

Advancing Inclusive Postsecondary Education for Students with Intellectual Disability (AHEAD White Paper)

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Introduction

The vision of AHEAD is “disability equity in postsecondary education,” and its mission is to “advance professional practice that operationalizes an expanded concept of disability access” (AHEAD Strategic Plan, 2023). The participation of intellectually disabled people in an inclusive postsecondary education that results in fulfilling opportunities, including meaningful employment, is integral to AHEAD’s purpose and project. In advocating for equal access and participation for students with intellectual disability, AHEAD upholds protections afforded by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), as well as provisions in the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) of 2008. Through the professional development of its members, AHEAD challenges harmful stereotypes and champions opportunities for people who have been denied the many lifelong benefits of postsecondary education, key components of the AHEAD Public Policy Platform (2022). These advocacy efforts establish AHEAD as a research hub and a public thought leader in the field of inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE), operationalizing specific goals in its strategic plan. Since the publication of the *Students with Intellectual Disability and Campus Disability Service* (2011), more than thirty articles have appeared in AHEAD’s quarterly *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, and opportunities to develop skill sets central to advancing inclusive postsecondary education—such as universal design—have been offered on a regular basis.

Background

People with intellectual disability have been systematically excluded from higher education for most of its history. Viewed as incapable of learning or benefiting from education after high school, they have had limited opportunities for a college education. The HEOA laid the groundwork for expanded, inclusive access to a quality higher education and forged a pathway from secondary school to IPSE and employment. As a result, in part, of federal funding authorized by the HEOA for model demonstration Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID), the number of programs for students with intellectual disability has grown significantly. Since 2010, more than 5,200 students have participated in 126 TPSID programs at colleges and universities in 34 states (Think College, 2025c). Despite extraordinary growth in IPSE over the past fifteen years, demand far exceeds the availability of options for students with intellectual disability:

- TPSID programs serve only a fraction of the estimated 8,000 students per year who pursue postsecondary education through a dedicated program for students with intellectual disability (Think College, 2025a).
- Intellectually disabled students also pursue college independently thanks to open enrollment.
- Nonetheless, only 2% of intellectually disabled people in the United States pursue postsecondary education (Association of University Centers on Disability, 2023).

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Purpose

This paper provides an overview of increased access and opportunities for students with intellectual disability in postsecondary education since the passage of the HEOA. Research and data collection that has been conducted since that time enables AHEAD to:

- Provide an overview of the inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) landscape.
- Summarize what has been learned through more than fifteen years of data collection and research.
- Equip disability resource professionals with information and resources to support students with intellectual disability and advocate for the development of inclusive postsecondary education programs.

Definitions

Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary (CTP) Program

Under Title 34 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Section 668.231(a), a comprehensive transition and postsecondary program for students with intellectual disability is defined as, a degree, certificate, or non-degree program that—

- (1) Is offered by a participating institution;
- (2) Is delivered to students physically attending the institution;
- (3) Is designed to support students with intellectual disabilities who are seeking to continue academic, career and technical, and independent living instruction at an institution of higher education in order to prepare for gainful employment;
- (4) Includes an advising and curriculum structure;
- (5) Requires students with intellectual disabilities to have at least one-half of their participation in the program, as determined by the institution, focus on academic components through one or more of the following activities:
 - (i) Taking credit-bearing courses with students without disabilities.
 - (ii) Auditing or otherwise participating in courses with students without disabilities for which the student does not receive regular academic credit.
 - (iii) Taking non-credit-bearing, nondegree courses with students without disabilities.
 - (iv) Participating in internships or work-based training in settings with individuals without disabilities; and

- (6) Provides students with intellectual disabilities opportunities to participate in coursework and other activities with students without disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2025a).

CTP status opens access to federal student aid for eligible students, even when they do not have a standard high school diploma and are not matriculated towards a postsecondary degree. (Think College, n.d.)

Credentials

An increasing number of states are discontinuing alternative diplomas in favor of a single, standard diploma for all graduating high school students, removing an administrative barrier to equitable participation in postsecondary education (Achieve & National Center on Educational Outcomes, 2016). While IPSE programs generally do not require a regular diploma for admission, having one opens possibilities that are not otherwise available, such as pursuing a postsecondary degree.

Upon completion of a dedicated program for students with intellectual disability, students are typically awarded a certificate that is specific to their program and based on participation in inclusive and specialized courses as well as credit-bearing and non-credit-bearing experiences. Many programs also feature the possibility of completing an industry credential—Certified Guest Service Professional or Forklift Safety Training, for example—and/or micro credentials that suit a student’s interests and skill sets. Such decisions can improve employment outcomes and result in higher pay (Grigal et. al., 2024).

Inclusive Postsecondary Education (IPSE)

Inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) may refer to educational opportunities for intellectually disabled people, including (but not limited to) CTP and TPSID. IPSE may also refer to the field of study examining how to include, support, and enroll people with intellectual disability in higher education so they can achieve their desired post-school outcomes. The terms “inclusive postsecondary education” and “inclusive higher education” (IHE) are often used interchangeably.

Student with Intellectual Disability

Title 34 Section 668.231 (b) defines a student with an intellectual disability as a student—

- (1) with a cognitive impairment characterized by significant limitations in
 - (i) Intellectual and cognitive functioning; and
 - (ii) Adaptive behavior as expressed in conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills;

(2) Who is currently, or was formerly, eligible for special education and related services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (20 U.S.C. 1401), including a student who was determined eligible for special education or related services under the IDEA but was home-schooled or attended private school (U.S. Department of Education, 2025a).

Throughout this paper, a mix of person-first and identity-first language—“student with intellectual disability” and “intellectually disabled student,” respectively—affirms the status of intellectually disabled people *as students* in postsecondary education, acknowledges disability as an aspect of identity per the AHEAD Statement on Language, and reflects a variety of respectful usage norms in the disability community and among stakeholders.

Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability (TPSID)

Awarded every five years since 2010 (and renewed in 2025) by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, TPSID grants are model demonstration grants awarded to colleges and universities to create or expand inclusive, high-quality postsecondary programs for students with intellectual disability. The TPSID grant program also includes funding for a national coordinating center that advances inclusive postsecondary education through technical assistance, data collection, and research. Think College at the Institute for Community Inclusion, UMass Boston, has been the recipient of that grant since 2010 (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Key Features of Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability

IPSE programs, including (but not limited to) TPSID and CTP, are designed to support intellectually disabled students in accessing inclusive academic, career, and independent living experiences in college settings. Program staff typically include a director and professionals who coordinate these areas of focus, as well as peer mentors. Peer mentors, who may be paid or unpaid, work with students in a variety of ways. They may attend classes, live nearby in the residence hall, tutor, assist with daily planning, go on lunch or workout dates, attend campus activities, or work alongside students in a job on or off campus.

IPSE programs exist at all sorts of postsecondary institutions, from community colleges to public flagship universities and private liberal arts colleges. Programs often feature an alternative application

and admissions process, a comprehensive program of study outlining program goals, student support, and articulated outcomes. The availability of unique pathways and supports in no way changes the spirit or specific provisions in support of maximally inclusive college experiences for intellectually disabled students (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2025a & 2025b). Theoretically, once a student is accepted to an IPSE program, they are a member of the campus community. In practice, inclusion varies from one campus to another. Trends among TPSID programs suggest that inclusion efforts improve over time and that more inclusive experiences result in better outcomes (see Outcomes below).

A few structural decisions can facilitate inclusion. Programs are often co-located among similar, student-facing offices and use a schedule that follows the campus academic calendar. Where residential options are available, students are increasingly likely to live on campus among their peers (Grigal et al. 2024). Students are encouraged to take as many courses in the regular curriculum (i.e., inclusive courses) as they are able; they often take classes that are unique to the program, devoted to academic, independent living, and employment skills. Specialized skills courses coordinate with existing services for all students, such as academic success, peer tutoring, and career services.

Students enrolled in IPSE programs have the same rights and responsibilities—and are held to the same expectations—as all students. With accommodations and adjustments, intellectually disabled students must meet standards set forth in campus policies pertaining to satisfactory academic progress and the student code of conduct, as well as any technical standards for their program of study. IPSE programs differ from other non-degree credential programs in several ways:

- Students take typical college courses alongside other students but may audit, take as pass/fail, or participate differently than a student earning college credit for the course.
- If students are auditing or otherwise not earning typical college credit, academic modifications and/or fundamental alterations may be allowed. Such modifications are made by arrangement with an individual instructor.
- When students take a college course, they earn credit towards their program credential, whether or not they are taking the course for college credit.
- The ratio of integrated college classes and specialized classes varies from program to program, and may vary among students in the same program.

- Courses that are exclusively for students in the program also count toward credential completion.
- Student engagement and career exploration activities may also count toward credential completion.

The most important feature of dedicated programs is, of course, students themselves. To review first-person accounts of the experiences of students with intellectual disability—an emerging genre—is to realize how similar they are to students who may seem more familiar. Like others their age, they are doing a lot of “adulthood”: taking classes, making friends, working one or more jobs, learning how to manage money, going to football games, learning how to cook and do their own laundry, and making plans for the summer (See Minnesota Inclusive Higher Education Consortium, News and Events).

Paying for College

Like all college students, students with intellectual disability can access a variety of funding sources to pay for college:

- Students who are enrolled in an approved CTP Program can access Pell Grants, Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants (SEOG) and Federal Work Study to pay for typical college costs and components of a course of study, including audited and other non-credit activities (U.S. Department of Education, 2025c).
- Vocational rehabilitation agencies may provide financial assistance for tuition and fees, transportation, assistive technology, and other expenses.
- Several states offer funding to support students enrolled in inclusive higher education programs (Think College, 2025b).
- Donor funds may also be available.
- Under IDEA Part B, local educational agencies (LEA, i.e. secondary schools) may use funds to support participation in postsecondary programs for eligible students with intellectual disability.
- Students enrolled in a dedicated program are not eligible for federal student loans.

Outcomes

The evaluation protocol developed through the TPSID program established a standard set of benchmarks that have been used across three TPSID cohorts to date. The longitudinal dataset includes more than 4,000 students spanning three grant cohorts (Cohort 1 spans 2010-2015, Cohort 2, 2015-2020, and Cohort 3, 2020-2025). A growing body of research demonstrates that inclusion in campus life supports program completion and positive outcomes. Data analyzed by Grigal et al. (2024) suggests that students who access federal student aid, complete more inclusive courses, meet with regular academic advisors, live on campus among all students (where on-campus housing is available), and access disability services are more likely to complete their program than students who have fewer inclusive opportunities. Between 2010 and 2023, as campus practices supporting inclusion increased, so did rates of program completion, from an average of 67% in Cohort 1 to 76% midway through Cohort 3 (the most recent data available).

Inclusive experiences result in better employment outcomes, as well: An average of 29% of Cohort 1 students had a paid job at exit or within 90 days compared to an average of 46% midway through Cohort 3. Follow-up surveys of program alumni confirm similar trends: 59% of students in Cohort 2 report having paid employment one year after program completion. This figure rose to 66% at two years and 67% at three years after completion (Grigal et al., 2024). This employment rate compares quite favorably to an overall employment rate of only 17% among all intellectually disabled people (National Core Indicators, 2024).

Sample Programs

These programs were selected to highlight the diversity of both program structures and options available to students. All five are approved Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary (CTP) Programs, where eligible students can access federal student aid.

Inclusive Education Services, U. Central Florida

Florida is home to more than 30 programs for students with intellectual disability and one of three U.S. states with its own technical assistance center, the Florida Center for Students with Unique Abilities (FCSUA), which provides support to programs throughout the state and administers a scholarship program. The two-year Inclusive Education Services (IES) program at the University of Central Florida offers three industry credentials: education, hospitality, and social services. Each concentration features res-

idential options and on-campus work experience followed by a capstone internship in the fourth semester.

InclusiveU, Syracuse University

Founded in 2014, InclusiveU features a voluntary peer mentoring program and residential mentors, access to more than one hundred academic programs, a dual-enrollment program for area high-school students, admission for international students with intellectual disability, and an inclusive two-week study abroad program to Italy. Upon completing five inclusive courses in an area of study and work experiences undertaken in the final year of study (if not earlier), students receive a certificate from the College of Professional Studies.

Next Steps Program, Vanderbilt University

A four-year program of individual pathways, this program emphasizes service, leadership, public speaking, and advocacy. The first two years focus on foundational academic, career exploration, and college skills. While students are expected to work throughout all four years, years three and four feature an increased focus on developing career interests through on or off-campus employment. Next Steps is developing a variety of registered apprenticeships that result in an industry credential.

Success, Engagement, Education, Determination (SEED) Program, Lehigh Carbon Community College

The SEED Program offers comprehensive direct services beyond accommodations typically provided to support students with disabilities. Three tracks of support are available for a supplemental fee: the Academic track, the AAchieve track, for students with autism, and the Career Track/XISC. The first two are for degree-seeking students and result in a credential or associate degree; completion of the Career Track results in a flexible, 32-credit Program Certificate. Scholarships are available.

University Participant (UP) Program, Western Carolina University

Founded in 2007, Western Carolina University is the first IPSE program to achieve program accreditation from the Inclusive Higher Education Accreditation Council (IHEAC). The program focuses on skill development in five areas: personal development, community participation, vocational preparation, social participation and learning, and participation in three to four inclusive courses. At the end of the second year, students are awarded a university-approved Certificate of Accomplishment for meeting 80% of

their goals each semester. Institutional grants and scholarships may be available.

The Role of Disability Resource Professionals

Disability resource professionals have long been at the forefront of educational innovation, developing strategies and advancing equal opportunity in response to changing student populations, technologies, and learning modalities. In the past decade alone, professionals have led adaptations to support universal online learning and to meet the needs of new disabled populations who would be unwelcome or unable to persist in an environment less receptive to their needs. These efforts have a life-changing impact on students who benefit from them, including students with intellectual disability.

Once they have been accepted into an IPSE program or enrolled in a course, students with intellectual disability have a right to access disability services. Disability resource professionals determine appropriate accommodations, introduce relevant assistive technologies, and connect students to vocational rehabilitation and other available resources. The disability resources office has the skill and infrastructure to communicate expectations to faculty and to campus, ensure compliance with civil rights protections afforded by Section 504 and the Americans with Disabilities Act, and confer legitimacy upon the unique experiences of disabled students on campus.

The proportion of intellectually disabled students seeking accommodations through the disability resource office has increased over time and correlates with positive outcomes. In the 2023-2024 academic year, more than three-quarters of TPSID students sought accommodations through the disability resource office on campus (Grigal et al., 2024). Most of these students (94%) also received support from others, including faculty, TPSID staff, and peer mentors (Grigal et al. 2025).

More broadly, disability resource professionals advance a campus culture of disability inclusion as the norm rather than the exception, paving the way for better experiences for all students. According to the AHEAD Program Domains (2021) disability resource professionals:

- Provide leadership and collaboration in framing a commitment to disability access and equity as an integral aspect of their institution's culture (Domain 1)
- Advise and educate the campus community about disability and inclusive practices (Domain 2)

- Provide services, strategies, and accommodations to mitigate the barriers faced by individual disabled people (Domain 3)
- Administer office operations guided by a mission and with access to appropriate resources (Domain 4)
- Enhance their professional knowledge and skills (Domain 5)

These domains suggest a variety of ways that disability resource professionals can engage with inclusive postsecondary education:

- Model respect and a strengths-based disposition for intellectually disabled people. (Domain 2)
- Provide equal access to accommodations, assistive technology, vocational rehabilitation, and other resources managed by the campus disability resource office. (Domains 3 and 4)
- Offer opportunities for others to learn more about universal design, transition planning, and other areas relevant to disabled student experiences. (Domain 1)
- Learn more about IPSE and build relationships. (Domain 5)
- Work with others on campus who are interested in IPSE. (Domains 1 and 4)

Disability resource professionals possess ease and fluency with disability, an understanding of civil rights protections, relationships with local stakeholders, and unique navigational knowledge that is tied to disabled experiences on campus. These skills provide a strong foundation for working effectively with students with intellectual disability.

Learning Opportunities

For professionals who have not had occasion to interact regularly with intellectually disabled young people, learning more about their experiences in college is a great way to do so and the following resources are a good starting point:

- *Creating our own lives: College students with intellectual disability*, a webinar including four student speakers, hosted by the Minnesota Inclusive Higher Education Consortium. Based on the book of the same name, co-edited by Michael Gill and Beth Myers (2023).
- *My college life: Students with intellectual disability share their lived experiences*, a webinar sponsored by the Association of University Centers on Disability.

- A series of ten blog posts by students with intellectual disability encouraging others to apply to college, featured by the Minnesota Inclusive Higher Education Consortium. Posts are featured in the News and Events menu.

Skill areas related to IPSE, such as transition planning, universal design for learning, academic coaching, academic success, peer support, and career preparation feature regularly in AHEAD professional development opportunities, as do opportunities dedicated exclusively to intellectual disability. Explore resources on these topics in the AHEAD Learning Library.

As the technical assistance center serving IPSE programs, students, and families, Think College makes a wealth of learning opportunities available, including the following:

- Online courses, recorded webinars, and a calendar of events both online and in-person (see TA & Training menu)
- An archive of brief publications including, for example, annual reports about TPSID student outcomes; “Insight Briefs,” about a timely topic in IPSE; “How to Think College,” action briefs about how to implement an aspect of IPSE; and the “Plain Language Series”

A professional who enjoys learning through personal connection and networking might be inspired to learn what is happening at the state level, including legislative and policy advocacy and information about activities hosted by a regional affiliate. They might also decide to join the new national member organization, the IPSE Association. Someone who is ready to work with others, locally, to develop an IPSE program might engage in some “backwards engineering,” sharing Tools for Preparing for Program Accreditation with others on their campus to begin imagining possibilities (Weir, 2024).

Benefits of IPSE Programs

Research confirms that inclusive postsecondary experiences benefit everyone involved: faculty, peer mentors, and, of course, the students themselves. In one study, over 90% of degree-seeking students surveyed consistently “strongly agreed” or “agreed” with a variety of prompts affirming inclusion in campus life for students with intellectual disability. Given that public-school students interact with intellectually disabled peers throughout their school day, this acceptance comes as no surprise. In the same study, nearly two-thirds of faculty surveyed on the same campus

viewed favorably the idea of modifying their teaching to provide an equal opportunity for learning for all students, and three-quarters of faculty and students agreed that students with intellectual disability should be granted opportunities to learn at the university (Gibbons et al., 2015).

In another study about teaching inclusive courses, faculty noted the positive influence the auditing students and their peer mentors had on the learning environment. One instructor remarked that the intellectually disabled student “brought joy to the classroom” (p.366); another noted how the student made everyone feel more comfortable asking questions. Instructors acknowledged that teaching an inclusive course prompted positive growth in their teaching and noted growth in students as well, particularly in terms of multicultural awareness. (Burgin et al., 2017).

In another qualitative study, one peer mentor highlighted that their experiences working with students with intellectual disability made them “more compassionate, more considerate of others, better students, and happier” (p. 291). Another student claimed that being a peer mentor gave her “the most diverse group of friends [she] ever had” (p.291). For a subset of this group of peer mentors, working with intellectually disabled students is what motivated them to stay in school and clarify their own plans (Ryan et al., 2017).

Students in dedicated programs are also thriving thanks to the choices they have made. For example, Jose Peacock spent the summer before his first year in the REACH Program at the University of Iowa working for the Conservation Corps, where he “got trained on how to use a chainsaw to cut down a tree safely, identify and remove invasive plant species, and manage prescribed fires, which are important for conservation.” Peacock is waiting to get into a course about food production, maintains his job at the Minnesota Science Museum, and works on campus, setting events, in the Student Union. He has a lot of wisdom for future college students:

I advise someone new to college to get involved with clubs, sports, and friends. Try to get as much into personal activities as you possibly can. Go to a football or basketball game—I wish I had gone to a Caitlin Clark game for her last year at the University of Iowa. Getting involved helps with the homesickness. A first-year student right out of high school might experience that, so just get involved. You can even keep the door to your room open for people to say “hi” (Peacock, n.d., para. 3).

Another student, Jeanne Hauff, began college at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. As she wrote her

post, she was looking forward to transferring to the Augie Access Program at Augustana University to continue studying mass media. She writes, “For anyone interested in college, I would tell them to follow their interests and their strengths. College is possible, so get ready!” (Hauff, n.d., para. 8). It is increasingly clear that students with intellectual disability share the same developmental and aspirational goals as all college students. Given the opportunity, they are quite adept at creating meaningful experiences with their peers.

Conclusion

In response to a variety of pressures, higher education has been evolving to meet the needs of every student: Instructors are using UDL strategies in their classes and, having realized the benefits to all learners of communication tools and technologies that used to be considered exceptional, they are adopting and producing accessible course materials designed to engage a broader diversity of students. Institutions are likewise relying upon universal design to rethink a variety of student services and opportunities: Offices such as student success, counseling and wellness, and career services, which traditionally functioned on a drop-in model, now offer regular workshops and skills courses, both credit-bearing and non-credit-bearing. At some institutions, academic coaches and peer mentors are regularly assigned or available. To better meet the needs of students whose lives require flexibility, co-curricular opportunities often count as credits towards a degree, and clearer and more efficient pathways to employment, such as credentialing, exist alongside conventional degrees. As this diversification of options and outcomes continues to gain momentum, it is becoming easier to imagine and to realize the many benefits of inclusive postsecondary education for campus community.

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