Industry Recognized Credentials in Inclusive Postsecondary Education Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability

By Charles Walters, Chelsea Stinnett, and Anthony Plotner

Inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs for students with intellectual disability (ID) have grown tremendously over the last two decades. What started as a movement to make higher education accessible to young adults with ID has shifted into a concern for access and demonstrable improvements to the postschool lives of the IPSE students with ID. Within this outcome-focused landscape, IPSE program staff and administrators are largely unified in their aim to to purposefully support students toward positive postschool outcomes like employment and community integration. There is a growing momentum for IPSE programs to align with career and technical education opportunities to help students with ID attain industry recognized credentials (IRC). In this *Think College Insight Brief*, we will discuss the importance of industry recognized credentials for IPSE programs alongside findings from a study recently conducted by researchers at the University of South Carolina.

COLLEGE = CAREER?

Many students with and without disabilities continue their formal education after high school with the hope it will offer them a clear path toward a career. A driving factor behind the creation and implementation of postsecondary educational opportunities for students with intellectual disability (ID) is that college will positively impact their employment outcomes (Domin, Haines & Taylor, 2020). While evidence exists to support the notion that college improves the employment outcomes of students with ID (e.g. Grigal et al., 2011; Moore & Schelling, 2015), the connection between college and careers may be more complicated than it appears at first glance.

In a study of more than 9,000 vocational rehabilitation case closures for young adults with ID in 2015, Cimera and colleagues compared employment outcomes on the basis of educational attainment (Cimera et al., 2018). They found that young adults with ID with some level of postsecondary education were more likely to be employed, earned higher wages, worked more hours, and were employed in a wider range of industries than their counterparts who had attained only a high school diploma. These findings underscore the importance of access to postsecondary education opportunities for young adults with ID. Despite the study's findings that participation in postsecondary education would affect positive employment outcomes, young adults in the sample examined were still largely living in poverty. While some forms of postsecondary education may lead to an increased likelihood of positive career outcomes, not all postsecondary education opportunities are created equally when it comes to promoting economic self-sufficiency for people with ID.

Further, Grigal and colleagues (2019) examined Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual

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Disabilities (TPSID) data from 2010-2015 and identified predictors of employment for enrolled students at the time of program exit (Grigal et al., 2019). One of four predictors of employment at the time of program exit was a student earning a credential formally recognized and offered by the institution of higher education (IHE) they attended. While many students in IPSE programs may earn internal recognitions of program completion (e.g., certificates of attendance), Grigal and colleagues purposefully separated those from IHE recognized credentials in their study. According to the authors, their finding that IHE recognized credentials predict employment may indicate that this type of credential is "more widely recognized by employers than TPSID-specific credentials" (p. 24). Building on this possibility, the research team behind this *Think College Insight Brief* set out to better understand how IPSE program administrators and staff address student access to opportunities for career and technical education (CTE) and industry recognized credentials (IRC).

A STUDY ON INDUSTRY RECOGNIZED CREDENTIALS IN IPSE PROGRAMS

The following research questions guided our research:

1. To what extent do IPSE program staff understand, collaborate, and communicate with external providers of career and technical education?

2. What is the nature, extent, and frequency of CTE experiences accessed by students enrolled in IPSE programs?

Survey development.

Based on previously conducted research on collaboration (Plotner et al., 2020) and recent recommendations on career and technical education for students with disabilities (Harvey et. al, 2020), the research team drafted a 22-item survey. Then, the team sent the draft survey to two IPSE program experts for feedback on usability, clarity, and content. We incorporated expert recommendations into the survey, resulting in a final instrument that included 24 items. Of these, 10 items covered participant demographics, two items covered information related to the IPSE programs with which participants were affiliated, three items covered interagency collaboration, seven items covered student access to industry recognized credentials, and two optional items were provided for participants to indicate their willingness to participate in a follow-up study and enter a drawing for survey incentives. The survey introduction included a glossary of survey terms. Industry recognized credential was defined for respondents as a credential that is "sought or accepted by employers within the industry or sector involved as a recognized, preferred, or required credential for recruitment, screening, hiring, retention, or advancement purposes" (Association for Career and Technical Education, 2018).

Method and participants.

We used various means to recruit survey participants over the course of two weeks in July 2021. Means for recruitment included emails sent from the research team to program contacts provided on the Think College website, a Think College Facebook post, and emails sent to Think College and Southeastern Postsecondary Education Alliance listservs. In total, 69 IPSE program staffers and administrators from 25 states participated in the survey. We received five or more responses from IPSE program professionals in Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Texas, accounting for roughly 57% of all responses. The remaining 43% of responses were split across the other 19 states represented in the sample.

Approximately 84% of respondents reported identifying as female, 12% identified as male, and 4% identified as gender non-conforming. Slightly less than 83% identified as White or Caucasian, with roughly 7% respondents identifying as Black or African American, 3% Hispanic or Latino, 3% Asian or Asian American, 4% as First Nations or Native American, 1%

Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 3% indicating they preferred not to answer. Nearly 12% of respondents reported that they identified as disabled or as having a disability, just less than 85% reported they do not identify as disabled or as having a disability, and about 3% indicated they prefer not to respond to the question. Sixty-three percent of respondents identified themselves as IPSE program directors, 24% as IPSE program coordinators, and 8% as IPSE program staff providing direct services. Of the 56 participants that responded, 57.2% reported a "moderate understanding," 23.2% reported a "high understanding," and 19.6% reported a "weak/minimal understanding."

Findings.

We asked survey respondents to rate their understanding, level of collaboration, and frequency of communication with various systems potentially supporting the employment outcomes of students in the IPSE program. Particularly salient to the topic of this Insight Brief were findings related to respondent understanding, level of collaboration, and communication with external providers of CTE opportunities. The research team used the qualifier of "external" to distinguish providers of CTE opportunities outside of the IHE in which respondent programs were located. Of the 56 participants that responded, 19.6% reported a "weak/minimal understanding," 57.2% reported a "moderate understanding," and 23.2% reported a "high understanding."

When asked to rate their level of collaboration with external providers of CTE opportunities, 27.3% indicated they "do not collaborate," 29.1% indicated a "weak/minimal" level of collaboration, 21.8% indicated a "moderate" level of collaboration, and 21.8% indicated a "high level" of collaboration (n=55). Fifty-five respondents rated their communications with external providers of CTE opportunities. Thirty-one percent reported there was no communication, 32% reported "weak/minimal" communication, 20% reported "moderate" communication, and 16% reported a "high level" of communication.

Survey respondents were asked to rate the frequency with which students in their program (1) access opportunities to earn IRCs and (2) exit their program with IRCs. For each, 55 respondents selected one of the following options: "unsure," "never," "rarely," "sometimes," "often," or "always." Figure 1 depicts the reported frequency of student access to opportunities to earn IRCs. While just under 33% of respondents indicated students often or always access opportunities to earn IRCs, approximately 23% reported students often or always exit their programs with IRCs.

Figure 1: Industry Recognized Credentials: Opportunities and Outcomes

Frequency of Response (n=55)
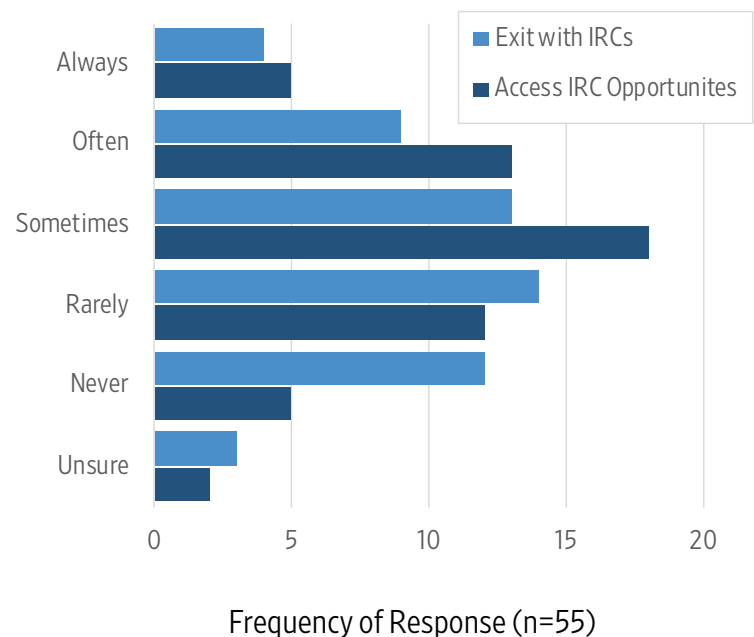
Next, unlike the scaled responses described above, we asked survey respondents to identify the actual scope of IPSE program offerings yielding IRCs. When asked to quantify the number of IRCs their programs facilitate access to responses ranged from 0 to 100 with an average of 12 (n=46). Respondents reported approximately 30% of their students leave their program with one or more industry recognized credentials. Of those students who exited IPSE programs with industry recognized credentials, 38% earned their IRC from within the IHE students were attending (n=44).

Finally, respondents were asked "In which industries do students enrolled in your program access experiences that can lead to the receipt of industry recognized credentials?". We provided respondents with a checklist of 25 industries as defined by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics' Occupational Outlook Handbook (2021), including a "not applicable" option in the event respondents did not offer opportunities to earn IRCs within their program. Each of the 25 industries in the checklist was selected one or more times by the 47 respondents to that question. Among the least frequently selected industries were "protective service" and "legal" with one response each. Among the most frequently selected industries were "education, training, and library" (42.6%) and "food preparation and serving" (44.7%); additional responses to this question are shown in Figure 2.

30%
The average percentage of students leaving IPSE programs with industry recognized credentials

38%
The average percentage of those credentials earned at the IHE where the IPSE program was housed

Conclusion and Implications.

There are some notable limitations to this research. First, while there were 69 total respondents to this survey, far fewer participants answered many items after the demographics section. One potential explanation for this missing data is respondents were unable to or preferred not to respond. Researchers conducting similar studies in the future may consider solely targeting IPSE program administrators to increase the likelihood that participants are able to answer questions that require a more in-depth understanding of a program's day-to-day operations. In so doing, researchers could also provide informative statistics like IPSE program response rate alongside findings. Second, as an exploratory study with a limited sample,

we did not calculate inferential statistics that might offer information that is potentially generalizable to IPSE programs across the country. The findings presented in this brief are not offered in an attempt to infer what may or may not be happening in this domain of practice for IPSE programs on the whole. Future research should seek to gather data from a representative sample offering more generalizable findings.
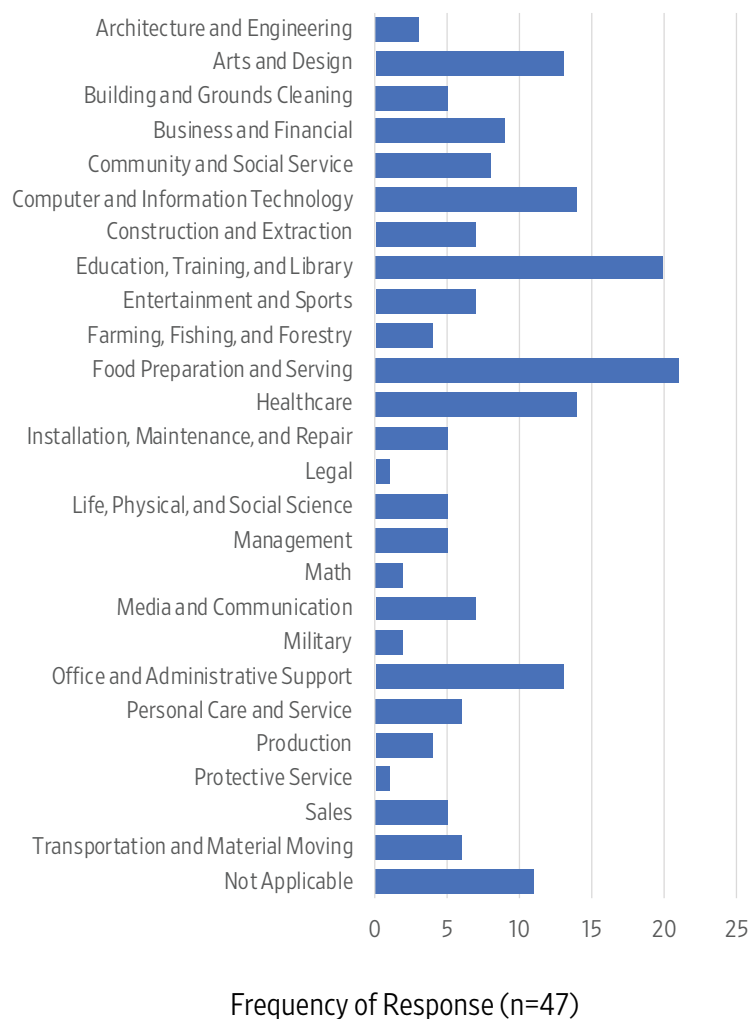
Important conversations are needed on IPSE program use of industry recognized credentials to maximize employment outcomes for students with ID. Many of these conversations align well with broader calls in secondary transition to better leverage the offerings of CTE with ambitions for supporting positive

Figure 2: Industry Represented in Industry Recognized Credential Access of IPSE Program

Frequency of Response (n=47)

employment outcomes for youth and young adults with disabilities (Harvey et al., 2020). The findings presented here indicate the current climate of practice in IPSE programs may give cause for similar lines of inquiry. Two dimensions of IPSE practice related to student access to CTE and opportunities to earn IRCs are particularly salient: collaboration and program evaluation.

Collaboration.

Large portions of the sample in this study indicated they are never or rarely collaborating and communicating with external CTE providers. On its own, this may not be alarming, and may be attributable to robust internal CTE opportunity offerings. There is a considerable amount currently unknown about how IPSE programs collaborate within their IHEs and across other potential providers of CTE opportunities. In particular, within IPSE programs where students are accessing robust CTE offerings and widely earning IRCs, how are those programs working within their IHEs and/or external partners? While ongoing research related to this dimension of IPSE program practice is needed, it may also be productive to ensure information sharing across IPSE programs on topics such as these.

> **There is a considerable amount that is currently unknown about how IPSE programs collaborate within their IHEs and across other potential providers of career and technical education opportunities.**

> **Programs may want to look at the frequency with which students are leaving their program with an industry recognized credential, and whether that credential is associated with positive employment outcomes.**

Program evaluation.

The recently released Model Accreditation Standards for Higher Education Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability outline a clear and ambitious path forward for developing and maintaining quality IPSE programs (Think College National Coordinating Center Accreditation Workgroup, 2021). These standards provide many entry points for considering student access to CTE and opportunities to earn IRCs as a critical aspect of IPSE program evaluation. Survey respondents indicated approximately 70% of IPSE program students are not currently leaving with any form of IRC. Without formal study and continuous attention, it may be an overlooked aspect of program evaluation, even when striving to adhere to the Model Accreditation Standards. IPSE program staff and administrators may want to consider taking a closer look at objectively examining student access to IRCs. As a starting place, programs may review the frequency of students leaving their program with some form of IRC and whether that IRC is associated with positive employment outcomes. To be certain, the ways in which IPSE program administrators and staff choose to evaluate student access to CTE and student opportunities to earn IRCs will likely be varied. Nevertheless, the need for examining IPSE program practice on this front is a call to action that likely unifies both established and developing programs alike.

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