean from this new era in our world's history. An emphasis on remote work and learning has made our world a smaller place through the use of technology, but it also brings a combination of advantages and pitfalls. Barriers around transportation become non-existent when classes are taught virtually. The reliance on public transportation, paratransit, or other transportation providers has been removed when classes are taught online. In addition, the shift to remote work and learning has led to increased empathy and interest in disability-related issues as people who were previously considered

to not have a disability are feeling wholly disabled by the changes in their environments.

The shift toward virtual learning requires access to computer technology, stable internet connections, and the necessary assistive technology to fully participate in an online environment. While the digital divide has decreased nationally (Federal Communications Commission, 2020), it is still an issue for people with ID, who may have higher reliance on paid support staff to assist in helping to literally make the connections needed for virtual learning. Additionally, local community resources can be stretched beyond capacity when attempting to ensure equal access. Colleges and universities have used proactive strategies in providing tablets or laptops when students have not had them available. Additionally, many internet service providers have given non-subscribers wireless access so that basic needs were able to be met at the outset of the first COVID-19 surge in the US.

People with ID are also at heightened risk of losing access to needed services when provider agencies are forced to close due to quarantine orders that are put in place at the state level. In the best-case scenario, this adds stress to families and natural support networks. In the worst cases, the lives of individuals with ID are endangered. In situations where supported employment provider agencies close, options for successful transition from higher education to employment are also narrowed. Statewide inclusive higher education networks will need to attend to safety, community access, technological, social distancing, employment, and academic delivery issues that have been brought about by COVID-19 in a comprehensive effort to promote access to colleges and universities among students with ID.

Conclusion

Higher education has the power to equip students with ID with the knowledge and skills needed for success in life. Although this is true for all students, higher education can change the life trajectory for students with ID, who have historically been disadvantaged across education, employment, health and economic self-sufficiency indicators. Higher education provides a strategic lever for improving individual student performance and outcomes, and, in so doing, serves to build a stronger, more inclusive workforce, stronger economy and stronger communities.

Students with ID are significantly underrepresented in higher education. Amidst the uncertainties of the COVID-19 era, now is the ideal time to completely abandon the one-size-fits-all approach to meeting the needs of students and preparing them for success after they leave our system of education, and instead to provide students, particularly students with ID, with increased opportunities. We have begun the difficult but necessary work to finally right the inequities and address the social disenfranchisement and injustices that have consistently and disproportionately characterized the education and postsecondary life of students with ID.

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