The Impact of COVID-19 on College Students with Intellectual Disability Attending Cohort 2 TPSID Programs

By Meg Grigal, Clare Papay, and Xiaoying Wu

In mid-March 2020, the emergence of COVID-19 throughout the United States led to programmatic changes at most higher education institutions, including those involved in implementing model demonstration projects known as Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability (TPSID) projects. This Insight Brief describes how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted college students with intellectual disability (ID) enrolled in the colleges and universities offering TPSID programs.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, most colleges and universities transitioned to some form of remote instruction. Many students with disability moved off campus, accessed their learning experiences and associated accommodations in new ways, and dealt with changes in their internship and employment experiences (Madaus et al., 2021; Papay & Myers, 2020; Sheppard-Jones et al., 2021). Like their college peer counterparts, college students with ID enrolled in TPSID programs also experienced changes in their access to learning and working experiences.

The COVID-19 pandemic in the US began during the spring semester of the fifth year of the 2015-2020 cohort of TPSID higher education programs (Cohort 2). Each

program was a part of a model demonstration initiative implemented by the US Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education (OPE) through 5-year grants awarded to 19 institutes of higher education (IHEs) in 2015. A previous cohort was funded between 2010-2015 (visit Think College for more information about these projects). The IHEs involved in these model programs were tasked with creating, expanding, or enhancing high-quality, inclusive higher education experiences to support positive outcomes for individuals with ID. The TPSID National Coordinating Center (NCC) was charged with providing support, coordination, training, and evaluation services for the TPSID projects.

In response to the disruption in services at college and university campuses caused by the pandemic, the NCC provided additional supports to TPSID and other IHE program staff. The NCC offered virtual support group sessions for TPSID staff to share challenges and solutions related to meeting students' needs during the pandemic. Topics of discussion included:

- supporting students' social and emotional needs
- continuing access to core academic content remotely
- providing employment support online
- communicating with families

Additionally, TPSID staff engaged with other postsecondary program staff and IHE program staff in a private Facebook group for ongoing information sharing and peer-to-peer connections.

This Insight Brief shares findings about the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on student courses, access to work-based learning and paid employment, and exit and post-exit outcomes.

> **Higher education provided a lifeline for college students with ID through the COVID-19 pandemic. As the COVID-19 pandemic hit and campuses were forced to close, TPSID staff pivoted to provide supports to students remotely.**

We collected these data from two sources:

1. TPSID program staff (e.g., principal investigator, program coordinator, evaluator, or data entry assistant) reported data for the 2019–2020 academic year to the NCC between October 1, 2019, and September 30, 2020. The NCC recognized the pandemic could impact student experiences in the TPSID programs, and thus provided TPSIDs with the ability to note any COVID-19 impacts on key datapoints.

2. In June 2020, the NCC shared a voluntary survey for TPSID staff to gather information on COVID-19's impact and other sustainability-related questions. This Qualtrics survey consisted of multiple choice and open-ended questions. The NCC received 27 valid survey responses.

TOP COVID-19 RELATED CHALLENGES AND IMPACT ON FUTURE PLANS

We asked TPSIDs to report their top three challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost all programs (n = 26, 96%) indicated career development and employment were challenges due to COVID-19. Programs also reported other challenges including residence life (n = 10, 37%), program sustainability and funding (n = 9, 33%), peer support (n = 6, 22%), recruitment (n = 6, 22%), admissions and orientation (n = 5, 19%), course access (n = 3, 11%), staffing (n = 1, 6%), and other challenges (n = 10, 37%). At the time of the survey, seven programs (26%) anticipated their IHE would continue remote learning in Fall 2020. Six programs (22%) said remote learning would end, 13 programs (48%) were not sure, and one program (4%) did not respond to this question.

COVID-19 IMPACT ON COURSE ENROLLMENTS

We also asked TPSIDs to report if COVID-19 impacted course enrollment. TPSIDs reported 31% of courses in the Spring 2020 academic term moved from in-person instruction to online instruction. Two percent of courses were canceled and 3% had modified assignments.

Forty-six TPSID programs (79%) reported there was an impact of COVID-19 on at least one course enrollment.

We examined the number of enrollments by academic term to determine any potential impact on course enrollments due to COVID-related program changes. Given that academic terms at some IHEs are semesters whereas others are quarters, we considered the Fall 2019 semester as well as any quarters that finished by March 2020 as "before COVID-19" and the spring 2020 semester and any quarters beginning in or after March 2020 as "at or after COVID-19." Fifty-four percent of all course enrollments were in the academic terms prior to COVID-19 compared with 46% in the academic terms impacted by COVID-19. In comparison, in the 2018-19 academic year, 52% of course enrollments were in the fall term vs. 48% in the spring or summer terms, suggesting a pattern of slightly more course enrollments in the fall is not unique to the 2019-20 academic year. Most course enrollments prior to 2018-19 were missing data about academic terms, preventing us from further examining this pattern.

LEARNING EXPERIENCES AND SUPPORTS

As the transition to online learning commenced, program staff sought information and resources to assist students in using the tools for remote instruction, including Zoom and WebEx, as well as learning management systems, such as Canvas and Blackboard (Think College, 2020a). As the students' learning environment shifted from a campus to a home environment, programs also sought to help family members understand and balance their role in providing technical supports to access instruction, while not overstepping and offering students assistance with actual coursework. Peer mentors continued to provide support, albeit virtually (Spencer et al., 2021). Much like their college peer counterparts, college students with ID enrolled in the TPSID programs dealt with myriad distractions that came with learning from home (Spencer et al., 2021).

Spencer et al.'s (2021) mixed method study offers a glimpse of students' and parents'

perspectives from one TPSID program during this time. Interviews with parents and students reveal the importance of technology during this transition to remote instruction. Students used smart phones and other devices to communicate with program staff, mentors, and each other. First year students were slightly less adept than more experienced students in mastering the new instructional tools, but most seemed to figure them out without significant problems.

One parent attributed her daughter's improved capacity to adapt to these changes and successfully use various technology tools to skills her daughter had acquired through her experiences in the TPSID program. Parents felt program staff understood their adult children's' learning and support needs and applied it with strong communication and technology skills to help students successfully transition to remote instruction (Spencer et al., 2021)

COVID-19 IMPACT ON PROGRAM COMPLETION AND CREDENTIAL ATTAINMENT

Most students at TPSID programs aiming for program completion in spring of 2020 were able to achieve this goal. However, five students exited their higher education program due to COVID-19, citing health concerns or not wanting to take online coursework. Eight students completed the coursework required to earn a credential but were not awarded credential, citing disruption in their studies due to COVID-19 as the reason for not being awarded the credential (e.g., needing more internship or practicum hours or being unable to take a required test). All of these students earned another credential from their TPSID program upon exit.

COVID-19 IMPACT ON WORK-BASED LEARNING EXPERIENCES

We asked TPSIDs to report on COVID-19's impact on work-based learning (WBL) positions. Of the 563 paid and unpaid WBL positions for which this information was provided, only 22% (n = 122) were reported to have had no impact; meaning 78% of WBL positions were impacted by COVID-19. COVID-19 had similar impacts on paid and unpaid WBL positions: 12% of unpaid WBL positions were not impacted vs. 14% of paid WBL positions that were not impacted.

Lindsey and Dana Share What It's Like Living on Campus

Lindsey Paputa, freshman in the Transition and Access Program (TAP) at University of Cincinnati shares that living on campus can be hard but it gets easier with experience and friendships. "It was hard moving to campus because we are in a pandemic. But I wash my hands, and wear my mask everywhere I go, and I have gotten used to it." Some of her favorite places include the dining halls on campus where the food is really good! Outside of classes Lindsey enjoys photography and video games. Some advice she would give to a high school student thinking about attending college and living on campus is, "Don't push yourself too hard and never give up. It gets easier. The dorm is pretty fun, and it's fun living with someone new."

Dana Laster shares that living on campus is going well and she has been successful with staying organized and keeping a schedule. "At first, it was kind of hard and sad to move away from home, but I got over it. I have been setting my alarm to get up every morning since middle school so that has really helped me." Outside of classes, Dana likes to walk on campus and watch movies. Dana shares some advice to future college students: "College is fun. It's hard at first, but you get used to it. Living in the dorm is fun because you get to meet new people."
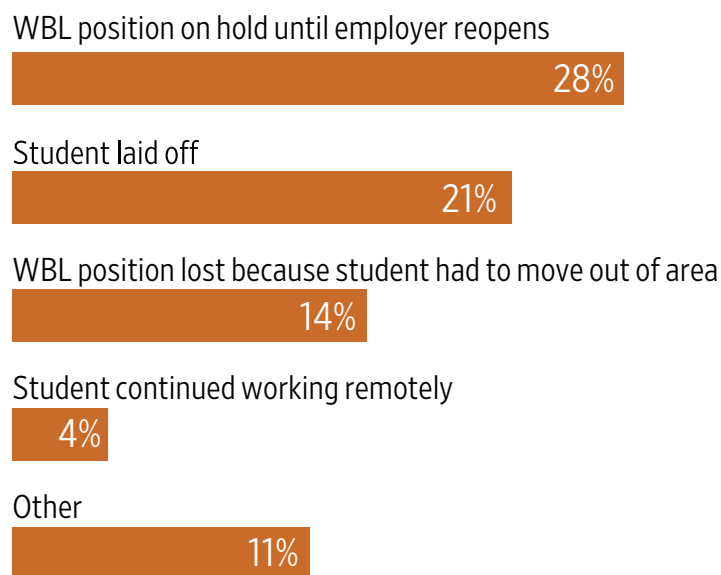
TPSIDs reported the following COVID-19 related impacts (see Figure 1):

- the WBL position is on hold and will resume when employer re-opens (n = 160, 28%)
- student was laid off (n = 121, 21%)
- student lost the WBL position because they had to move out of the area (n = 80, 14%)
- student continued working remotely (n = 20, 4%)
- other (n = 60, 11%)

The most frequently reported other impact was that the WBL position was lost because the location closed due to COVID-19 with no option for remote work. Additionally, 428 students (n = 45%) were reported to have had no WBL opportunities this academic year specifically because of COVID-19.

FIGURE 1. HOW DID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IMPACT WORK-BASED LEARNING (WBL) FOR STUDENTS AT TPSIDS?

WBL position on hold until employer reopens

28%

Student laid off

21%

WBL position lost because student had to move out of area

14%

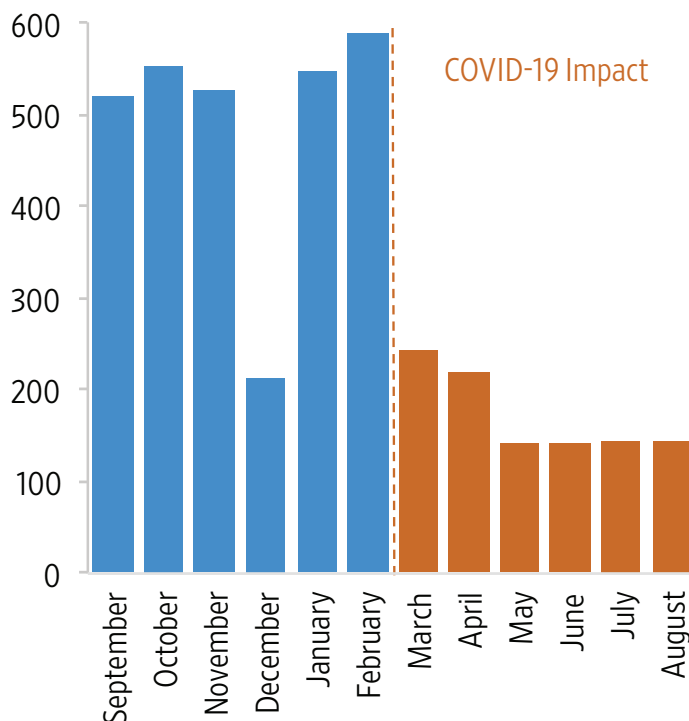Student continued working remotely

4%

Other

11%

78% of WBL positions were impacted by COVID-19

69% of employment positions were impacted by COVID-19

There was a visible reduction in the number of WBL positions held by students in February 2020 (n = 591) to March 2020 (n = 242) (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2. NUMBER OF WORK-BASED LEARNING (WBL) POSITIONS BY MONTH
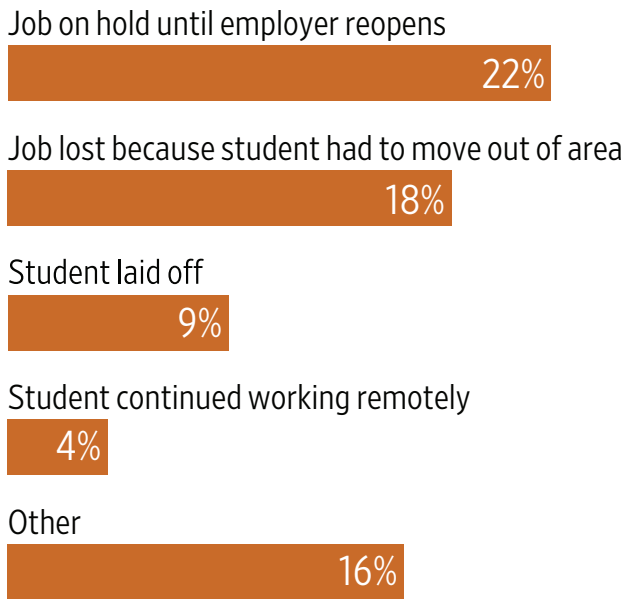

COVID-19 Impact

COVID-19 IMPACT ON EMPLOYMENT WHILE ENROLLED

We asked TPSIDs to report on COVID-19's impact on student employment. Of the 245 jobs for which this information was provided, 31% (n = 76) had no impact; meaning 69% of employment positions were impacted by COVID-19. TPSIDs reported the following COVID-19 related impacts (see Figure 3):

- job is on hold and will resume when employer re-opens (n = 53, 22%)
- student lost job because they had to move out of the area (n = 43, 18%)
- student was laid off (n = 23, 9%)
- student continued working remotely (n = 10, 4%)
- other (n = 40, 16%)

The most frequently reported other impact was that hours were reduced.

FIGURE 3. HOW DID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IMPACT EMPLOYMENT OF STUDENTS AT TPSIDS?

Job on hold until employer reopens
22%

Job lost because student had to move out of area
18%

Student laid off
9%

Student continued working remotely
4%

Other
16%

There was a visible reduction in the number of jobs held by students in February 2020 (n = 287) to March 2020 (n = 209), a 27% drop in the rate of paid employment for students enrolled in the TPSID programs (see Figure 4).

Finally, 70 fewer students in 2019-20 held individual paid jobs than in the previous year.

FIGURE 4. NUMBER OF EMPLOYMENT POSITIONS BY MONTH
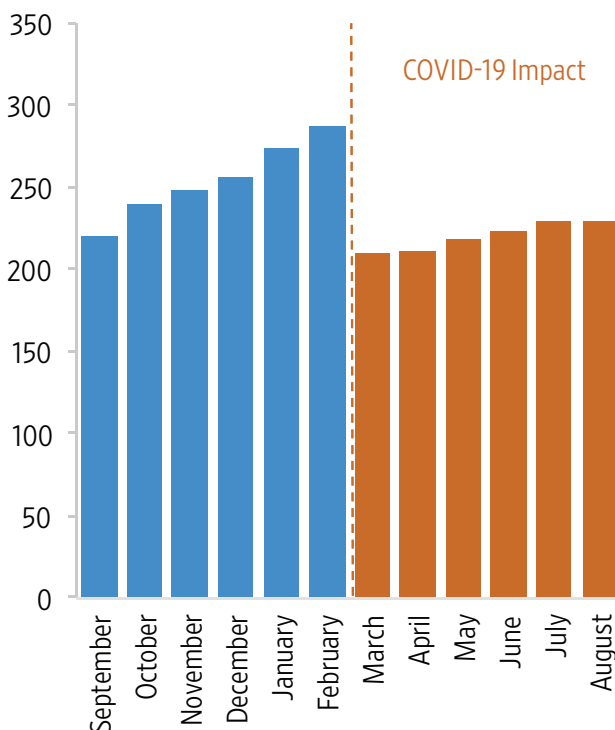
COVID-19 Impact

COVID-19 IMPACT ON PAID EMPLOYMENT AT EXIT

A striking impact of COVID 19 was evident at the student level of paid employment at exit. Only 21% of exiting students (n = 73) were working in a paid job at exit or within the first 90 days after exiting. This is a 31-percentage-point decrease from the 52% of students employed at exit in the previous year. As businesses dealt with temporary and permanent closures, students had fewer opportunities to seek and gain paid work after completing their program. Conversely, the percentage of students who were only participating in unpaid career development experiences at exit grew from 25% in 2018-19 to 49% in 2019-20.

COVID-19 IMPACT ON POST-EXIT OUTCOMES

COVID-19's impact on the long-term outcome data from Cohort 2 completers was less substantial. Cohort 2's paid employment rate dropped only six percentage points one year after exit (from 65% in 2019 to 59% in 2020). This reduction was somewhat less than we might have expected. The 2-year outcome data showed this same level of reduction, with 66% of respondents reporting having a paid job, compared to the previous year's 72%.

Only two graduating students in Year 5 indicated they were continuing onto further postsecondary education, whereas 12 students sought further education in the previous year. This reduction could be related to the lack of clarity about whether colleges and universities would be able to provide face-to-face instruction in fall of 2020. Like other students considering higher education, the prospect of distance or remote learning may have dissuaded students with ID from considering future postsecondary education options in their immediate future.

OVERALL IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH ID

We observed the COVID-19 pandemic's impact throughout TPSID programs, although the disruption to academics was less severe than the disruption in students' employment and work-

based learning (WBL) experiences. Despite the challenging circumstances, students at TPSIDs enrolled in 6,750 courses in 2019-20, and 62% of all enrollments were in inclusive courses (i.e., typical college courses attended by students with ID and other college students without ID). This is the highest proportion of inclusive courses seen since TPSIDs were initiated in 2010.

The data examined here show students were mostly able to continue their academic experiences after campus closures. Program staff acted quickly to support their students to learn virtual communication tools, such as Zoom and WebEx, as well as learning management systems, such as Canvas and Blackboard (Think College, 2020a). Program staff provided individualized supports as they reached out to each student to make sure they were connected and understood the expectations for online learning.

However, WBL experiences were more challenging to support remotely. The most obvious indicator is TPSIDs reported almost half of the students enrolled had no WBL experiences (paid or unpaid) due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For students who were in WBL positions when campuses closed, TPSID programs sought creative solutions when those WBL positions were lost. Some programs shifted focus to other employment preparation activities such as updating resumes, practicing interview skills, or completing job applications (Papay & Myers, 2020). Others explored the use of virtual job exploration programs such as Virtual Job Shadow and Able Eyes to support continued progress. Program staff also focused on helping students become more adept at using online communication platforms such as Zoom and Google Meets, given the increased use of these platforms in various business' remote work settings.

Like so many others when the pandemic hit, the students with ID enrolled in TPSID programs faced furloughs, layoffs, and unemployment. Since March 2020, people with disabilities have faced disproportionate impacts in the labor market, losing nearly one million jobs (Livermore & Schimmel Hyde, 2020). Younger workers with disabilities may face greater difficulties in times of economic stress due to their limited experience and skills (Fogg,

Harrington, & McMahon, 2012). In looking at the number of employment positions held by students at TPSIDs each month, there was a visible reduction in the number of jobs held by students from February 2020 (n = 287 jobs) to March 2020 (n = 209 jobs). The highest number of job applications for students at TPSIDs occurred in the month of February, right before lockdowns occurred nationwide. Therefore, it is likely the pandemic subverted any gains in rates of paid employment that we might have expected to see later in the spring.

TPSID and other program staff cite one of the most pressing needs was supporting the social and emotional needs of their students during campus closures. As students became fluent in the use of virtual communication platforms such as Zoom or Google Hangouts, program staff capitalized on these tools to support social connections (Think College, 2020b). Program staff found they could connect students with the social activities that were being offered to all students at the IHE, supplementing with additional targeted activities and supports for their students. Communication with families became even more important given the essential role of family members in supporting students to continue their learning from home (Think College, 2020b).

CONCLUSION

Higher education provided a lifeline for college students with ID through the COVID-19 pandemic. As the COVID-19 pandemic hit and campuses were forced to close, TPSID staff pivoted to provide supports to students remotely. These supports allowed students to continue their academic learning and to stay connected socially with each other, their peer mentors, and other college friends. Employment, however, presented a greater challenge to both staff and students. At the end of this brief, we provide information on several resources the Institute for Community Inclusion developed. The wealth of knowledge that has been gained through this pandemic can serve to strengthen the employment-related supports provided to students with ID while the pandemic continues to have an impact on college campuses and beyond.

Virtual Learning Opportunities were a Lifeline During COVID‑19

"I recently attended a webinar where several doctors presented information and answered questions regarding many aspects of COVID and the Down syndrome (DS) population. After hearing information on infection rates in individuals with DS, the pending vaccine, etc., the discussion turned to the social / emotional well‑being of individuals with DS who thrive being around people and physically being part of a community. The importance of online opportunities was discussed and almost everything suggested (maintaining a sense of community and peer relationships, activities, learning experiences, social opportunities, etc.) has been offered online by InclusiveU since March when Nathan returned home from campus. I can't thank you all enough for realizing the needs of your students and for making the past months enriching and productive. The days have been filled with time not only to learn, but to play games, dance, and socialize with friends. We are blessed to be a part of the Syracuse University InclusiveU community."

—Alicia Bach
(parent of InclusiveU sophomore Nathan Bach)

Nathan at home remotely taking his ARI 261 Painting Studio I class.

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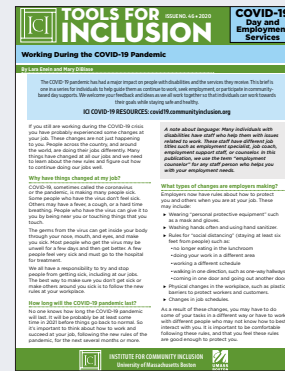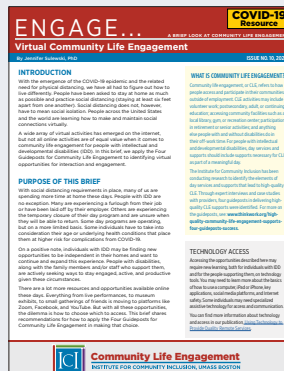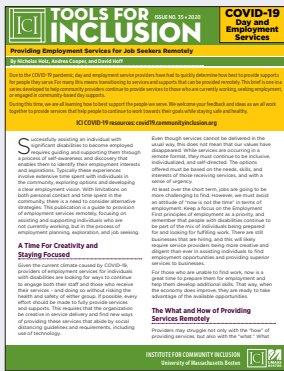
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COVID-19 RESOURCES FROM THE INSTITUTE FOR COMMUNITY INCLUSION

Our colleagues at the Institute for Community Inclusion at UMass Boston responded quickly to the COVID-19 pandemic and created resources for professionals and individuals to safely and effectively continue to support people with disabilities during a constantly changing situation. There are a range of publications and tools addressing community engagement, employment, and more: https://covid19.communityinclusion.org

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