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# Increasing Access to Postsecondary Education for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

Amy L. Cook

*University of Massachusetts Boston, amy.cook@umb.edu*

Laura A. Hayden

*University of Massachusetts Boston, laura.hayden@umb.edu*

Felicia Wilczenski

*University of Massachusetts Boston, Felicia.Wilczenski@umb.edu*

Timothy A. Poynton

*University of Massachusetts Boston, Tim.Poynton@umb.edu*

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# Increasing Access to Postsecondary Education for Students with Intellectual Disabilities



Authored by

Amy L. Cook (University of Massachusetts Boston), Laura A. Hayden (University of Massachusetts Boston), Felicia Wilczenski (University of Massachusetts Boston), Timothy A. Poynton (University of Massachusetts Boston)

## ABSTRACT

Students with intellectual disabilities (ID) are increasingly seeking postsecondary education (PSE) opportunities. High school to college transition presents its challenges for all students, and school counselors are uniquely positioned to assist students with ID throughout the PSE process. This article provides a review of the literature on PSE and specifically explores the different types of PSE programming available and strategies high school counselors can employ to effectively assist students with ID in PSE planning.

When preparing students for college and career readiness, traditionally educators have focused on mainstream students, leaving out students with moderate to severe disabilities, including intellectual disabilities (ID) (Kleinert, Jones, Sheppard-Jones, Harp, & Harrison, 2012). According to the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5), intellectual disability (ID) includes limitations in intellectual functioning and social/adaptive behavior (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Schalock et al., 2010). Educators have held misconceptions about promoting college access among students with ID, and may believe that encouraging students with ID to pursue postsecondary education (PSE) is tantamount to setting them

up for failure (Cook, Hayden, & Wilczenski, 2014). These misconceptions may be fueled in part by educators' focus on disability and weaknesses rather than abilities, strengths, and learning variabilities. Increasing access to PSE for students with ID is a shared responsibility, involving collaboration across a variety of service providers, including schools and agencies, and reaching out to families and community members (Mock & Love, 2012). High school counselors are integral to promoting these collaborations in addition to providing counseling and advocacy support to students with disabilities, including ID (Milsom, 2007).

In an effort to increase higher education accessibility among students with disabilities, including ID, federal funding under the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA, 2008) has resulted in the development and expansion of transition and PSE programs across the U.S. (Folk, Yamamoto, & Stodden, 2012). There are currently over 200 PSE programs for students with ID (Cook et al., 2014), and there is an easily-accessible online database describing these programs through Think College, a national organization dedicated to increasing inclusive options of higher education for individuals with ID



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(thinkcollege.net). Despite the significant improvement and expansion in PSE opportunities for students with ID, transition planning and college readiness preparation are typically not adequately executed, resulting in this student population being ill-prepared for such opportunities (Folk et al., 2012; Griffin, McMillan, & Hodapp, 2010).

PSE, including college attendance, for students with ID is associated with improved access to employment and higher paying jobs (Migliore, Butterworth, & Hart, 2009). Employment outcomes are poor for youth with ID, and have resulted in high rates of poverty for this population as a whole, but minority youth with ID in particular (Baer, Daviso III, Flexer, Queen, & Meindl, 2011; Mock & Love, 2012). More specifically, in conducting high school exit and one-year follow up interviews with students with ID, Baer et al. (2011) found that participation in inclusive education during high school almost doubled the chances of engaging in PSE. However, African American students with ID were more likely to encounter negative employment outcomes. This latter finding was attributed to potential concerns of losing disability benefits and difficulty obtaining jobs in local neighborhoods. These outcomes emphasize the need to increase access to PSE opportunities among students with ID, while paying close attention to cultural differences and potential additional barriers that could manifest for individual students. Through building partnerships and collaborative relationships with parents/families,

community organizations, and higher education services, high school counselors can connect students with ID to the necessary supports and programs to be successful in navigating the postsecondary transition process. These services may include, but are not limited to, state vocational rehabilitation agencies, job coaches, career services, and disability services. Through these partnerships, counselors can promote and assist with facilitating greater opportunities for inclusion, given the relationship to improved outcomes for PSE (Baer et al., 2011).

High school counselors hold a central role in implementing equitable educational practices for students (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2012; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). The ASCA position statement on students with disabilities describes the need for school counselors to assist all students in reaching academic goals regardless of ability, and outlines school counselors' role in serving students with disabilities through implementation of a comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA, 2013). Additionally, researchers have identified school counselors as being integral members of school support teams that assist students with disabilities (e.g., Fier & Brzezinski, 2010; Gillis, 2006).

In an effort to improve PSE and employment outcomes, coordinated efforts are needed to increase access to PSE opportunities and to effectively prepare students with ID to be college and career ready. High school

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counselors are trained to assist students to be successful in the areas of academics, social/emotional functioning, and college/career readiness (ASCA, 2012). Their expertise can be utilized to support students and families throughout the postsecondary transition process. To that end, we provide a review of the literature describing the college and career readiness interventions that have helped to prepare students with ID to successfully navigate the PSE process, including the role of high school counselors and recommendations for practice and professional development.

### **Promoting College and Career Readiness for Students with ID**

Developing the skills needed to enhance college and career readiness for students with ID involves understanding the potential needs, strengths, and challenges of this student population in high school and beyond. This involves being aware of diagnostic criteria concerning ID. However, albeit diagnoses should be interpreted with caution and should not be used to preclude students from accessing PSE opportunities, nor should they be utilized as a sole criteria for determining access to PSE. The American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) has defined intellectual disability as “significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior as expressed in conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills” (Schalock et al., 2010, p. 1). Additionally, the onset of significant impairment of intellectual functioning and

adaptive behavior occurs before the age of 18 (AAIDD, 2013). Adaptive behavior can be measured through assessment of conceptual skills, social skills, and practice skills, including activities of daily living and occupational skills (AAIDD, 2013), and intellectual functioning can be measured through an IQ test (AAIDD, 2013). An IQ score of 70-75 (or lower) combined with significant need for support in adaptive behavior would meet the criteria for diagnosis of ID (AAIDD, 2013). While the diagnostic criteria emphasizes limitations, it is important to recognize that individuals with ID have significant strengths upon which counselors and educators can build throughout the postsecondary transition process (Kleinert et al., 2012; Shogren, Wehmeyer, Palmer, Rifenbark, & Little, 2013; Wehmeyer, Lawrence, Garner, Soukup, & Palmer, 2004).

In focusing on strengths, Wehmeyer et al. (2007) emphasized the importance of developing students’ self-determination, which include skills involving self-advocacy, self-awareness, problem solving, goal setting, and decision-making. Level of self-determination has been associated with positive post-school outcomes, academic success, and community engagement (Landmark, Ju, & Zhang, 2010; Shogren et al., 2013). These findings suggest the importance of developing and enhancing self-determination during the postsecondary transition process (Wehmeyer et al., 2007). Many PSE programs for students with ID promote the acquisition of self-determination.

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The Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI) is an evidence-based curriculum that focuses on goal attainment through engaging in self-directed activities (Wehmeyer, Palmer, Agran, Mithaug, & Martin, 2000). Thus, throughout the postsecondary transition process that occurs during high school, counselors can assist students with ID by reinforcing the self-determination skills learned in the classroom and beyond. Students with ID can be encouraged to explore the different PSE options available in a manner that promotes continued development of self-determination skills.

### **PSE Programming Opportunities**

There are a variety of PSE and service delivery options available to students with ID. According to data maintained by Think College ([thinkcollege.net](http://thinkcollege.net)), there are currently over 200 PSE programs housed at colleges and universities throughout the U.S. In general, these PSE programs offer students with ID various opportunities at the college level, including enrolling in college classes (for credit or not for credit) and engaging in college-based activities, such as intramural sports, student clubs and other extracurricular activities, and some also provide housing on campus (Hart & Grigal, 2010). While these are some of the general types of offerings, PSE programs can significantly differ in structure based on the level of inclusion. Researchers have identified three different types of PSE programs: substantially separate, mixed/hybrid, and inclusive individual support

(Hart & Grigal, 2010; Neubert & Moon, 2006). Counselors can access a plethora of information about PSE opportunities through Think College.

### **Substantially separate programs.**

Colleges and postsecondary institutions that run programs following a substantially separate model offer distinct course work and activities for students with ID, and thus there is often little connection with mainstream college students (Hart & Grigal, 2010). The coursework provided is designed to address the various learning needs of students with ID, including teaching life skills (Hart & Grigal, 2010; Hart, Grigal, Sax, Martinez, & Will, 2006). Upon completion of a substantially separate program, students would typically receive a certificate of completion but not a degree. Some examples of PSE programs following a substantially separate model include higher education institutions that have partnerships with local school districts to provide job readiness skills, independent living skills, socialization skills, and other skills as identified in the student's Individualized Educational Plan (IEP). In some cases, PSE programs following a substantially separate model may allow students with ID to participate in other activities with mainstream students, such as exercising at the gym, eating at the student cafeteria, and engaging in college mentorship programs (Hart & Grigal, 2010).

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### **Mixed/hybrid programs.**

While participation in coursework and campus activities within programs following the substantially separate model are primarily exclusive to students with ID, the mixed/hybrid model offers greater opportunities for students with ID to be involved in campus activities with mainstream college students (Hart & Grigal, 2010). In these mixed/hybrid programs, students with ID typically complete specific coursework on life skill development, such as building financial literacy and independent living skills, and they often have opportunities to engage in internships and job training while attending some college courses alongside traditional college students (Casale-Giannola & Kamens, 2006). While mixed/hybrid programs are often two-year programs, they vary in length and offerings, and tend to offer more opportunities for inclusion, both in coursework and campus activities, than programs following a substantially separate model (Hart & Grigal, 2010).

### **Inclusive individual support programs.**

The focus of inclusive individual support models is to engage students with ID through inclusive practices (Hart & Grigal, 2010). That is, students participate in all aspects of the campus community, similar to mainstream college students, with additional counseling and instructional supports (Folk, Yamamoto, & Stodden, 2012). For example, such programs often provide education coaches to work individually and in small groups to assist students in reaching educational and

career goals (Hart & Grigal, 2010). There are opportunities to engage in inclusive higher education programs while working toward high school completion. Such dual enrollment programs allow students with ID to gain exposure to a college setting through inclusive programming, and they typically receive coordinated transition assistance through services provided at both the college and high school. Once high school is complete, students with ID in these dual enrollment programs may continue to participate in college-related experiences similar to mainstream students. These experiences include, for example, engaging in student orientation, completing placement tests, and meeting with academic advisors (Hart & Grigal, 2010). They also have the opportunity to complete project-sponsored workshops, which provide development and training in employability skills, study skills, money management, and other life skills.

### **Other supports in higher education.**

Colleges and universities have a wide range of supports to offer students with ID. In a study of 149 PSE programs serving students with ID, Grigal, Hart, and Weir (2012) found that half of the institutions surveyed provided students with ID advising services in the same manner as all other students on campus, and slightly more than half received services from the institution's disability services office. A key requirement in accessing the services of a Disability Services Office (DSO) on a college campus is self-disclosure; if a student does not self-disclose a documented disability, no

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services or accommodations can be provided by the DSO. In a longitudinal study with more than 4,800 participants, Newman et al. (2011) found that 63% of the participants identified in high school to have a disability did not consider themselves to have a disability while attending PSE. An additional 9% considered themselves to have a disability but chose not to disclose this to the DSO. This finding suggests that school counselors should direct students with ID to the PSE's DSO and help them practice talking about their disability while in high school.

Furthermore, the various PSE options can be explored with students and families as part of the transition planning process. As part of this process, high school counselors can collaborate with key professionals within the high school, community, and from higher education institutions to ensure supports are in place to assist students with ID in making the transition from high school to post-school options.

### Direct Services

The ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2012) charges school counselors with providing direct services (i.e., in-person interactions) to *all* students through delivering a school counseling core curriculum, providing individual student planning, and delivering responsive services designed to meet students' immediate concerns. High school counselors can offer their expertise in providing targeted interventions to support students with ID in becoming college and career ready. Youth with disabilities,

including ID, are increasingly likely to take rigorous academic courses in school, including college-preparatory courses (Wagner, Newman, & Cameto, 2004). Furthermore, Cameto, Levine, and Wagner (2004) found that PSE is an important post-high school goal for over 80% percent of secondary school students who have transition plans, which could include students with ID. High school counselors can help students explore what courses best match their abilities and goals while working with teachers to ensure that students with ID have the academic support systems in place to help them succeed with a rigorous course load. In other words, high school counselors are encouraged to differentiate their outreach and intervention approaches with students to improve PSE and employment outcomes. Differentiated instruction is particularly important considering that students with ID from lower SES and minority backgrounds have reported less involvement in career and educational planning activities and employ fewer self-determination strategies compared to regular education peers (Washington, Hughes, & Cosgriff, 2012).

In relation to providing direct services through individual student planning, high school counselors can assist students with ID during the postsecondary planning process by providing information about entrance requirements for various vocational education programs and about available jobs that might meet students' needs and skills (Levinson, 1986). Given the access school counselors

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have to occupational and career-related awareness information, they can support students with ID by providing them with the relevant information needed to explore and determine postsecondary plans. Furthermore, school counselors can use their expertise in youth development to provide preventative and responsive counseling in relation to self-esteem, academic, and/or bullying issues, which may contribute to the ease with which they transition from high school (Mitcham, Portman, & Dean, 2009). High school counselors can provide large group or classroom guidance lessons on career exploration, goal setting, and career planning, while helping to empower students with intellectual disabilities ID to advocate for themselves through teaching them interpersonal skills relevant to the postsecondary transition process (Mitcham, Portman, & Dean, 2009). Assisting students with ID in the development of interpersonal skills can include highlighting and building on their existing abilities and strengths. Researchers have found that including students with ID in classroom lessons facilitates a more tolerant and accepting environment for the whole class, while allowing for students with ID to interact with diverse peers and learn from positive role modeling (Bennett & Gallagher, 2013; Freeman, 2000; Wiener & Tardif, 2004)

### **Collaboration with Parents and Families**

Numerous researchers have identified the importance of involving parents and families in the process of PSE exploration (e.g. Davies

& Beamish, 2009; Griffin, McMillan, & Hodapp, 2010; Martinez, Conroy, & Cerreto, 2012). Involving families is particularly important given the sudden decrease in services available for youth with ID during this period of transition from high school to adulthood (Neece, Kraemer, & Blacher, 2009). Positive post-school transition outcomes are associated with a number of factors, including individual youth, family, and environmental characteristics, and particularly the importance of family well-being (Neece, Kraemer, & Blacher, 2009). This latter finding suggests the importance of and need for greater family outreach and collaboration throughout the transition process.

In addition, there are a variety of barriers that may impede accessing and understanding the various PSE options, including a lack of information sharing and sufficient guidance from professionals (Griffin, McMillan, & Hodapp, 2010). Griffin, McMillan, & Hodapp (2010) found only 26% of parents reported that a post-school transition plan was included in their child's individualized education plan (IEP), and 36% of the parents reported feeling the school did not provide sufficient guidance to assist in understanding PSE options. However, parents tend to report greater involvement in postsecondary transition planning as their children with ID spend increasing more time within the regular education curriculum (Martinez, Conroy, & Cerreto, 2012). This finding suggests the importance of high school counselors reaching out to engage students

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with ID and their parents in participating in college and career counseling. While parental involvement in transition planning is mandated under IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), it may be that in some instances the mode for providing the information is not clearly understood and/or accessible to all parents. For example, Martinez, Conroy, and Cerreto (2012) found that more than half of the parents surveyed reported feeling “overwhelmed and confused” with the PSE transition process, and described feeling they were given a prescribed set of options rather than engaging in an ongoing collaborative process” (p. 285). High school counselors can help to bridge the information gap that many parents have reported experiencing during the transition planning process.

Lack of access to sufficient community supports and resources can also present a major barrier to immigrant families, resulting in disparities in educational and health outcomes (Begeer, El Bouk, Boussaid, Terwogt, & Koot, 2009; Cohen, 2013). Due to language and cultural differences, Latina/o families may not be aware of existing services that are available and have often reported feeling dissatisfied with services rendered to their children with ID as a result of misinformation, poor communication from providers, and experiences of discrimination (Cohen, 2013). To address these concerns, high school counselors can collaborate with a cultural broker (or community member volunteer) to assist with communication

when language and cultural barriers present (Bryan & Henry, 2012; Cohen, 2013). Additionally, it is helpful to understand cultural factors and how they may be employed as a resource in postsecondary planning. For example, Latina/o families tend to value family cohesiveness and maintain extensive social networks (Borrero, 2011; Yamamura, Martinez, & Saenz, 2010), and a variety of other immigrant populations also value strong community connections (Sue & Sue, 2012). These values of family and community support can serve as a source of strength that high school counselors can cultivate when working with immigrant families and students with ID on postsecondary transition planning.

To effectively engage in collaborative outreach to parents regarding postsecondary plans for students with ID, it behooves high school counselors to employ a comprehensive approach. While students with ID may participate in a curriculum that emphasizes development of self-determination skills, a highly recommended training strategy for transition education programs is for high school counselors to regularly collaborate with the professionals providing such training and periodically hold consultation with students, parents, and other educators throughout the process to facilitate discussions linking self-determination skill attainment and the postsecondary transition (Davies & Beamish, 2009; Wehmeyer, Lawrence, Garner, Soukup & Palmer, 2004). That is, given high school counselors’

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expertise in college and career planning, their collaborative involvement in PSE exploration during this transition process could help to positively engage youth and parents in decision-making, while concomitantly counselors can provide information about relevant community and higher education resources. In working closely with families, it is important to maintain a culturally sensitive perspective, one that is respectful of individual family preferences and needs (Martinez, Conroy, & Cerreto, 2012). Information sharing needs to be relevant and reflective of preferred cultural values. For example, Kim, Lee, and Morningstar (2007) emphasized the importance of materials being provided to parents and families in an accessible manner – that is, in a variety of formats and representative of cultural differences.

### Collaboration with

#### Key Community Members

As recognized by various researchers (e.g. Bemak, 2000; Bryan, 2005), school counselors can serve as change agents in schools by assuming many roles, including that of collaborator with members of the school, families, and communities. As Bryan (2005) noted, performance in school can be affected by a variety of non-school factors (e.g. personal/social issues and, community issues). Supporting collaboration between administrators and outside agencies that target the academic concerns of students with ID to promote their academic development is an appropriate mandate for high school

counselors. Mitcham, Portman, and Dean (2009) listed various external strategies that the high school counselor can be responsible for coordinating in relation to developing partnerships to serve students with ID, including: (a) maintaining a resource list and community support materials for referrals for students and families in need; (b) developing a network system for educational and employment needs of students and families; and (c) providing parents and community leaders an opportunity to influence the advocacy and educational needs of students with ID that may affect community climate and policies. High school counselors can facilitate collaborative meetings with family members that involve key community-based providers (such as transition specialists or vocational rehabilitation counselors) to address anticipated needs and respond to problems that may arise. For example, high school counselors can encourage parental involvement through inviting them to school meetings, holding frequent conferences, and referring them to outside resources. They can also work with parents to understand their concerns and perceptions so they can advocate for the whole family during the postsecondary transition process (Mitcham, Portman, & Dean, 2009).

#### Implications for High School Counselors

High school counselors are uniquely positioned to assume a transition leadership role to advocate for students with ID who have traditionally had limited access to PSE. Similar to PSE transition planning for

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students without disabilities, high school counselors need to support more rigorous programs for students with disabilities so that they gain access to more inclusive classes. High school counselors typically have connections with local colleges and universities so that PSE for students with ID may follow existing high school to college pathways and initiatives.

High school counselors know the different expectations of high school and college. That knowledge will serve them well in coordinating appropriate transition supports across high schools and higher education institutions. It behooves school counselors to prepare students with ID for PSE and to foster self-determination as a primary goal (Wehmeyer, Palmer, Agran, Mithaug, & Martin, 2000; Wehmeyer, Agran, Hughes, Martin, Mithaug, & Palmer, 2007). It would be beneficial for high school counselors to understand principles of self-determination and apply those principles in their work with all students, while employing a culturally sensitive approach that promotes effective communication and addresses potential barriers to engagement.

Since the inclusion movement shifted emphasis to employment outcomes, transition education and transition specialist training has been gaining momentum nationwide over the past decade. Although few states have credentials specific to transition (see: [nstattac.org](http://nstattac.org)), most states have transition-related content as part of their standards

(Kleinhammer-Tramill, Geiger, & Morningstar, 2003). To date, there are three states that have identified school counselors as eligible to acquire transition specialist endorsements or certifications. These include Massachusetts (MA, 603 CMR 7.00 § 7.14), Michigan (MI, R340.1799g § 99g), and Nebraska (NE, 92, Ch. 24 § 007.04). For example, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education offers credentialing as a transition specialist available to licensed school counselors who fulfill competency requirements. Advanced training in transition education for high school counselors should focus on developing the leadership skills necessary to promote system-wide transition supports and services for students with ID (Paiewonsky & Ostergard, 2010). Professional development for high school counselors needs to address capacity building within school districts to support students with disabilities as they negotiate school to PSE transitions as well as interagency coordination with adult disability services.

### Conclusion

It is critical for students with ID to envision a life beyond high school, and along with their non-disabled peers, they need to be prepared for the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce. High school counselors can help students with ID take the lead in their own career preparation and community inclusion. Given high school counselors' expertise in the areas of college and career readiness, they serve a key role in assisting students with ID throughout the

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postsecondary transition process. Specifically, they can provide direct services to students and parents through counseling interventions and consultation; they collaborate with outside service providers to promote effective transition from high school to PSE options; and they engage in advocacy to ensure all students with ID can access services and take action to remove potential barriers. Through providing these services to support students with ID, high school counselors take a culturally sensitive approach that is responsive to the diverse needs and preferences of students and families.

The idea of students with ID accessing PSE is gaining popularity among the students themselves, families, communities, high schools, and institutions of higher education, and the students themselves. The socialization, employment, and independent living benefits of PSE accrue to students with ID just as it benefits their peers without disabilities. PSE is an important way to change life outcomes for persons with ID, and high school counselors serve an integral role in facilitating that process. 

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