

PRACTICE BRIEF

Florida College Collaborative: Facilitating Inclusive Postsecondary Education Opportunities for Youth with Intellectual Disabilities

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Abstract

In response to the paucity of transition services available for students with intellectual disabilities, the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) allocated grant funding to support model demonstration programs that promote successful transition into higher education. In accordance with the objectives of the HEOA, the Florida College Collaborative (FCC) convened to facilitate the development of an inclusive postsecondary education model that supports individuals with intellectual disabilities. This effort included collaborative strategic planning, two statewide surveys of stakeholders, the development of an informational webpage, and the creation of a registry of existing postsecondary education programs in the state of Florida. A primary goal of the FCC was to lay the groundwork for a proposal for HEOA funding that would be utilized to demonstrate the model. Other states may learn from Florida's efforts and replicate strategies to improve systems and access to postsecondary education opportunities for their youth with intellectual disabilities.

Keywords: Inclusive postsecondary education, intellectual disabilities, transition, HEOA, Think College

The Higher Education Opportunities Act (HEOA) of 2008 requires comprehensive transition and postsecondary education (PSE) programs for students with intellectual disabilities (HEOA Title VII, Part D, Section 760). Students with intellectual disabilities (ID) who are enrolled in an approved Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary Education Program (CTP) may access federal support if they are working toward an educational credential that reflects personalized student goals for employment, independent living, and educational outcomes. Courses may be audited and students are not required to have a standard high school diploma to enroll. Additional HEOA funding has been allocated through twenty-seven Transition Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) grants designed to support model demonstration programs that promote the successful transition of students with ID into higher education.

It is important to distinguish students with intellectual disabilities from those with learning disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of

2004 (IDEA) defines an intellectual disability as "... significantly sub-average general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period, that adversely affects a child's educational performance" [34 CFR §300.8(c)(6)]. This diagnosis differs from one of a learning disability which is defined by IDEA as a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The diagnosis of a learning disability does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of intellectual disability, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage [34 CFR §300.8(c)(10)].

Summary of Relevant Literature

Successful transition to PSE has been equated with high expectations, person-centered or student directed goals, and practices that reflect collaboration with external partners, community agencies, and organizations that support students in post-school environments (Grigal, Hart, & Migliore, 2011). In a recent study that analyzed data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study – 2 (NLTS2), Grigal et al. (2011) found that only 25% of students with ID listed a goal of PSE on their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) compared to 46% of students with other types of disabilities. The study also found that having a post-school transition goal of pursuing PSE was the only predictor associated with a greater likelihood of employment for students with ID. In addition, the study found that 68% of school systems contacted adult day programs or sheltered workshops as external partners for students with ID compared to 6% for students with other types of disabilities. Overall, the study data shows that approximately 30% of students with ID attended PSE compared to 56% of students with other types of disabilities.

Research studies correlate PSE opportunities for youth with ID with improved employment outcomes and increased community participation (Thoma, Lakin, Carlson, Domzal, Austin, & Boyd, 2011; Kleinert, Jones, Sheppard-Jones, Harp, & Harrison, 2012; Grigal et al., 2011; Migliore, Butterworth, and Hart, 2009). Higher education is also associated with better health and longevity and higher levels of reported happiness (McMahon, 2009). According to Hart, Grigal, & Weir (2010), the benefits of accessing PSE for students with ID include increases in academic and personal skill building, competitive employment, independence, self-advocacy, and self-confidence. They also indicate that “being part of campus life, taking classes (whether auditing or for credit), and learning to navigate a world of high expectations leads to the development of skills needed for successful adult life” (p. 139).

In May 2012, a database compiled by Think College documented the number of PSE programs for students with ID at 165 which did not include 9 new programs funded through TPSID grants (Research and Training Center on Community Living, 2013). According to Kleinert et al. (2012), the three most common types of PSE programs for students with ID are separate, integrated, and mixed. Separate programs typically offer specific classes for students with ID. In

integrated programs, students with and without disabilities attend established courses together. Mixed programs provide a combination of specific or stand-alone courses and integrated courses or use a separate model for courses while integrating students through extracurricular activities and residential life. For a program to be considered integrated or inclusive, the HEOA requires students with ID to participate on not less than a halftime basis with non-disabled students in regular enrollment in credit-earning courses, audited courses, non-degree seeking courses, or internships/work-based training. An additional model to support students with ID in PSE is the individualized support model. This model focuses on each student’s talents, strengths, and interests and uses peer mentors to help students with ID to navigate campus culture which may increase the success of these PSE programs (Hart, Grigal, Sax, Martinez, & Will, 2006; Jones, Weir, & Hart 2011).

Depiction of the Problem

According to Grigal et al. (2011), there has been an increase in students with disabilities receiving some level of PSE after high school. However, the increase in PSE for youth with intellectual disabilities is occurring at a significantly lower rate than that of youth with other types of disabilities and students with ID are the least likely to be continuously enrolled in college (Grigal & Hart, 2010; Newman, Wagner, Cameto, & Knokey, 2009; Blumberg, Carroll, & Petroff, 2008). Youth with ID are also least likely of all youth with disabilities to enroll in postsecondary education and typically do not meet the standard college entrance criteria for academic performance (Papay & Bambara, 2011; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005).

Research on PSE programs for students with ID is limited, but there are some promising practices including inclusive programs that utilize: a) natural supports such as peer mentoring; b) person-centered planning to identify the strengths and support needs of the student; and c) state-level cross-agency teams that share information and resources and strategize to develop PSE models that promote access to PSE for students with ID (Hart et al., 2010). Florida stakeholders sought a way to implement these best practices and, in 2010, the Association of University Centers on Disabilities awarded the University of South Florida a Think College mini-grant to develop the Florida Col-

lege Collaborative (FCC) with a purpose of utilizing collaboration and evidence-based best practices to facilitate the development of an inclusive PSE model that supports individuals with intellectual disabilities. A primary goal of the FCC was to lay the groundwork for a proposal for HEOA funding that would be utilized to demonstrate the model.

Participant Demographics and Institutional Partners

The Florida Center for Inclusive Communities, a University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities at the University of South Florida, coordinated the development of the Florida College Collaborative (FCC) which consisted of a diverse group of 51 stakeholders including self-advocates, family members, school district personnel, representatives from state agencies, the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council, Florida Protection and Advocacy Center, and college faculty and staff from 14 academic institutions within the State of Florida. Table 1 provides more information on the collaborative partners involved in the FCC.

As part of the project, two surveys were conducted to gather perspectives from stakeholder groups. The first was conducted of students with ID and their families to identify: a) perspectives on barriers to access to PSE programs; b) goals of students with ID who want to participate in PSE; and c) necessary supports and services. The anonymous survey was created in Survey Monkey and distributed through Florida service agencies' email distribution lists. Of the 553 people who started the survey, 314 (56.8%) completed it. Sixty-four percent of respondents were male and 36% were female. A large majority of the respondents were from mid to large size cities with more rural communities underrepresented. Respondents included 289 students with a mean age of 19.5 years. Reported types of disabilities included 109 students with ID, 140 students with autism or Asperger's syndrome, 38 students with Down's syndrome, 35 students with cerebral palsy, and 99 respondents with a developmental disability. The total exceeds the number of respondents because some respondents indicated more than one type of disability.

A second survey was conducted of professionals who support students with ID. Of the 354 professionals who started the online survey, 250 (71%) completed it. Respondents included vocational rehabilitation staff (6%), support coordinators (11%), transition or supported employment providers (23%), college profes-

sionals (10%), educators (40%), and other stakeholders (10%). Urban, rural, and suburban areas were represented. However, a large number of responses came from the north-central Florida area which primarily consists of rural and suburban communities. Seventy-eight percent of respondents indicated that they serve students with ID as the primary disability.

Description of Practice

The FCC project included five primary activities that were completed with technical assistance, training, and support from Think College staff. Activities included a) establishing the Florida College Collaborative; b) developing a strategic plan; c) compiling a Florida PSE program registry; d) developing a PSE webpage; and e) completing a statewide survey of students, families, and professionals. In addition, the FCC used this mini-grant opportunity to begin strategizing for the development of a proposal for one of twenty-seven TPSID grants offered through the HEOA. The purpose of the TPSID grants is to support model demonstration programs that promote successful transition of students with intellectual disabilities into higher education and to create or expand high quality inclusive model comprehensive transition and postsecondary programs for students with intellectual disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

Florida College Collaborative

The foundation of the FCC's work focused on the following premises: a) inclusive PSE for students with ID optimally occurs when a person-centered/individual support model is implemented; b) students with ID enroll in regular (inclusive) college classes either for audit or credit; c) customized, competitive employment is the outcome for all students; d) students have the opportunity to be meaningfully engaged in all aspects of college life including living on campus with individuals who do not have disabilities, participating in the Greek system, and attending social events with peers without disabilities; and e) staff development and ongoing technical assistance and supports are key in facilitating successful, positive outcomes. Values established by the FCC are inclusion, collaboration, support, social capital, and quality of life. The FCC defines "inclusive" as meaning all students with ID are welcome regardless of skill level or support needs. No students are excluded except on the basis of numerical capacity guidelines. Priority was placed on utilizing an individual

Table 1

FCC Member Affiliation (N=51)

Affiliation	N (%)
Institution of Higher Education	24 (47%)
Florida State University – Student Disability Resource Center	
Southeastern University (2)	
University of South Florida – Florida Center for Inclusive Communities (UCEDD) (2)	
University of South Florida – Project TEN	
University of South Florida – Center for Autism and Related Disabilities	
University of South Florida – Disabilities Services (3)	
University of South Florida – ADA Services	
University of South Florida – Department of Pediatrics	
St. Petersburg State College – Disability Services	
Warner University	
Hillsborough Community College – Disability Student Services	
St. Leo University – Student Support Services	
University of Florida (2)	
University of Florida – Florida Outreach Program for Children and Young Adults Who are Deaf-Blind	
Valencia Community College – Office for Students with Disabilities	
Pasco-Hernando Community College – Disability Services	
Bethune-Cookman University	
University of North Florida – Disability Resource Center	
University of West Florida – Associate Dean of Students	
School District	4 (8%)
School Board of Pasco County – Transition	
Orange County Public Schools (2)	
Polk County Schools – Transition Manager	
State Organization or Non-Profit	12 (23%)
Florida Inclusion Network (2)	
The Able Trust	
Florida Developmental Disabilities Council, Inc. (2)	
Partners in Policymaking	
Consortium for the Education of Individuals with DD	
Training Resource Network	
Central Florida Autism Institute, Inc.	
Florida Protection and Advocacy Center, Inc.	
Florida Youth Council	
The ARC of Jacksonville – College Experience Program	

State Agency	7 (14%)
Florida Department of Education – Bureau of Exceptional Student Services (2)	
Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (4)	
Agency for Persons with Disabilities	
Self-Advocate	2 (4%)
Elephant Herds Self-Advocacy	
ADAPT of Florida	
Family Organization or Representative	2 (4%)
Parent to Parent of Miami	
Parent Advocate	

support model where students receive individualized services in college courses, certificate programs, and/or degree programs for audit or credit. Within this model, the individual student's vision and career goals drive the services and supports that are provided.

Strategic Plan

Within the grant period, the FCC engaged in a variety of strategic planning activities during two full day meetings and interim webinars/conference calls. Focus was placed on the following priority areas defined by FCC members: a) development of partnerships with relevant agencies (Vocational Rehabilitation, school districts, Agency for Persons with Disabilities, etc.); b) integration of students with ID into on-campus and off-campus housing; c) involvement of other students attending college who are studying special education, rehabilitation, assistive technology, rehabilitation engineering, or other related fields; d) full inclusion; and e) person-centered planning. FCC members were grouped based on their interests and expertise and tasked with identifying goals, objectives, and action steps for addressing their assigned priority area. In addition, each group identified partners to involve and next steps for the accomplishing goals.

Statewide Surveys

Two surveys were conducted to gather the viewpoints of students, families, and professionals regarding postsecondary education for students with ID. The anonymous surveys were distributed through Survey Monkey and collected respondents' perspectives on

PSE barriers that hinder participation, hopes and goals for individuals with ID who want to participate in an inclusive PSE program, and necessary supports and services. A full article with survey results, analysis, and implications is forthcoming.

Webpage

Members of the FCC are in the process of developing a webpage that will be a source of information about transition and inclusive PSE for students with ID. It will include information about the FCC project, inclusive PSE options, links to useful resources, and other content as suggested by the FCC and its advisors. Collaborative members have agreed to provide a link to this webpage on their websites.

Florida PSE Registry

The FCC developed a list of twelve existing PSE programs for students with ID located in Florida. These programs include both mixed and separate models for students with ID. However, none of the programs currently implement an integrated individual support model. Information for the registry has been provided to the Florida Department of Education's Project Transition Education Network (TEN) for posting on their website.

Observed Outcomes

Through this project, new partnerships blossomed and positive energy was created as the FCC worked diligently and passionately to achieve its goals. It was learned that curriculum supports or curriculum modifications are needed to facilitate success of students with ID in inclusive PSE settings. Additionally, faculty need training, beyond subject matter expertise, to maintain effective PSE programs for students with ID. PSE programs that are geared toward a student's level of learning would be ideal. Also, incorporating options for job training or employment preparation into the curricula would facilitate success in obtaining employment following completion of the PSE program.

The use of universal design and assistive technology is necessary for facilitating access to campus, classrooms, and materials. Behavioral and social supports and assistance with activities of daily living such as personal care assistance and physical supports are required. Additionally, logistical supports that include transportation assistance, financial support, and housing on or near campus are needed.

PSE programs cannot be limited to academics and be considered fully inclusive. Opportunities for students with ID to socialize among peers without disabilities and to receive supports by peer mentors are essential to full inclusion in campus life. Survey responses reflected that students with ID share the hopes and dreams of their peers without disabilities. These include having a job, a home, a spouse, good friends, and involvement in their communities.

Information learned through activities of the FCC project, including the strategic planning process, has been utilized to develop a model PSE program that is currently being implemented by members of the FCC representing the Florida Department of Education's Project TEN program. Project TEN, housed at the University of South Florida, was awarded a TPSID model demonstration grant to test the PSE model. Through the TPSID grant, Project TEN is continuing the planning and implementation process that was started by the FCC.

Implications and Portability

Lack of opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities to participate in PSE is a national problem. The FCC identified barriers to PSE programs

including: a) lack of awareness of PSE options; b) lack of research on effective PSE programs for students with ID; c) lack of engagement of administrators at PSE institutions (President, Provost, Deans, etc.); d) limited non-degree options such as certificate programs; and e) lack of funding for necessary supports.

Challenges encountered by the FCC included limited time to bring stakeholders together to plan and develop strategies for addressing the problem. Also, taking time to learn more about FCC member's personal goals and to achieve consensus on the definition of inclusion would have aided in the collaborative process.

The efforts of the FCC can be replicated by other states by bringing together key stakeholders to identify challenges and opportunities pertaining to PSE options for students with ID. A combination of strategic planning, networking, and knowledge and resource sharing can be utilized to facilitate availability and access to inclusive PSE programs. More research needs to be conducted on utilizing the individual support model and peer mentors to assess the impact of these strategies on successful PSE outcomes. Florida's continued efforts through the TPSID grant will generate additional evidence-based best practices to guide systems in the development of inclusive PSE programs that support students with ID.

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