



practice brief

**vr&youth**  
Rehabilitation Research & Training Center

## **What is Inclusive Higher Education for People with Intellectual Disabilities, and How Does it Connect to Vocational Rehabilitation?**

### **A Primer for VR Leaders and Practitioners**

Meg Grigal and Barry Whaley

Economic independence in the United States is closely aligned with postsecondary education, particularly for jobs that require an industry credential, specialized training, or a college degree. According to Georgetown University's Public Policy Institute, by 2020, thirty percent of jobs will require some degree of postsecondary education. Recent federal legislation and investments in model demonstration projects have led to an increase in students with intellectual disability (ID) accessing higher education (Grigal, Hart, Smith, Domin, Sulewski & Weir, 2015). Increasing numbers of students with ID are enrolling in higher education, and many of the higher education programs that are being implemented with federal funding are partnering with state and local vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies (Grigal & Smith, 2016).

2

Many VR professionals are still struggling to understand the benefit of students with ID attending higher education, and how supporting access to college can help VR achieve its mission of employment for these individuals. This brief describes collaborative partnerships between VR and higher education initiatives, illustrating the commonalities in their mission and services. It also shares some challenges to building these partnerships, and some strategies to make them more effective. Inclusive higher education is a developing field of research and practice aimed at creating a viable and legitimate alternate pathway to and through higher education for students with intellectual disabilities that culminates in either integrated and competitive paid employment or further pursuit of higher education. The Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 stipulated that higher education programs for students with intellectual disability should be comprised of inclusive academic, vocational, and social experiences, and that these experiences should result in gainful employment (Grigal, Hart, & Weir, 2014).

## **VR-Higher Education Partnerships in Action**

---

Between 2010 and 2015, the Office of Postsecondary Education awarded model demonstration funds to colleges and universities in 23 states to create or expand inclusive higher education options for people with ID. These programs were called Transition Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities, or TPSIDs. The TPSID programs partnered with VR agencies in a variety of ways: providing direct services, paying for student tuition, and serving in an advisory capacity (Grigal & Smith, 2016). Forty of the 52 colleges and universities hosting TPSID programs in 2015 (77%) partnered with VR programs, and rates of partnership were the same at two- and four-year institutions. Providing direct services to students with ID was the most common role played by VR partners (68%), followed by paying student tuition (45%) and participating in the project advisory committees (43%). Although some state VR agencies have developed policies regarding payment for tuition, books, and supplies for college students with intellectual disabilities, many have not. Most higher education programs interacted with their VR partners on a quarterly or monthly basis. The following examples illustrate the central role played by VR in the higher education TPSID model demonstration projects implemented between 2010 and 2015, as well as VR-funded initiatives and efforts that were implemented in California and Pennsylvania.

### **Alaska**

The TAPESTRY project is a TPSID program at the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) for 18- to 21-year-olds with ID. The program uses the resources of UAA's Center for Human Development, the Disability Support Services Office, and the Community and technical College, in partnership with the Anchorage School District and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR). In collaboration with the TPSID staff at UAA, the DVR assigns a counselor to serve as the liaison for the TAPESTRY program, enrolls eligible individuals for DVR services, and provides financial support for some fees and other services not covered by the TAPESTRY grant or other sources. The DVR also participates as a member of the TAPESTRY Planning Advisory Board, committing staff time to attend monthly planning meetings, and assists in the recruitment of TAPESTRY students. <https://www.uaa.alaska.edu/academics/college-of-health/departments/center-for-human-development/tapestry/index.cshtml>

### **California**

College to Career is comprised of programs of instruction that provide youth with ID and autism on certain California Community College campuses with access to higher education and vocational training. The Department of Rehabilitation (DOR) funded four pilot sites at colleges and designated matching funds to draw down VR funding in order to serve consumers with ID. The contract, which includes employment outcome goals, provides for colleges to offer instruction, educational coaching, career development, and other DOR-funded services at participating California Community Colleges. <https://www.semel.ucla.edu/opendoors/college-career>

### **Florida**

The Department of Vocational Rehabilitation covers the costs and fees of students with ID dually enrolled in college and university programs operated under the TPSID program as long as a student meets eligibility requirements. In Florida, the TPSIDs include a consortia of programs at the University of Central Florida, Florida State College at Jacksonville, Florida International University and the University of South Florida. The waiver of tuition, fees, and books applies to all students who meet the criteria for dual enrollment and who are working toward a high school diploma. This means a student who is pursuing a diploma (e.g., standard, special, performance) and is either: a) seeking to enroll in career credit courses and has a 2.0 unweighted grade point average; or b) seeking to enroll in college credit courses and has a 3.0 unweighted grade point average. The type of diploma does not matter as long as the student is continuing to pursue a diploma and is being provided a free appropriate public education. <http://ftpsid.info/files/DualEnrollmentandTPSID.pdf>

### **Hawaii**

In Hawaii, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) counselors and the DVR state administrator collaborate with the University of Hawaii Center on Disability on the Dual Enrollment with Individualized Supports or DEIS project, a TPSID project that facilitates access to postsecondary education for students with ID. The DEIS project uses person-centered planning and collaborative teaming to enhance access to, and participation and success in, inclusive postsecondary education. The partnerships include three high schools, the DVR, and Leeward, Honolulu, and Windward Community Colleges. The DVR provides funding through a companion memorandum of understanding (MOU) that supports the tuition, supplies, and other costs of students who are attending college via the programs. The DVR has also provided funding for personal supportive devices. <http://www.cds.hawaii.edu/deis/>

### **Kentucky**

In Kentucky, employment exploration services for students with ID began as a pilot project in 2010, providing an hourly rate to supported employment providers to offer short-term work exploration opportunities for students. In 2014, Kentucky Vocational Rehabilitation partnered with the Supported Higher Education Project (SHEP) a TPSID program at the University of Kentucky to establish a VR funding category called Post-Secondary Transition Program to fund student employment services. The Kentucky policy only applies to approved Comprehensive Transition Programs (CTPs), creating an incentive for

colleges and universities to establish CTP programs. Comprehensive Transition Programs as defined by the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 are degree, certificate, or non-degree programs for students with intellectual disabilities that are approved by the U.S. Department of Education and allow students with intellectual disabilities access to certain forms of federal student aid. The program provides time-limited work practicum opportunities, work-based learning opportunities, and career exploration for students enrolled in CTP programs at four institutions. Work practicums can be paid or volunteer at both on- and off-campus locations. <http://kcc.ky.gov/Vocational-Rehabilitation/staffresources/Documents/SFMs/postsecondarytransitionprogramSHEP.pdf> <http://www.shepky.org/>

### **Pennsylvania**

In Pennsylvania, the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation's (OVR) Access College Employment Success (ACES) grant focused on increasing postsecondary education options for young adults with intellectual disabilities through a commonwealth-wide network of providers who offer college-based certificate programs that lead to permanent employment and build independent living skills. OVR funded a \$1.35 million grant to provide ACES funding to colleges throughout PA via the Pennsylvania-based DREAM Partnership. ACES funding requires that applicants develop programs that focus on employment, follow the TPSID model and use the Think College Standards for Inclusive Higher Education. In 2016, OVR amended its college policy to include Comprehensive Transition Programs. <https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/eligibility/intellectual-disabilities>

## **Need for Continued Collaboration**

---

While VR partnerships have been vital to the implementation of the TPSID model demonstration projects and state initiatives in CA and PA, similarly high levels of collaboration are not as prevalent between VR and other higher education programs enrolling students with ID. Plotner and Marshall (2015) found that about a third of existing postsecondary programs serving students with ID are not collaborating with VR. They posit that the newness of this field, coupled with the lack of familiarity of the purpose and role of VR in higher education, is part of this disconnect. There is much work to be done to build understanding with VR professionals regarding how inclusive higher education aligns with VR goals for job seekers with intellectual disabilities. In developing collaborative relationships between postsecondary programs and VR, several important factors should be considered. First, there must be a discussion of how the objectives of the inclusive higher education program align with the objectives of VR. The primary objective of VR is to support access to competitive integrated employment for people with disability. Inclusive higher education programs can demonstrate how attending a postsecondary education program will assist someone in finding work or establishing a career that would likely not be attainable by traditional VR or Supported Employment services alone. They can describe how access to career paths, begun through work-study opportunities, internships, and other college-related options, can be built into students' courses of study; while honoring students' unique conditions, preferences, and potential contributions. This conversation is critical to help both entities understand and appreciate the resources and expertise that each brings to the table.

It is also crucial that inclusive higher education programs demonstrate they are delivered in a cost-effective manner. In most states, VR programs are challenged by limited funding and must be cost-conscious. Whenever possible, recipients of VR services must use comparable benefits as a primary funder of services. Additionally, quality of job outcomes is very important for VR, so that services meet federal common performance measures as outlined by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014. Higher education personnel can share their employment outcome data with VR personnel to demonstrate the quality of the students' employment outcomes. Higher education and VR partnerships work best when there is a clear understanding of program objectives by both the VR counselor and the staff in the college or university program. As in all cross-agency collaboration, both partners must invest time to help each other understand their operational language, as well as the guidelines under which they operate. Higher education personnel will need assistance in understanding the guidelines and programmatic limitations under which VR counselors must operate. VR personnel may need assistance understating how inclusive academic courses can ultimately impact students' long-term employment potential.

## Conclusion

---

Currently, emerging partnerships between higher education entities and state VR agencies are creating the scope of their collaborations without the benefit of federal guidance or policy. Some state VR agencies have created their own policies, and these will likely continue to evolve as knowledge about effective practice and data on student outcomes emerge. There is a strong role for VR in the form and function of inclusive higher education, as VR can serve as the conduit for connecting these higher education programs with the state agencies and partners that will likely serve students with ID after they leave college. Creating the most effective partnerships will require continued conversations to help state and local VR agencies grow their applied knowledge about the viability and legitimacy of higher education as a path toward employment for youths and adults with ID.

## References

---

- Grigal, M., Hart, D., & Weir, C. (2014). Postsecondary Education for Students with Intellectual Disabilities. In M. Agran, F. Brown, C. Hughes, C. Quirk & D. Ryndak (Eds.), *Equity and Full Participation for Individuals with Severe Disabilities* (pp. 275 -298). Baltimore: Brookes Publishing.
- Grigal, M., Hart, D., Smith, F. A., Domin, D., Sulewski, J., & Weir, C. (2015). *Think College National Coordinating Center: Annual report on the transition and postsecondary programs for students with intellectual disabilities (2013–2014)*. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion.
- Grigal, M., & Smith, F. (2016). *Vocational rehabilitation partnerships with higher education programs serving students with intellectual disability. VR and Youth Rehabilitation Research and Training Center Fast Facts, Issue No. 1*. Rockville, MD: TransCen, Inc.
- Plotner, A. J., & Marshall, K. J. (2015). Supporting postsecondary education programs for individuals with an intellectual disability: Role of the vocational rehabilitation counselor. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, 59, 195-202.
- Raynor, O., Hayward, K., & Francis, W. (2013). Promoting inclusion in postsecondary education through VR funded college to career programs. Presentation at the Think College Capacity Building Institute, Washington, D.C.
- Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, Pub. L. 113-128. 29 USC § 3101. 128 Stat. 1425-1722 (2014, July 22). Retrieved from <https://www.congress.gov/113/plaws/publ128/PLAW-113publ128.pdf>

## About the Authors

---

Meg Grigal, Ph.D. is the principal investigator of the TPSID National Coordinating Center, co-director of Think College and a senior research fellow at the Institute for Community Inclusion at University of Massachusetts Boston.

Barry Whaley is a project administrator at the University of Kentucky Human Development Institute. His projects include the Supported Higher Education Project and the Kentucky Post School Outcome Center. Barry is also the Employer Outreach Coordinator for the Southeast ADA Center, a project of the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University.

## Funding & Citation

---

Funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Community Living, Grant Number: 90RT5034

Grigal, M., Whaley, B. (2016) What is inclusive higher education for people with intellectual disabilities, and how does it connect to vocational rehabilitation? A primer for VR leaders and practitioners. *VR and Youth Rehabilitation Research and Training Center Practice Brief, Issue No. 01*. Rockville, MD: TransCen, Inc.