

Changing Systems to Provide Inclusive Higher Education for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

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Abstract

For several decades, institutions of higher education (IHE) have been addressing the need for postsecondary education (PSE) for students with intellectual disabilities (ID). These efforts have increased significantly since 2008 with passage of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA). The law includes a defined set of services and activities which make up a Comprehensive Transition Program (CTP) of PSE for students with ID, as a pathway to employment. In response to student need and the HEOA, California developed a unique partnership between Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) and selected Community Colleges to create College to Career (C2C) Programs. This practice brief describes PSE programs for students with ID in general and development of the C2C programs. It also shares student outcome data and implications from the C2C programs which may be applicable to other colleges and universities as they strive to meet the PSE needs of students with ID on their campuses.

Keywords: *Intellectual disabilities, college to career*

The development of postsecondary education (PSE) for individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) is relatively new (Kelly & Westling, 2013; Plotner & Marshall, 2015). Traditionally, students with ID did not meet matriculation requirements and given their support needs, they were not considered a match for the integrated college experience (Plotner & Marshall, 2015). In the first decade of 2000, growth occurred in the number of PSE options for individuals with disabilities, including students with ID (Grigal & Hart, 2010; Grigal, Hart, & Weir, 2012; Newman, Wagner, Cameto, Knokey, & Shaver, 2010; Raue & Lewis, 2011; Snyder & Dillow, 2010). Scholars (e.g., Kelly & Westling, 2013; Neubert, Moon, Grigal & Redd, 2001) credited federal legislation for improvements in inclusive higher education.

Much of the growth in PSE programs is attributable to the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 ([HEOA]; Plotner & Marshall, 2015). It specifically included provisions to increase PSE participation of individuals with ID and cited meaningful employment as a goal. The law defined an intellectual disability within the context of higher education, created a new

category of Title IV-funded higher education programs known as Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary programs (CTP), made federal financial aid available to eligible students attending CTPs, waived matriculation requirements, added requirements for inclusive student participation, and funded model demonstration PSE programs, as well as a national technical assistance center (Grigal, Hart & Weir, 2013).

Zaft, Hart, and Zimbrich (2004) found lack of access to PSE was a major barrier to improved employment outcomes; less than 40% of young adults with ID accessed higher education compared to almost 80% for others. Individuals with ID who have participated in PSE have experienced better post school outcomes including higher levels of employment, increased wages, and extended social networks than peers who did not have PSE (Hart, 2006). Rehabilitation outcome data show that youth with ID who participated in PSE were 26% more likely to leave Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) with a paid job and earned 73% in higher weekly income (Migliore, Butterworth, & Hart, 2009).

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Depiction of the Problem

Both the community colleges and VR in California identified the need to change systems to improve programming and outcomes for students/clients with ID. The California Community Colleges (CCC) are an open access system of higher education. Generally, entrance criteria requires students to be 18 years of age or older, have a high school diploma, or be able to “benefit from instruction.” Many CCCs offer continuing or adult education classes to meet the lifelong learning needs of various student populations, including students with ID. Currently, at colleges without a College to Career (C2C) program, students with ID enroll in classes with varying degrees of inclusion and student success. In 2014-15, 6,871 students with ID received services or took a special class for students with disabilities in a CCC (DSPS Allocations, n.d.). It is estimated that many of these students are enrolled in continuing education life skill classes held in community facilities for persons with ID. In other cases, students attend specialized classes on independent living and pre-employment skills on campus with other students with ID. In situations where students do enroll in inclusive classes on campus, they often start with Adaptive Physical Education (APE) or an arts class and go on to enroll in classes without academic prerequisites. Auditing of classes is rarely used as an option for students with ID in the CCCs.

Other key institutional partners, namely the VR and developmental disabilities (DD) fields, offered little focus for transition age youth with ID to become prepared to work in integrated settings in their communities and to live independently. VR is a federal program administered by the state that provides services to job seekers with disabilities to achieve and maintain competitive employment. Youth with ID who became clients of VR were traditionally referred to specialized vendors who placed them in supported employment jobs, often in a group setting. Within the DD system, the significant majority of youth with ID exiting high school were referred to segregated, non-work “day activity programs” which took them further away from a future which involves employment as a major life activity.

Description of Practice: The Development of the C2C Programs

While many colleges, especially community colleges, had been serving students with ID for decades, few, if any, had programs which were consistent with the federal guidance provided in the HEOA. Colleges and universities were now challenged to re-think their expectations of students with ID, analyze their current

services and identify needed new services and partnerships both on campus and in the community. California found it lacked effective existing programming and needed new systemic initiatives. To address this need, a unique partnership developed between the CCCs and California VR, known in California as the Department of Rehabilitation (DOR) in the form of five pilot C2C Programs. Interested colleges were required to submit proposals to DOR to implement three-year programs for students with ID that were aligned with the HEOA and met the following conditions: (a) be offered at a college; (b) support students with ID who are seeking to continue academic, career and technical, and independent living instruction to prepare for gainful employment; (c) include guidance and advising; (d) include at least 50% focus on academic opportunities with students without disabilities; and (e) lead to competitive employment outcomes as indicated in the contract.

The initial C2C programs, located at College of Alameda, North Orange County Community District, Sacramento City College, San Diego Community College District, and Santa Rosa Junior College, were funded, beginning in FY 2010-11 at \$250,000 per year for four years. No matching funds were required. As outlined in a contract between DOR and the college, the programs offered rehabilitation services as well as disability support services provided by the college. The supplemental VR services offered through the C2C program at the college included: focused guidance/advising to match the student’s PSE experience to their career interests, educational coaching, work experience, job development, and placement services. They also offered program coordination and direction both within the campus and between the college and DOR and community based DD services. Four of the five initial programs also provided specialized instruction.

Education coaching, which has been identified as a needed service by students and staff, included organizational supports to assist students to prepare for and debrief after classes and provided assistance with executive functioning. To attain sufficient well-trained education coaches, one C2C program utilized occupational therapy assistant students on campus to serve as education coaches.

At the end of the first three year funding cycle, C2C programs were approved by DOR for three additional years of funding through June 30, 2017. In addition, three additional college programs started a three-year funding cycle beginning in 2015: Fresno City College, Shasta College, and West Los Angeles College. This practice brief presents a description of key elements from the first three years of implementation of the C2C program, including academic and campus participation,

career development activities, and educational supports for student access and success.

Participant Demographics

Across the five initial sites, 296 students participated in the C2C program during the first three-years spanning 2011-2014; 87 students in Year One (2011-12), 108 in Year Two (2012-13), and 101 in Year Three (2013-14). The number of students per site ranged from 54 to 62, with sites most commonly having 60 students. The majority of C2C students were male (57%). Three-quarters (77%) of students were between the ages of 18 and 26, with an average age of 25 (median=24). Half of the students were White, 14% were Black or African-American, and another 14% were Asian. Nearly a quarter (24%) of C2C students were Hispanic or Latino. C2C students primarily had an intellectual disability (52%) and/or developmental delay (36%). A quarter (27%) of C2C students had autism either alone or in combination with another diagnosis. At the time of referral to C2C, less than half (46%) of the students were DOR clients. As a result, 160 individuals became eligible clients of DOR. Students were also asked about previous academic and work experiences prior to C2C. A little over half (54%) of the C2C students had taken a college course prior to C2C. The majority of incoming C2C students (63%) had not been employed at or above minimum wage prior to C2C.

Institutional Partners/Resources

The two key institutional partners in the development and implementation of C2C programs were the CCCs and DOR. As part of this effort, the Chancellor's Office of the CCCs contracted with the Tarjan Center at UCLA to serve as a consultant in developing the programs. The Tarjan Center, which is a nationally funded University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD), continued to provide professional development, technical assistance, and evaluation services to the C2C programs. In addition, the local DD service agencies, known as Regional Centers, partnered with the colleges to provide additional services as well as program referral to the C2Cs.

Evaluation of Observed Outcomes

Course Enrollments

On average, C2C students enrolled in six to seven classes per year which included a variety of courses. As students moved through the C2C program, course enrollments in academically specialized courses designed for

students with ID and other disabilities, which includes Disabled Student Programs and Services courses and C2C courses, decreased and regular course enrollments increased (See Table 1). For-credit course enrollments increased from 53% (Year One) to 62% (Year Three). Course enrollments were also increasingly related to a student's career goals, rising to 61% in Year Three from 47% in Year One. Examples of courses related to the student's career goals were in the areas of Child Development (i.e., Nutrition, Health, and Safety; Child Development Curriculum: Music/motor skills; Child, Family, and Community); Culinary Arts (Food Production Theory; Intro to Hospitality and Tourism; Food and Beverage Management); Computer skills (Intro to PowerPoint, Desktop Publishing, Word, Database Development, and Principles of Information Systems); Business (Law and Legal Environment; and Business Mathematics) and the Arts (Beginning Voice for Actors, Music Appreciation, and Beginning Painting). Likewise, course enrollments related to a degree/certificate increased from 6% in Year One to 21% in Year Three.

Career Development and Work Experiences

As part of C2C, students engaged in a variety of job preparedness activities. In Year Three, the majority of students had prepared a resume (75%), identified potential employers (68%), created a list of references (61%), and conducted an online job search (60%). Nearly half (47%) of C2C students submitted a resume in Year Three compared to 36% in Year One. There was an increase in the percentage of students who applied for a job from 15% in Year One to 46% in Year Three.

The C2C program was designed to focus on work experiences after the first year. There was an increase in the number of work experiences, paid and unpaid, from Year One to Year Three. In Year One, 26 (30%) of the 87 students attending C2C had 32 work experiences. In Year Two, 88 (47%) of the 188 C2C students had 115 work experiences. In Year Three, 116 (44%) of the 265 students in C2C had 154 work experiences. The top three most common work experiences in each year were individual paid jobs, volunteer positions, and unpaid internships. See Figure 1. C2C students who had an individual paid job earned, on average, over nine dollars an hour: \$9.05 (Year One); \$9.79 (Year Two); \$9.45 (Year Three). C2C students worked, on average, 13 to 22 hours a week. Examples of employers include preschool and elementary schools, hospitals, museums, movie theaters, grocery, restaurants, and retail stores.

Systemic Changes at the College

The C2C program also facilitated attitudinal changes as well as expansion of services and programs offered

at the college to assist students with ID in gaining skills for employment. For example, at one site, conversations with C2C staff and the department chair of the auto body program led to progress in developing certificates of proficiency in specific task areas related to auto body rather than the requirement for completion of a full certificate which may not be attainable for some students with ID. At another site, the building of relationships among staff heightened the awareness of the needs of students with disabilities, including those with ID, in developing and restructuring new certificate programs.

Implications and Portability

As described in this practice brief, the HEOA created the framework for key elements to be considered for supporting individuals with ID in higher education. Several implications arose from implementation of C2C, which may be applicable in other postsecondary settings that are seeking to better serve students with ID. First, colleges need to venture into the new area of preparing students with ID for competitive, integrated employment. This focus, which traditionally is beyond the scope of the college, led to a natural partnership with VR agencies in the form of C2C programs in California and possibly to other collaborative programming strategies with VR in other states. A second implication was the need for colleges to examine already existing services and initiatives in their disability support services (DSS) and other campus offices that are applicable to serving students with ID and to change systems and attitudes to recognize students with ID as a natural part of the student population. Disability supports discussed in the paper along with Universal Learning Design and Student Diversity efforts were part of the already available resources. Third, the C2C's had to identify unique needs for some of their students that go beyond services provided to other students with disabilities such as education coaching and the development of other pre-vocational and vocational supports. Additional resources must then be identified to meet these needs. In the case of California, DOR funding was utilized to enhance the offerings and services of the college to better assist students with ID to succeed in career oriented college courses and enter into integrated employment.

While C2C presents one promising model for using PSE as a pathway to employment for students with ID, it is not the only one. In designing the best program for each IHE, the process of using the HEOA as a framework and then identifying available resources as well as unmet needs and key strategic partners is a portable strategy that can be utilized universally.

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Table 1

Number and Percent of Course Enrollments by Year

Types of Courses	Year One (n=527 courses)	Year Two (n=1127 courses)	Year Three (n=1501 courses)
Basic skills course	37 (7.0%)	77 (6.8%)	101 (6.7%)
C2C courses	158 (29.8%)	313 (27.8%)	307 (20.5%)
Career Technical Education	33 (6.3%)	51 (4.5%)	104 (6.9%)
DSPS courses	135 (25.6%)	247 (21.9%)	292 (19.5%)
Regular courses	154 (29.2%)	414 (36.7%)	664 (44.2%)
Other regular course	11 (2.1%)	25 (2.2%)	33 (2.2%)

Figure 1. Percentage of Types of Work Experiences by Year

