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## College Students with Intellectual Disabilities: How Are They Faring?



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**PROPELLED BY THE REAUTHORIZATION OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION OPPORTUNITY ACT OF 2008 (HEOA) and evidence that postsecondary education positively impacts employment and adult outcomes of individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID), inclusive living-learning opportunities for students with ID are emerging. Accompanying the recent shift in conventional wisdom about “who” should go to college is a relative dearth of information on how students with ID who live in residence halls with traditional undergraduates are faring. We describe the University of Iowa (UI) REACH (Realizing Educational and Career Hopes) program, its students, and the living-learning community they experience at the University of Iowa. We describe strategies employed to support their transition to college, to build family partnerships, and to help them overcome the challenges and complexities of the social environment. Campus opportunities and the central role of student staff–RAs and mentors—to the integration of REACH students into the campus community are described. A comparison of UI-REACH and first-year college students on the Ryff Scales of Psychological Well-Being and the Openness to Diversity/Challenge Scale revealed no significant differences between the student groups. These results suggest that UI-REACH and first-year college students are adjusting to college similarly on such dimensions as self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose in life, positive relations with others, environmental mastery, and autonomy. We strongly encourage colleges and universities to forge ahead in the development of inclusive postsecondary education options for students with ID.**

The vision of providing opportunities for students with ID to receive quality postsecondary education is not new. Although some programs . . . have existed for years, comprehensive college experiences for students with ID have been limited in number and unavailable to most families.

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To date the bulk of postsecondary education endeavors on behalf of students with intellectual disabilities (ID) (e.g., Down syndrome, Autism Spectrum Disorder, pervasive developmental delay, traumatic brain injury) have focused on vocational preparedness and the transition of secondary students to paid employment and greater independence (e.g., Moon, Simonsen, & Neubert, 2011). Following the recommendations of the National Council on Disability and Social Security Administration (2000) to expand secondary programs to two- and four-year college and university campuses and with the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004, a multitude of postsecondary transition programs developed nationwide (Neubert & Redd, 2008).

Participation of students with ID in postsecondary education programs is positively correlated with competitive employment (Moon et al., 2011; Zafft, Hart, & Zimbrich, 2004), an improved sense of independence (Neubert & Redd, 2008), and increased satisfaction in such domains as emotional well-being and personal development (Hughson, Moodie, &

Uditsky, 2006). In spite of this knowledge and the development of a widening range of postsecondary options for students with ID, adult outcomes for these individuals are disheartening in comparison to those for typically developing students (Kochhar-Bryant, 2007; Ludlow, 2012) and even students with other disabilities such as learning disabilities (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Levine, & Garza, 2006).

The vision of providing opportunities for students with ID to receive quality postsecondary education is not new. Although some programs (e.g., the Pace Program at National Louis University-Skokie; the Mason LIFE Program at George Mason University) have existed for years, comprehensive college experiences for students with ID have been limited in number and unavailable to most families (Grigal, Hart, & Paiewonsky, 2010). With the passage of the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (HEOA), some of the barriers to students on college and university campuses have been removed. For example, students with ID enrolled in institutions with Comprehensive Transition Program status, as defined by the Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act of 2008, are now able to (a) apply for federal support (e.g., Pell grants, federal work-study programs, federal supplemental education opportunity grants) that had previously been available only to students in degree-earning programs; (b) be admitted to college without high school diplomas, due to a continuation of their IEP from high school; (c) participate in college coursework; and (d) be provided with the individualized supports to maximize their educational experience. These changes in federal law encourage institutions of higher education to offer students with ID

the postsecondary education options that families and educators only dreamed of in the very recent past.

The HEOA also authorized the funding of 27 model demonstration programs, called Transition Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) (Kleinert, Jones, Sheppard-Jones, Harp, & Harrison, 2012), and a National Coordinating Center (NCC). Thus, the HEOA provided fiscal and technical support to higher education institutions, including start-up funds to create and evaluate the 27 transition programs and to assess the effectiveness of inclusive postsecondary education in general. These projects are located in 23 states with funding beginning in 2010. Regularly scheduled communications and multiple collaborations related to the design, implementation, and evaluation of transition programs are coordinated by the NCC. It is anticipated that the record of experiences and the program and student-level data being analyzed will yield a wealth of information to guide higher education institutions in establishing programs for students with ID.

## **THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA REALIZING EDUCATIONAL AND CAREER HOPES PROGRAM**

The University of Iowa REACH Program (UI-REACH) is one of the 27 federally funded transition programs. It is a two-year certificate (non-degree earning) program for students with ID. The overarching mission of the program is to provide students with ID a comprehensive, inclusive college experience which prepares them to become independent, engaged, self-determined young adults (University of Iowa, 2010). The UI-REACH

model emphasizes student life, academic life, and career development and transition (i.e., post-program support) and strives to foster an authentic, inclusive living-learning experience that brings a rich array of learning opportunities to the multiple dimensions of each student's immediate life circumstances. To impact the postsecondary life trajectories of individuals with ID, the program goals include creating a living-learning environment that fosters growth in academics (Solberg, Howard, Gresham, & Carter, 2012); improves self-management, self-advocacy, and self-determination (Weinkauff, 2002); and enhances student communication and social and interpersonal skills (Geller & Greenberg, 2010; McCoy & Hermansen, 2007) in a person-centered manner (Holburn, Jacobson, Vietze, Schwartz, & Sersen, 2000).

## **UI-REACH STUDENTS**

To date UI-REACH has served 74 students, including approximately 35% in-state residents and 65% out-of-state. Students hail from 19 states—from New York to California, Texas to South Dakota, with rural, suburban, and urban hometowns (e.g., population range = 400 to >1,000,000). The UI-REACH admissions guidelines require applicants to be between the ages of 18 and 25 when admitted. All students who apply to the program complete an application packet, tour the program, and participate in on-campus student and family interviews. Upon admission, all students are issued a university identification card and register for classes and pay bills in the same way as other students do. Families may submit a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) to the university Office of Financial Aid to qualify for

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a need-based UI-REACH scholarship. Approximately \$500,000 in privately donated monies have been awarded to date.

No specific disability label is required to be part of the program, which admits students with a wide range of intellectual, social, independent life, and communication skills. Most have some volunteer and community-based experiences. Academic achievement levels are wide-ranging, with the majority of students' academic skills between the 3rd and 6th grade level. Similarly, overall cognitive/intellectual functioning as measured by standardized intelligence tests revealed intelligence quotients ( $M = 100$ ,  $SD = 15$ ) ranging from the 50s to approximately 100, with the scores of most students falling in the low- to mid-70s.

UI-REACH students typically have difficulties in the following areas:

- attention span and memory
- time and money management
- organization
- self-regulation of emotions and behaviors
- processing oral language
- interpreting and responding to social cues and verbal instructions
- heightened anxiety
- fatigue
- managing peer pressure
- social and personal boundaries
- problem-solving and stress management
- abstract thinking
- fine and gross motor skills
- sleep regulation
- hypersensitivity to light/sound/touch
- rigidity of thinking

These difficulties do not overshadow the

positive characteristics of individuals with ID, who are also hardworking, loyal, fun, trustworthy, dedicated, passionate, kind hearted, joyful, and committed to being lifelong learners; nor are they intended to suggest a negative, deficit-oriented perspective. Rather, the intent is to underscore the very serious challenges faced by these students and to recognize the heroic effort they may put forth every day to access and enjoy opportunities and resources others may take for granted.

## STUDENT LIFE AND CAMPUS INVOLVEMENT

The literature is replete with research that supports the value of residence hall life and living-learning communities for undergraduate students in such areas as adjustment to college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), academic outcomes (Brower, 1996; Stassen, 2003), and social transitions (e.g., social interactions, social adjustment) (Stassen, 2003). At UI-REACH, we often refer to the residence hall and campus as our most important classroom. For the most part, campus life for UI-REACH students is similar to that for any undergraduate living in the residence hall. In addition to following university and housing student handbook policies, these students are expected to abide by several procedures intended to promote student safety (e.g., sign-in each evening, be in the building by curfew) and engagement (e.g., attend mentor-supported evening activities, volunteer). Their social adjustment and personal transition to the university and their independence are impacted positively by this integrated residence hall community experience with traditional undergraduate students.

Also integral to their adjustment are the



residence hall assistants (RAs). UI-REACH collaborates with University Housing & Dining to recruit, hire, and train its undergraduate RAs. Two male and two female RAs rotate duty, one on each of two hall floors during the later hours of each evening of the week. Although UI-REACH students often interact with other RAs in the residence hall, the first staff person they tend to seek out with questions and concerns is one of their own RAs.

To encourage engagement in campus activities, RAs and mentors support UI-REACH students in their initial participation in hall-sponsored social and educational programs with undergraduates; once the students are comfortable, they attend such activities independently. These inclusive experiences promote acceptance, respect, and cooperation, as well as building a community and sense of belonging (Vander Busard, 2012). These students experience campus life with other students by participating in such things as cultural and social events, theater performances, student clubs, and sporting events. Through their involvement in these and other leisure and recreational opportunities, they discover new interests. UI-REACH staff have found that students and families highly value campus life, especially the residence hall experience. Families of these students have stated unequivocally during applicant interviews that living in the residence hall and experiencing typical student life activities were pivotal factors in the student's decision to become part of the program.

### **UI-REACH STUDENTS AND FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE STUDENTS**

Our study of UI-REACH and its students had two research objectives; the first was to assess

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these students' psychological well-being after a year in college to determine whether or not they were similar or dissimilar to their college peers. The University of Iowa, like many universities, is a very diverse community; therefore, the second research objective was to assess UI-REACH students' openness to diversity and response to diversity challenges. Together these data might help to inform and potentially bolster the arguments of college and university proponents considering developing postsecondary education opportunities for students with ID.

The responses of UI-REACH students were compared to those of undergraduates using two scales—the Ryff Scales of Psychological Well-Being (SPWB) and the Openness to Diversity/Challenge Scale (ODC)—after they had been on campus for one year. We used a randomly selected sample from the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education as a naturally occurring comparison group. The Wabash study was designed to measure the experiences and outcomes of a liberal arts education. Our random sample was drawn from a larger sample that consisted of first-year students at 19 four-year and two-year colleges and universities located in 11 states



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The seven-item Openness to Diversity/Challenge Scale measures openness to cultural and racial diversity and the extent to which one enjoys being challenged by different perspectives, values, and ideas.

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from four general regions of the United States: the Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, and Pacific Coast. The total sample with both precollege and end-of-first-year data was 3,081 students (E. Pascarella, personal communication, July 13, 2012). The Wabash data were collected in the fall of 2006 and the spring of 2007; UI-REACH data were collected in the fall of 2011 and the spring of 2012. These data were collected with IRB approval as part of the REACH repository and included informed consent/assent.

*Psychological well-being* was operationalized with the total score from the Ryff scales (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995), which is a 54-item theoretically grounded instrument that specifically focuses on measuring six dimensions of psychological well-being: positive evaluations of oneself (*self-acceptance*), sense of continued growth and development as a person (*personal growth*), belief in a purposeful and meaningful life (*purpose in life*), quality relations with others (*positive relations with others*), capacity to effectively manage one's life and surrounding world (*environmental mastery*), and sense of self-determination (*autonomy*). The scales tend to have significant, positive associations

with frequently used measures of happiness and satisfaction and negative associations with depression. The clearest evidence of the instrument's predictive validity is with the self-acceptance and environmental mastery scales (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). The internal consistency (alpha) reliability for the total SPWB scales is .88 (E. Pascarella, personal communication, July 13, 2012).

The seven-item Openness to Diversity/Challenge Scale measures openness to cultural and racial diversity and the extent to which one enjoys being challenged by different perspectives, values, and ideas (Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, & Terenzini, 1998). Scores on this scale significantly predict the likelihood of participating in a racial/cultural workshop during the first year of college (Whitt, Edison, Pascarella, Terenzini, & Nora, 2001). Precollege scores correlated .37 with a measure of students' experiences with diverse others and diverse ideas. The Openness scale has an internal consistency reliability of .83 (E. Pascarella, personal communication, July 13, 2012). Our analyses showed that UI-REACH student data paralleled the Wabash data. Various forms of regression-based analysis of covariance were used to determine the differences between UI-REACH students ( $n = 20$ ) and the Wabash random sample comparison group ( $n = 25$ ) on the dependent measures (i.e., psychological well-being, openness to diversity). All dependent measures were standardized. In each comparison, statistical controls for the following covariates were introduced: a parallel precollege measure of each dependent variable; full-time or less than full-time enrollment; living on campus

versus commuting; a seven-item measure of secondary school involvement; an eight-item measure of precollege academic motivation; a measure of parental education; attendance at a community college; and attendance at a liberal arts college (E. Pascarella, personal communication, July 13, 2012).

Table 1 summarizes the results of the analyses of covariance. The coefficient in Table 1 represents the adjusted mean difference between the UI-REACH students and the Wabash comparison group on end-of-first-year dependent measures. A positive coefficient represents an adjusted mean difference favoring the UI-REACH students, while a negative coefficient represents an adjusted mean difference favoring the Wabash comparison group. There were no statistically significant adjusted mean differences between the UI-REACH students and their Wabash counterparts. The absence of a statistically significant difference indicates that both students with ID and traditional undergraduates have similar psychological well-being profiles, suggesting that they experience and respond to cultural and racial diversity in the residence

hall and on campus in similar ways.

## DISCUSSION OF OUTCOMES, CHALLENGES, AND CRITICAL SUPPORTS

Propelled by the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 and evidence that postsecondary education positively impacts individuals with ID, inclusive residential living opportunities such as the living-learning community developed at the University of Iowa are emerging. The advent of students with ID successfully attending colleges and universities refutes the conventional wisdom of who should go to college (Ludlow, 2012). Analysis of first-year undergraduate and UI-REACH student responses to the Ryff scales showed no significant differences in the student groups, suggesting that the psychological adjustment of students with ID cannot be differentiated from that of typical undergraduates after one year of college. Similarly, UI-REACH student responses to the Openness scale showed no significant difference. These indicators suggest that students with ID are transitioning to college life in a manner similar to that of first-year college

**Table 1**

*Statistically Adjusted Mean Differences Between REACH Students and a Random Sample of Wabash National Study (WNS) Students on Selected End-of-First-Year Scales*

Dependent variable scales	Coefficient *, **	p-value
Ryff Overall Scales of Psychological Well-Being	-.216	.513
Openness to Diversity/Challenge Scale	-.102	.829

Note. \*REACH students (n = 20); random WNS student sample (n = 25).

\*\*The negative coefficient (-) represents an adjusted mean difference favoring the WNS comparison group.



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## The advent of students with ID successfully attending colleges and universities refutes the conventional wisdom of who should go to college.

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students across the U.S.

The work of Longerbeam, Inkelas, and Brower (2007) may in part explain the similar experiences of UI-REACH students and first-year college students. They noted that student engagement increases across time along with a sense of belonging (Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007) as students learn to navigate campus and build relationships with peers, faculty, and staff and as the stresses associated with everyday student life decline. To create a parallel experience for UI-REACH students, the program's staff dedicate several days to campus navigation activities and attempt to reduce the anxiety associated with change by using individualized student schedules, weekly advising sessions, and carefully timed announcements. To offset potential social isolation and to enhance social connections, some evening and weekend activities are required. To enhance motivation, leadership development is linked with student interests.

Being part of a living-learning community offers a plethora of opportunities for achieving personal growth, developing positive relations, and gaining a sense of environmental mastery. We consider student misunderstandings, negative interactions, and quarrelsome behavior to be opportunities for learning and

practicing self-control, self-advocacy, and problem-solving. Designing carefully coordinated, individualized strategies for addressing personal challenges is a continuous process. Staff are always weighing the importance of the individual making independent choices (good or bad) with when and how much support to provide and must consider the learning curves of students, their limited experience in complex social environments, and their need for substantially more practice in using age-appropriate behaviors and emotions. That being said, the safety, rights, and well-being of each student and the community are considered in determining courses of action.

To promote respectful interactions and to capture teaching moments beyond the academic classroom, UI-REACH employs several strategies: (a) program-specific resident assistants (b) on-call UI-REACH professional staff, (c) nightly duty logs and weekly staff meetings, (d) referrals to university services, and (e) mediated roommate contracts. The program also offers short-term courses (e.g., stress management, couples counseling) to small groups of UI-REACH students.

As noted previously, UI-REACH resident assistants have the same responsibilities as traditional RAs do (e.g., roommate mediation, community building, educational and recreational programming). They also receive specialized training to prepare them for additional responsibilities (e.g., monitoring curfew, modeling appropriate social skills and boundaries, assisting residents with expressing themselves, providing direct and meaningful feedback, and fostering positive social interactions among *all* students in the hall). These RAs are the natural bridge between the UI-REACH living-learning



community and the greater residence hall.

The 10th floor of Stanley Hall, home to both UI-REACH and other undergraduate residents, was named the Residence Hall Community of the Month in 2011 by the National Association of College and University Residence Halls (NACURH) for being respectful, safe, and engaging for all students (Vander Busard, 2012). The RA who submitted the nomination indicated that the community was strong for several reasons:

Several traditional residents have opted to return to the 10th floor community as a result of their positive experience with REACH students. Today, staff and guests can hear residents joking with each other, laughing together, and comforting each other.

It is a great community for all residents—one that offers a feeling of unity, belonging, and hope for the future.

Reflecting upon the 2011-12 academic year, the RAs noted that initially they were concerned about saying or doing something wrong and wanted to interact with the UI-REACH students as they did with other students. The RAs observed that these students were successful in adapting to the residential environment:

[They] made huge strides in their maturity when dealing with other residents [and they] gained much more independence and confidence, and [made] huge improvements in things they . . . had to work really hard at and be reminded about multiple times at the beginning of the year [that] were an in-existent [sic] issue by the end.

The RAs commented on benefits to themselves and to the other students, indicating that “individuals with disabilities are forever overcoming the odds against them. . . . They were

continuously surprising me with their newly acquired knowledge and abilities.” The RAs also acknowledged their own personal growth in understanding disabilities issues and developing more patience.

Establishing and maintaining open communication with UI-REACH family members/guardians is essential for the student’s adjustment to college. Of course, these students are granted the same rights to privacy as other students (see the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act [FERPA, 1974]). While some UI-REACH students are their own guardians, others have legal guardians. To enable UI-REACH staff to support students, each student is assigned a professional staff member as an advisor to serve as a liaison to family members/guardians. An advisor may contact family members/guardians to share updates on a student’s progress, to seek guidance on a recurring concern, or to discuss ways family members/guardians can support and reinforce a student. This collaborative relationship enables the student to receive a consistent message when grappling with different situations. Family members/guardians also collaborate with UI-REACH advisors in communicating expectations for academics and behavior to these students.

The results of our study of UI-REACH stu-



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dents and first-year college students suggest that both groups are experiencing college and their adjustment to it in similar ways in terms of their psychological well-being and openness to diversity. We hypothesize that this similarity is in part a function of UI-REACH students living in an integrated residence hall and receiving both systemic support (e.g., specially trained RAs, weekly advising, mentor-supported activity engagement) and individualized support (e.g., communication and behavioral guidance, roommate agreements, stress management strategies, person-centered planning).

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

All students have the right to an effective postsecondary education. This is a historical moment with an unparalleled opportunity for colleges and universities to expand their educational mission to include serving students with intellectual disabilities. Our experience at UI-REACH has demonstrated that an expanded institutional definition of diversity that includes students with ID results in unique and deeply meaningful learning opportunities for all students. Providing inclusive residence hall living to students with ID appears to hold particular promise for the futures of all students by enriching their day-by-day college life experience and better preparing them for living and working in diverse communities.

We also know that research revealing what constitutes evidence-based best practices in inclusive postsecondary education settings for students with ID is sorely lacking. There is a dearth of empirical data on the immediate and long-term outcomes of program components and postsecondary programs in general.

Higher education institutions have the expertise and talents of administrators, faculty, staff, and students that can contribute significantly to the science that will improve our understanding of how to best impact the learning and life outcomes of students with ID and their college peers. There is an urgent need for both qualitative and quantitative research to examine the many questions that must be addressed to guide policy makers, administrators, educational practitioners, and family members/guardians. We strongly encourage individuals and institutions to work together to establish evaluation designs and research agendas in concert with the development of postsecondary education options for students with ID.

In closing, our experience at UI-REACH has been a dynamic, iterative process. Staff, family members/guardians, and students have all learned and changed along the way. While it is critical to anticipate and identify the supports, structure, resources, and opportunities that are required to promote student engagement, social adjustment, and learning, there is no blueprint for this important work. Although we are at a formative stage in the development of postsecondary education options, we have found one constant in supporting students in their journey to independence while living away from home: the centrality of developing collaborative relationships with family members and guardians.

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## Discussion Questions

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1. Considering the areas in which UI-REACH students typically have difficulty, how can residence hall staff monitor and mentor students to ensure that they are getting enough sleep, handling peer pressure, and managing time and money appropriately? Should this be part of their role? What role should parents/guardians play in this monitoring and mentoring process?
2. The UI-REACH program requires applicants to be between the ages of 18 and 25 when admitted. Consider and weigh the pros and cons of a decision to extend the age requirements to include non-traditional students (second career, war veterans, graduate students, etc.).
3. What leadership or mentoring role do you believe successful students participating in programs such as UI-REACH can play as they interact with similar students with IDs? Develop and recommend a plan for implementation.
4. The authors suggest there is an "urgent need for both qualitative and quantitative research" to "improve our understanding of how to best impact the learning and life outcomes of students with ID and their college peers." What kinds of assessment and evaluation can student affairs professionals undertake to help further the understanding of programs like UI-REACH's?
5. What can student affairs practitioners who work with students with IDs glean from the research on UI-REACH regarding external issues of cross-campus collaboration, purposeful staff training, etc.? How can these ideas help to inform those in the university community who do not interact with these students?
6. This study advances the importance of more inclusive postsecondary education opportunities. In what ways can you as a student affairs practitioner encourage a conversation about such an expansion on your campus?

*Discussion questions developed by  
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