

Assessing and Meeting College Support Needs of Students with Disability: A Tiered Approach

Jeremy W. Ford¹
Julia P. Gorman¹

Abstract

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) is a widely used model for allocating resources to support students in K-12 settings. However, its tiered structure is also adaptable to higher education settings. In this conceptual practice paper, we outline how core supports (Tier I), supplemental interventions (Tier II), and intensive individualized services (Tier III) align with existing and potential postsecondary resources, characterizing programs that provide access to postsecondary education for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities within the Tier III support framework. Three case studies illustrate how the needs of students with various disabilities can be effectively matched with available resources in a university setting with an Inclusive Postsecondary Education Program. Additionally, a decision-making framework for identifying student needs is presented to illustrate how it can be applied to consider college readiness and provide appropriate support in higher education. Ultimately, we propose intentional integration of MTSS into higher education systems to improve access, retention, and outcomes for students with disabilities, particularly those with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Keywords: inclusive postsecondary education, disability resource center, multi-tiered systems of support, decision-making

The Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (HEOA, 2008) initiated federal support for expanding access to postsecondary education for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). This act promoted grant-funded projects, such as the National Coordinating Center and the Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability (TPSID) model demonstration projects, to evolve, expand, and refine inclusive postsecondary education for students with IDD through research and practice (Think College, n.d.). These federal initiatives embody the belief that when creating disability law or policy, the focus should be on an individual's long-term goals and those of their families (Lee et al., 2018). College is a frequently sought-after milestone for many young people and their families. The HEOA (2008) and its associated investments in the TPSID programs and the National Coordinating Center have helped increase opportunities for students with IDD to participate in postsecondary education over the last two decades across much of the United States.

There are many ways for one to build a rich, fulfilling life, and enrolling in college is a normative pathway sought by many after high school for this purpose (Uditsky & Hughson, 2012). While college is not the "right fit" for everyone, college access should be available to all who demonstrate a willingness to engage in the work and express a genuine interest in postsecondary education. Further, the option to pursue meaningful postsecondary education should be available for individuals without disabilities as well as individuals with a wide range of disabilities, including IDD (Inclusive Postsecondary Education Association, 2025).

Notably, K-12 students with disabilities benefit from educational systems that offer flexible, tiered supports tailored to their diverse needs, such as the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) model (Jimerson et al., 2016). A tiered model of support, such as the MTSS, is particularly well-suited to support postsecondary students with disabilities as it provides varying levels of intervention intensity to

¹ Boise State University

ensure that all students receive the necessary resources for their success. Importantly, decisions about a student's transition from high school to adult life should be grounded in a meaningful, comprehensive assessment process (Neubert & Leconte, 2013).

Likewise, data-based decision making is a cornerstone of MTSS (Deno, 2016) for identifying students' strengths, areas for support, and progress toward goals. Although different from the traditional data collected in K-12, institutions of higher education still collect data, such as academic progress, referrals for student outreach, and a student's self-report. It is essential to examine the available information and use it to make informed decisions about referring and supporting students to achieve their goals.

In the following section, we provide a brief overview of the MTSS model and the services and supports available, given the resources typically available in K-12 settings. We follow this overview with a description of how the MTSS model can be applied to higher education. We then describe a decision-making framework for determining whether pursuing postsecondary education is a "good fit" for a student with IDD, and if so, what resources are likely needed for their success in higher education. This framework is inspired by both related research and our experiences as the director of an inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) program and associate director of a disability resource center (DRC). Roles of the director include communicating with interested students and families, coordinating with various units on campus (e.g., admissions, financial aid, registrar, DRC), supervising student employees, communicating with parents/guardians as needed, and advising students in the program. Roles of the associate director include managing the day-to-day operations of the center, supervising professional staff, determining accommodations, supporting faculty/staff with accessibility and accommodations, providing campus/community training, and serving on the student intervention team. We have repeatedly found ourselves referring students with disabilities, their families, and teachers to each other when learning more about students' needs during initial conversations about postsecondary education options.

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

A MTSS model is proactive and preventative. MTSS uses both data and instruction to support student learning regarding their social, emotional, and behavioral needs (Jimerson et al., 2016) and includes three tiers of intervention to support the academic and non-academic skills of students (see Figure 1). The MTSS model is widely used in K-12 education, often

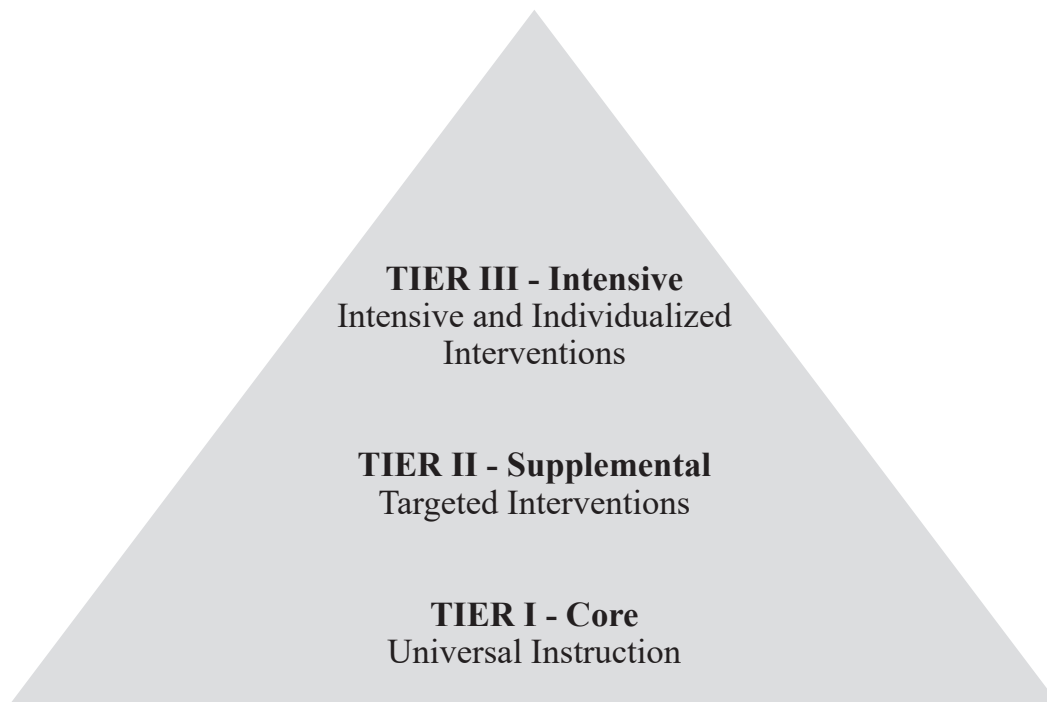
to support the identification of students with disabilities who may need specially designed instruction (i.e., special education services). This framework can also be applied to the higher education environment. Before discussing MTSS in a postsecondary context, we will first provide a foundational understanding of MTSS and the resources associated with each tier.

Tier I

Core instruction, also known as Tier I, represents the resources available to every student simply because they attend their school. The instruction and support students receive are comprehensive, evidence-based, and ensure students have the opportunity to learn essential content and skills (Stoiber & Gettinger, 2016). Instruction and support are often scaffolded and adapted to meet the needs of all learners. This work is typically done through a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, which closely aligns with Tier I elements of support (Rao et al., 2017). The UDL framework, developed by the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST), addresses the diverse needs of learners by planning instruction based on a variety of engagement, representation, and action and expression principles (CAST, n.d.; Davies et al., 2013). The goal of UDL is to reach the greatest number of learners, regardless of disability or learning preference, and for them to access the learning and meaningfully participate (CAST, n.d.; Hartsoe & Barclay, 2017). Within Tier I, student data are collected to monitor learning and progress (Thomas et al., 2023). If students are not making adequate progress with the resources provided within Tier I, additional, more intensive resources are considered for Tier II (Riley-Tillman et al., 2020). Importantly, in K-12 schools, the tiers are implemented sequentially based on success or progress. In the proposed application to postsecondary education, tiers would likely be chosen prior to implementation. This notion is further clarified below. In the context of MTSS, more intensive resources can include increased duration or frequency of instruction, smaller group size to increase opportunities for corrective feedback, and additional staff (e.g., a paraprofessional responsible for providing instruction).

Tier II

The purpose of Tier II interventions and supports is to give students additional opportunities to develop and practice their skills (Stoiber & Gettinger, 2016). Tier II, or supplemental instruction, does not replace Tier I; instead, Tier II instruction complements what the student is already receiving in Tier I (Hosp et al., 2016). Examples of Tier II instruction include Title I

Figure 1*Multi-Tiered Systems of Support in K-12 Schools*

Reading, differentiated instruction practices, simple token economy systems to reinforce meeting behavioral expectations, and other supplementary approaches. Within Tier II, student progress is monitored more closely than in Tier I. This allows the school to adapt the support as needed (e.g., increasing the frequency or duration of instruction). If the instructional support provided in Tier II is insufficient for the student to make adequate progress, resources available within Tier III will be considered to support the student's learning (Riley-Tillman et al., 2020).

Tier III

Tier III, or intensive instruction, is more rigorous than that of Tiers I and II. Instruction is adapted to the student's individual needs due to the inadequate progress made with core (Tier I) and supplemental (Tier II) instruction (Stoiber & Gettinger, 2016). This level of support typically requires more time and resources, as well as specialized staff (e.g., an interventionist), and involves frequent progress monitoring (Riley-Tillman et al., 2020; Stoiber & Gettinger, 2016). Tier III may be, but is not necessarily, synonymous with special education (Hosp et al., 2016). In addition to special education, Tier III can include small-group instruction, often one-on-one; complex plans to reinforce students who meet behavioral expectations; and

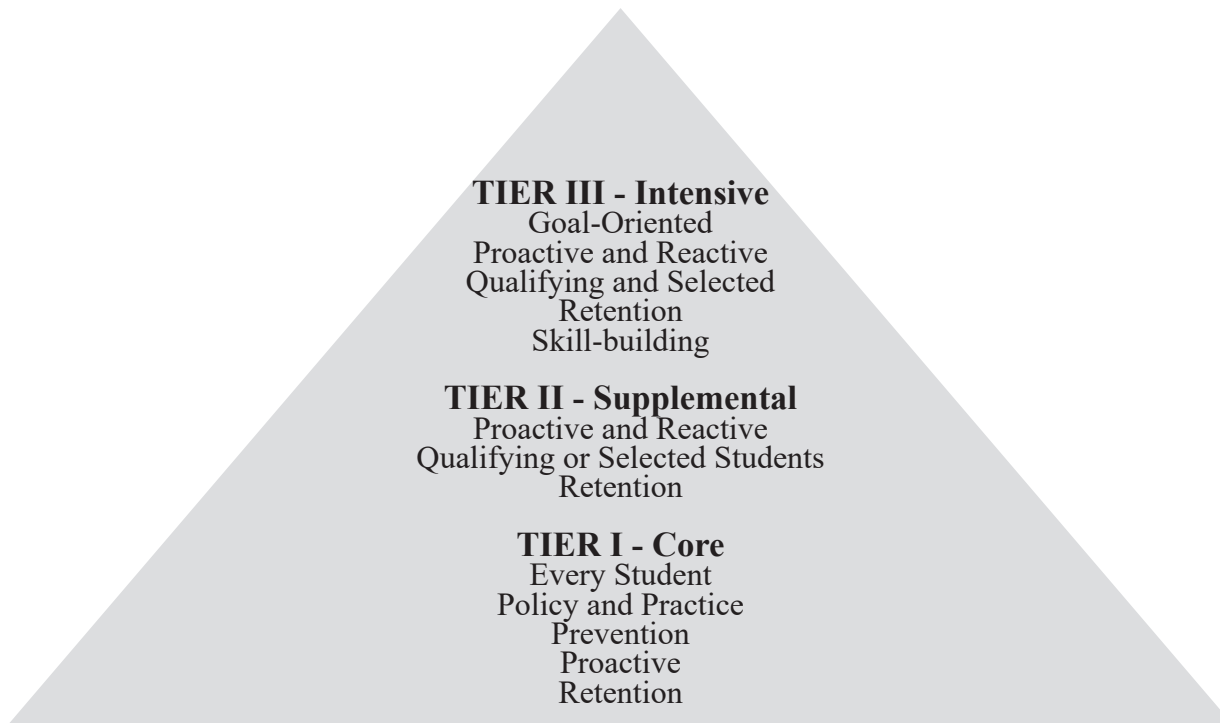
frequent collaboration between professionals (e.g., a general education teacher and a behavior specialist). In addition, Tier III instruction does not replace the support students are receiving in Tiers I and II.

Student Supports in Postsecondary Education

Although the MTSS framework is used regularly in K-12 education, it can also be feasibly applied to the postsecondary education context. Higher education institutions offer a range of academic, social, and behavioral support services to meet the diverse needs of their students. Many of these services can be organized using the MTSS model (Figure 2). By providing a foundational level of support and increasing that support through tiers of increasing intensity matched to students' needs, instructors are better able to focus on teaching students and trust other professionals across campus to provide additional intervention, as necessary. One may even relate the idea of data-based, early-warning student support systems used in higher education to implement robust retention strategies (Hanover Research, 2024). The relation between proactive and preventive intervention within the framework would support student retention, as they would receive early support for their identified needs. Overall, a tiered model of support in postsecondary education focuses on both proactive

Figure 2

Envisioned Postsecondary Education Resources Mapped Out in a Multi-Tiered Systems of Support Model



and reactive support to promote student retention and ensure students meet satisfactory academic progress.

Core (Tier I)

Institutional support available to all students in postsecondary education would be considered Tier I support. These services are embedded through policies, practices, and programming. Examples of student support services in Tier I may include an academic support center, advising, a career center, the office of the dean of students, new student orientation, a student involvement center (e.g., clubs), or tutoring centers (e.g., math, writing). The purpose of these supports is to proactively serve all students with the goals of retention and satisfactory academic progress. For students with disabilities, there has been a significant increase in the rate at which they attend college. However, their graduation rate is lower than that of their non-disabled peers (Francis et. al., 2019). This gap could be indicative that additional, or more intentional, services beyond the basic support available are needed for students to meet their goals.

Supplemental (Tier II)

Tier II services in postsecondary education are both proactive and reactive. To receive this support, students must meet the qualification requirements.

For example, a student would need to have a disability to receive disability accommodations. Again, the goal of these supplemental services is to retain students and facilitate satisfactory academic progress. Examples of Tier II services may include academic recovery programs, academic integrity interventions, English language support programs, and DRCs.

DRCs are the primary service available to students with disabilities in postsecondary education. The purpose of DRCs is to determine appropriate and reasonable accommodations for qualifying students with disabilities. According to Newman and Madaus (2015), only 35% of students who received special education services in high school chose to disclose their disability when enrolled in postsecondary education. In some cases, this disclosure is proactive (e.g., when students obtain accommodations from the start of their academic journey). In others, it can be reactive (e.g., a student realizes they need accommodations after classes begin). Of course, students with disabilities who access the Tier II services of the DRC still receive and can access the Tier I services available. For example, Anastopoulos and King (2015) found that multimodal treatment (e.g., counseling, tutoring, and accommodations) can have promising impacts on the mental health and graduation rates of neurodivergent students. Some students, however,

may need more than the core services and accommodations available.

Intensive (Tier III)

Similar to Tier II, Tier III services in postsecondary education can be either proactive or reactive, with a focus on student retention. Students receiving this support typically have to qualify and be selected for it. These services are goal-oriented and focused on skill-building. For example, a student with IDD could both qualify for a program that provides access to participate in college meaningfully and have to apply and be selected for the program. Examples of Tier III services in postsecondary education may include individualized counseling, TRiO programs, and dedicated programs for students with IDD.

Dedicated programs for students with IDD may include IPSE programs. IPSE programs are designed for students with IDD who want to develop their academic, employment, and community involvement skills. According to a national directory, there are currently 361 colleges and universities in the United States with dedicated programs for students with IDD (Think College, 2025). Students enrolled in IPSE programs participate in coursework offered by the institution (traditional and/or program-specific courses), engage in employment practicums, and have opportunities to participate in the campus community. Requirements vary for on-campus or residential living. Some IPSE programs may require on-campus or residential living, others may have it as an option, and other programs do not have the option. IPSE programs may be appropriate for students with IDD who want to pursue higher education but may need additional resources to support their success. Often, these resources provide dynamic services that can enhance student success (Corby et al., 2018; Hendrickson et al., 2013; Petroff et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2023). Table 2 includes a comparison of resources across tiers in K-12 education and postsecondary education.

Given the variety of resources available to support students with disabilities and the varying skills of these students, it can be challenging to determine the type of support most likely to help a student succeed in meeting their postsecondary educational goals. This challenge is especially true for students with IDD, for whom pursuing postsecondary education may not have been considered until graduation approaches and the option becomes known. Thus, a framework that provides prompts for students with IDD, their families, and their teachers and other professionals who support them can help with the challenging tasks associated with making decisions about postsecondary education.

In the next section, three case studies are presented. We begin by describing three students with various disabilities who are interested in attending college. Next, we introduce an access coordinator working in the college's DRC. Using the data available, the appropriate postsecondary resources for each student are then identified.

Case Studies

The students described below each have multiple strengths and skills, but they also face barriers to accessing college. While reviewing these fictional case studies, consider the supports appropriate for each student and the accommodations they may need in the postsecondary environment.

Tier I Case Study: Kelsey

Kelsey is a high school senior who is unsure about attending the local community college or university in her hometown in the fall. She will be completing high school having met traditional graduation requirements and attaining a 3.2 GPA. Kelsey plans to enroll in a radiologic sciences program, with aspirations to become a radiologic technologist. Kelsey is diagnosed with anxiety and depression. She demonstrates strong academic abilities, particularly in language arts and science. Kelsey tends to struggle more in her math courses and is concerned about the math requirements she will need to fulfill as part of her course of study. Kelsey has had a 504 plan throughout high school, which gives her access to a quiet space and a trusted adult she can speak with when feeling overwhelmed. As Kelsey's high school experience has progressed, the need for a quiet space and a trusted adult has decreased but remains on her 504 plan as a precaution.

Tier II Case Study: Maria

Maria is a graduating high school student with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), and she's diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Maria will be completing high school having met traditional graduation requirements and attaining a 3.4 GPA. Overall, she possesses strong skills across core academic areas but tends to second-guess her abilities. Maria has a goal of obtaining her bachelor's degree, but is undecided on her specific major. She hopes to have a career related to theater, writing, or visual arts.

Maria has identified barriers related to her academic management skills (e.g., time management), group projects, self-regulation, processing information, and multitasking. She performs well with con-

sistency but can experience dysregulation in response to unexpected changes. Maria's auditory senses are strong (e.g., hearing the air conditioning unit turn on and off), which can sometimes cause her difficulty in remaining focused on the current task. During class, Maria may experience barriers related to processing information at the same pace as her teachers are teaching. Maria's teachers often go back to reteach her the information.

On Maria's current IEP, she receives specially designed instruction in academic management and organization, as well as social-emotional skills. Maria's accommodations include teacher checks for understanding, extra time on tests and quizzes, permission to listen to music in class, a copy of the teacher's notes, additional time on assignments, early release for the passing period (to limit increased sensory stimuli), and encouragement to use self-regulation tools and skills.

Tier III Case Study: Alex

Alex is graduating soon from his 18-21 transition program, where he has an IEP and receives support for his part-time job at a construction company. Alex was diagnosed with an intellectual disability at a young age and has received specially designed instruction throughout his schooling. He had individual paraprofessional support through elementary school, middle school, and the beginning of high school. This support decreased when he expressed aspirations of attending college. By the end of high school, Alex was mostly attending classes independently and attempting the majority of all assignments in classes (e.g., U.S. History, Biology) with high school peers with and without disabilities. While Alex attempted all assignments, modifications included the following: reduction of pages or word counts for final papers, presentation time limits capped at 6-7 minutes, and assignments graded on a modified scale of (exceeds expectations, meets expectations, does not meet expectations). In addition to his goal of attending college, Alex has goals to maintain meaningful employment and live with friends one day. Alex is social and hopes to get involved at his future school.

Alex is highly organized and appreciates routine. Alex is engaged at school and work, often being the first to greet potential clients in the office. Alex does have difficulty with reading fluency and comprehension, so he uses assistive technology to access written materials. Alex also uses dictation to assist with writing tasks. It can also be difficult for Alex to process multiple pieces of information at once, so an outline of his tasks, notes from meetings, and check-ins are helpful support he receives at his job. Alex enjoys his place of work but wants to acquire more skills so he

can earn a competitive salary and live independently in the future.

Alex's current IEP includes specially designed instruction in transition services, independent living, reading, and writing. Alex's accommodations include teacher checks for understanding, extra time on tests and quizzes, a copy of the teacher's notes, access to a daily schedule, chunked assignments and tasks, text-to-speech and speech-to-text capabilities, a calculator, preferential seating, and a teacher-provided graphic organizer for writing.

Case Study Summary

Table 1 outlines the accommodations and resources available to each student. Postsecondary education is an option and an appropriate goal for each of the three students. How they attain their postsecondary education goals might look different, and each student will likely access resources across tiers. The student's self-report and documentation provide us with the necessary information to determine reasonable and appropriate accommodations for postsecondary education. This interactive process exemplifies the application of data-driven decision-making within the postsecondary education context. Not all accommodations will remain suitable; some may look different, and new ones might even be considered. We will discuss this below. Each student's experience as a learner with a disability and the previous services they received allow us to make those meaningful referrals. Below, we consider how an Access Coordinator could make these connections with students.

Reaching out to the DRC

Marcy is an access coordinator at the local university's DRC. Along with working with enrolled students with disabilities, Marcy has informational meetings with interested students or answers questions when they call. Informational meetings include reviewing the accommodation process, learning about the student's educational experiences and services (e.g., IEP), answering their questions, and referring them to explore other resources (e.g., IPSE). Marcy also explains the interactive process, which officially begins when the student self-identifies as a student with a disability needing accommodations and is admitted to the university.

In the interactive process, Marcy will (a) get the student's self-report about their experience of disability, barriers within the learning environment, and history of accommodations, (b) review the student's external documentation (e.g., medical documents, IEP), and (c) develop her own impressions and conclusions as a professional (AHEAD, n.d.). There are

Table 1*Summary of Case Studies*

Student	Primary Tier for Services	DRC/IPSE	Appropriate Accommodations for Postsecondary Education	Resources
Kelsey	I (Core)	N/A	Based on the information provided, accommodations are unlikely to be necessary. 1.5x extra time on tests/quizzes	Wellness resources Math tutoring center
Maria	II (Supplemental)	DRC	Noise-cancelling headphones Copy of PowerPoint slides Permission to record the class Access to course materials in advance	Academic support center Wellness resources Mental health resources
Alex	III (Intensive)	DRC and IPSE	2x extra time on tests/quizzes Preferential seating Copy of PowerPoint slides Note-taking services Text-to-speech Speech-to-text	Student involvement/clubs Writing support center Job coach provided by IPSE Academic coaching from IPSE Social opportunities through IPSE Independent living support from IPSE

Note. DRC = Disability Resource Center; IPSE = Inclusive Postsecondary Education Program

Table 2*Components of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support Comparison*

MTSS Tier	K-12	Postsecondary Education
Tier I (Core)	Curriculum standards School-wide behavior supports Universal screening/assessments Extracurricular activities School counselors	General education requirements Student conduct codes Admissions data, retention data Student involvement/clubs Academic advisors
Tier II (Supplemental)	Supplemental instruction Progress monitoring Teacher referrals for support Accommodations	Remedial courses Academic recovery programs Faculty/staff referrals Accommodation plans
Tier III (Intensive)	Individualized instruction Multidisciplinary approach Therapeutic services Academic and non-academic support	Individual academic coaching Student intervention teams Individualized counseling Inclusive-postsecondary education programs

Note. MTSS = Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

many questions professionals can ask to obtain an accurate self-report, including the following: “What is your experience with (subject/skill)?” “What accommodations have been helpful or not helpful in the past?” and “What type of support did you have previously in school?” (AHEAD, n.d.).

Marcy’s university has recently established a college program for students with IDD that has gained significant popularity among students and families. This is an IPSE program, as students take classes with typically enrolled peers, program-specific classes, engage in competitive integrated employment, and are involved in campus community activities with support from the program. Marcy has noticed in her calls that she often reflects on what the student or prospective family is telling her and whether the IPSE program would be an appropriate referral.

Kelsey Calls Marcy

Early in her day, Marcy receives a phone call from Kelsey. Kelsey shares with Marcy that although she is leaning toward enrolling in community college, she wants to explore her options at the university too. Marcy asks Kelsey about what she is looking for concerning resources and accommodations. Kelsey explains the current support she gets on her 504 plan due to her anxiety and depression. However, she has been working with a counselor for the last few years and feels like she has her mental health well-managed. Kelsey shares that she did not know why she still had her 504 plan, as she did not use it, but her parents continued to advocate for it. Kelsey shares that she may consider mental health resources at her future college, but is more interested in the academic support. She is concerned about the required math courses and knows that if she has access to tutoring, she could likely do well.

Marcy affirms Kelsey’s efforts to manage her anxiety and depression. She also uses reflective listening to share with Kelsey that it sounds like accommodations may no longer be needed for her. Reflective listening is a technique Marcy uses to ensure she is accurately understanding the student’s self-report (Braillon & Taiebi, 2020). Marcy provides Kelsey with information about her rights to receive or decline accommodations and shares the general process for requesting them if needed. Marcy also reflects that she heard Kelsey is interested in mental health and math tutoring. Marcy provides information about how counseling and tutoring are not accommodations, but could be resources available on college campuses. Marcy provides information about the well-being resources and math tutoring center at her university. She gives Kelsey ideas about ques-

tions she could ask the community college about the availability of similar services.

Maria Drops into Marcy’s Office

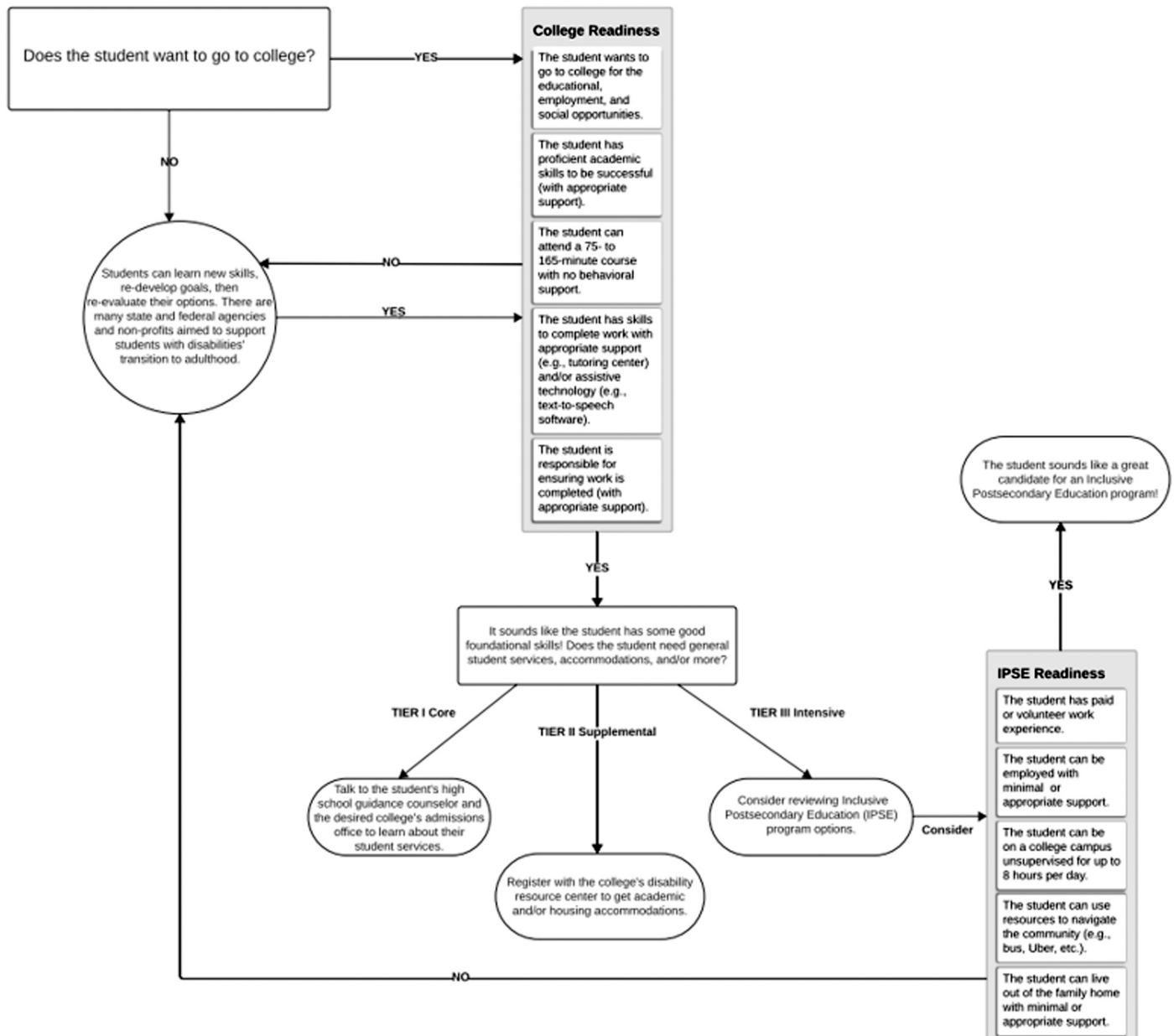
Maria, a soon-to-be high school graduate, drops by the DRC. Marcy greets Maria and learns that Maria has committed to the university and will be starting in the fall. Maria shares with Marcy that she is nervous to make the transition from high school to college. She has been successful with the support she has received, but is concerned about the availability of accommodations and academic support in college. Maria shares some of her current accommodations and concerns about becoming dysregulated in class, managing her time, and overall feeling burned out.

Marcy assures Maria that accommodations are still available in college but that they may look different sometimes. Marcy shares general information about testing and note-taking accommodations, but notes that there is an official process to receive them. Marcy walks Maria through the process for formally requesting accommodations. Marcy also normalizes many of Maria’s concerns and shares that many students worry about the stress of managing their academics, and that it is great she’s being proactive and reaching out now. In addition to the accommodation information, Marcy shares information about the university’s academic support center, wellness resources to help prevent burnout, and mental health resources in case more individualized support is needed.

Alex and His Parents Meet Marcy

It is Marcy’s last meeting of the day, and she gets to meet with a prospective student, Alex, and his parents. Alex and his parents had been emailing back and forth with Marcy since his graduation will be soon. In their communication, Marcy has learned that Alex has an intellectual disability, holds a part-time job, is graduating from his transition program, and has a goal to attend college. Alex is concerned about the courses and thinks he may start with one class at a time. Marcy has begun to wonder, based on these early observations, if Alex would be a good candidate for her university’s IPSE program.

Marcy finally gets to meet Alex, and his parents join for the meeting. Marcy learns more about Alex’s goals for himself. Alex appears to be a motivated student who wants to engage in both the academic and social opportunities the university has to offer. He also emphasizes the importance of meaningful, competitive employment for him. Alex tells Marcy about the services he has been receiving in his transition program, including building his skills in assistive technology. Marcy shares that there are many

Figure 3*Decision-Making Framework to Identify Needed Postsecondary Supports for Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*

resources and opportunities for college support. She gives Alex and his parents an overview of the differences in services between his IEP and the accommodations he could receive in college. Marcy can tell Alex is feeling overwhelmed, and he expresses that he does not think that would be enough, at least for his first couple of years.

Marcy uses reflective listening to share some of what appeared important to Alex: building academic skills, starting at a manageable pace, and attaining meaningful employment. Marcy asks if he or his parents have heard of IPSE programs, and they had, but were uncertain what they were. Marcy explains how IPSE programs are meant to intentionally support students in developing their academic and employment skills while increasing their independence and community involvement. Marcy explains that at her university's IPSE program, students take program-specific classes and elective classes with typically enrolled peers. She also shares how students can work with both academic and job coaches to develop their skills further.

Alex starts getting excited, and his parents share that it sounds like something that would be a good transition from what he is currently receiving. Alex also appreciated hearing that he would graduate with a certificate from the program, which he could include on his resume to enhance his employability. Marcy affirmed Alex's excitement and shares that even if he chooses to apply and was accepted, he would still be able to get accommodations through the DRC and access all other campus resources available to students. Marcy provides Alex and his parents with information on how to contact IPSE program staff if they have further questions. In a follow-up email, Marcy provides the IPSE program website, directions for registering with the DRC, and other campus resources.

Using Knowledge of Available Tiered Supports to Assist in College Planning

Figure 3 provides a decision-making framework for considering the types of support a student with a disability may require in college. This framework is designed for use by students, teachers, and other professionals who support them and is informed by the College and Career Readiness Framework proposed by Morningstar et al. (2023). In the fictional case studies above, Marcy engages in an interactive process to gather information and uses the decision-making framework to identify appropriate resources aligned with students' needs, recognizing the increasing levels of support provided in each tier. Parents are especially encouraged to be involved in the decision-making process for students with IDD,

as they play a crucial role in setting expectations for college enrollment (Martinez et al., 2012). The most important factor in helping a student decide whether to attend college is ensuring that the student genuinely wants to attend. The pursuit of postsecondary education cannot be the goal of a parent or teacher; it must be the student's goal.

Establishing that the student is interested in postsecondary education is key to determining Ownership of Learning (Morningstar et al., 2023). It is certainly acceptable for a student not to be interested in attending college. If this is the case, the student can learn new skills, redevelop goals, and reevaluate their options at any time. Each state includes government and non-profit agencies to support individuals with disabilities. If the student decides in the future that they wish to attend college, that opportunity may still exist in the future, and the specific support the student needs can be explored. Importantly, while some IPSE programs do not have age limits, other programs do. Interested students and their families should verify whether the program(s) they are interested in have an age limit. In addition, college-based transition programs (i.e., programs where students are enrolled in both their school district and IPSE) will be restrained by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) or the state age limit for providing special education services.

If a student is interested in attending college, their readiness for college must be assessed. When doing so, the student's interest in college should be confirmed. That is, students should be interested in college not only for the social opportunities, but also for the educational, employment, and social (college is fun!) opportunities. Once a holistic interest in college has been established, other important considerations include determining the student to (a) have proficient academic skills for the coursework they plan to take (with appropriate support), (b) be able to attend a college class lasting a traditional amount of time (e.g., 75 to 165 minutes), (c) advocate for themselves by accessing resources (e.g., writing center) with appropriate support and assistive technology, and (d) be expected to be responsible for completing assignments (i.e., turn in their work on time) with appropriate support.

The areas considered in College Readiness (Figure 3) are mostly subjective. However, attending class can be viewed as an indicator of academic engagement, while skills related to academic tasks, work completion, and time management can be viewed as process-oriented skills (Morningstar et al., 2023). The most qualified people to answer the prompts in Figure 3 are the student themselves, their parent(s) or guard-

ian(s), and the teachers or related professionals they have worked with. It is also expected that any individual preparing to transition to life after high school, in particular students with IDD, is still developing the skills related to these prompts. Identifying what is proficient and what is appropriate support is not always easy to determine. Suppose it is determined that the student has gaps regarding College Readiness skills. In that case, the decision-making framework guides teams back to the idea that students can learn new skills, redevelop goals, and reevaluate their options. Revisiting the possibility of attending college can occur in the future, and might include working with a state vocational rehabilitation agency, parent and information training center, or local nonprofit agency. For students who are near completing high school, it may be appropriate to consider extending special education services.

When it is decided that a student is holistically interested in attending college and possesses the necessary College Readiness skills to succeed, discussion of what types of support the student needs can be considered. This can also be thought of as identifying the resources that are most likely to facilitate the student in meeting their postsecondary education goals. For students without a disability, Tier I resources, such as the university library or tutoring center, are available. Some students with milder disabilities may only need these and similar resources to meet their postsecondary education goals as well. For students with mild or more moderate disabilities, registering with a disability resource center is recommended. Tier II resources, such as accommodations for taking classes (e.g., extra time on tests and note-taking services) and housing, may be necessary to meet postsecondary education goals.

We believe that IPSE programs are best conceptualized as representing Tier III resources of a postsecondary institution. Students with IDD can be successful with the more intensive person-centered supports provided by IPSE programs. However, in the spirit of college not being for everyone, several IPSE Readiness skills must be evaluated to determine if a student is a good fit for college. Responses to the prompts about these skills indicate the current level of independence in the community and workplace of students with IDD who are interested in college. Again, it is essential to note that the student, their parent(s)/guardian(s), and the teachers and related professionals they work with are in the best position to evaluate these skills.

In addition, a student's IEP in high school or transition program can be explicitly aligned with goals for postsecondary education success. This alignment makes it essential for school districts and IPSE pro-

grams to collaborate, preferably early, to consider if postsecondary education is an attainable goal. Skills related to college readiness (e.g., self-determination, career awareness) can start as early as elementary school when integrated into the classroom (Papay et al., 2015). For students who express an interest in college relatively late in high school, a decision by IEP teams to extend special education services past high school to work on college readiness goals may need to be considered.

Furthermore, it is once again necessary to acknowledge that phrases such as "minimum or appropriate support" are vague, and students are likely to be developing skills like navigating the community and living independently. If it is determined that a student "checks all the boxes" for IPSE Readiness, they might be a good fit for college. Importantly, if all boxes are not checked, the student can learn new skills, redevelop goals, and reevaluate their options.

Future Directions

As the field of IPSE continues to evolve, it is crucial to expand and deepen efforts that promote equitable access to postsecondary education for students with IDD. Such an expansion must continue in both K-12 and higher education. Workshops teaching the decision-making framework presented in this paper and examining its effects on students, parents, teachers, and other professionals in understanding the available postsecondary education resources should be pursued. Institutions of higher education (IHEs) can also take an active role in embedding tiered systems designed to support student retention and satisfactory academic progress. However, while the application of MTSS in K-12 settings is well established, its integration into postsecondary education remains conceptual, highlighting the need for empirical research. Such a call for research aligns with previous ones for increasing knowledge on supporting students with disabilities in higher education (Newman et al., 2021).

One particular barrier to implementing a tiered system of supports in higher education stems from the difference in focus of K-12 schools and IHEs for supporting students with disabilities. That is, the focus of K-12 schools is most often to provide the support that students with disabilities need to meet the same expectations as their same-grade peers without disabilities. The focus of DRCs is to provide students with disabilities access to the school's curriculum, while an essential focus of IHEs overall is to create a sense of belonging (Gopalan & Bradly, 2019) for students that facilitates retention and degree completion. While more attention is likely devoted in K-12 schools to considering data related to the success of

students with disabilities than is found in postsecondary settings, IHEs often have data indicating when the allocation of resources in Tier I (e.g., satisfactory academic progress, retention indicators, student outreach referrals), Tier II (e.g., progress in remedial courses, DRC information), and Tier III (e.g., school student intervention teams, IPSE program information) is insufficient to support a student. When the allocation of resources associated with a Tier is unsuccessful, meaningful referrals are necessary. It is important to note that individual units may not have access to all the data, but use the information they do have to make meaningful referrals. Additionally, multi-disciplinary teams within the IHE (e.g., student intervention teams) may be able to share enough appropriate information to make further decisions and support students.

A continuum of services (Deno, 1970; Murdock-Perriera et al., 2019) is necessary to support students with disabilities in K-12 settings and IHEs effectively. These resources are present in postsecondary education settings, and framing their use within a tiered model, such as MTSS, can provide a systematic and intentional approach to supporting student learning. Notably, IHEs likely do not require different or additional data collection or personnel to collect such data. Instead, by examining the resources the school offers and what “success” looks like for students accessing the resources available at specific tiers, it can be determined which resources are helping and where additional supports (i.e., different resources associated with a tier or the resources associated with a different tier) are needed. Unlike K-12 schools, where multiple metrics are available for making decisions about whether students are receiving the support they need, IHEs lack research that identifies the specific indicators from the data they collect to inform these decisions, which makes it an essential area of research to focus on moving forward.

Further, while research examining the experience of students with disabilities in college has increased considerably (Kimberly et al., 2019) and continues to do so, particularly for students with IDD (Carter & McCabe, 2021; Grigal & Papay, 2018; Grigal et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2021), research examining the experience of students with disabilities enrolled in an IHE explicitly integrating an MTSS model should be an area of interest given the benefits associated with the model in K-12 settings (Kearney et al., 2020; Hines et al., 2023; Morningstar et al., 2018; Raley et al., 2021). Such research could help normalize disability within the college experience, reduce stigma, and cultivate environments that anticipate and plan for diverse learning needs, as called for by Lombardi and Lalor (2023). Moreover, calls for training fac-

ulty in UDL (Hromalik et al., 2019; Reardon et al., 2019) are consistent with the need for improvements in universal instruction in higher education. By advancing research, training, and advocacy, the field can move toward more inclusive, data-informed, and person-centered postsecondary education systems.

Conclusion

The decision-making framework outlined above emphasizes student-centered planning, promotes self-determination, and helps IHEs align their services to foster academic success, independence, and access to postsecondary education for students with disabilities. As the conversation around equitable access to postsecondary education continues to evolve, particularly for students with IDD, future efforts can benefit from the intentional integration of a tiered structure of support aligned with the MTSS model in IHEs. The conceptual framework outlined in this practice paper represents a reimagining of how colleges and universities can better support all learners; however, further research is necessary to validate and refine this model. Specifically, there is a growing need to examine how students, families, educators, and institutional leaders understand and utilize decision-making frameworks aligned with MTSS. This includes exploring the types and levels of support that different stakeholders find most effective, feasible, and meaningful.

As research on the postsecondary experiences of students with disabilities continues to grow, particularly among students with IDD, there is an opportunity to build on this momentum by conducting empirical studies that assess the effectiveness and feasibility of MTSS-based supports in higher education. These investigations should also consider the perspectives of students with disabilities, as well as those of faculty and staff. Ultimately, creating a system wherein all students have access to the proper supports at the right time will require a shift in institutional culture and policy, one grounded in data, inclusivity, and the belief that every student deserves the opportunity to pursue postsecondary education.

References

- AHEAD. (n.d.). *Supporting accommodation requests: Guidance on documentation practices*. Association on Higher Education and Disability. <https://www.ahead.org/professional-resources/accommodations/documentation>.
- AHEAD. (n.d.). *The professional's guide to exploring and facilitating access*. Association on Higher Education and Disability. <https://www.ahead.org/professional-resources/accommodations/documentation/professional-resources-accommodations-professional-guide-access>.
- Anastopoulos, A. D., & King, K. A. (2015). A cognitive-behavior therapy and mentoring program for college students with ADHD. *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice*, 22, 141–151. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cbpra.2014.01.002>.
- Braillon, A., & Taiebi, F. (2020). Practicing “reflective listening” is a mandatory prerequisite for empathy. *Patient Education and Counseling*, 103(9), 1866–1867. doi.org/10.1016/j.pec.2020.03.024.
- Carter, E. W., & McCabe, L. E. (2021). Peer perspectives within the inclusive postsecondary education movement: A systematic review. *Behavior Modification*, 45(2), 215–250. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0145445520979789>.
- CAST. (n.d.). *Universal Design for Learning*. CAST. <https://www.cast.org/what-we-do/universal-design-for-learning/>
- Corby, D., Taggart, L., & Cousins, W. (2018). The lived experience of people with intellectual disabilities in post-secondary or higher education. *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities*, 24(3), 339–357. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744629518805603>
- Davies, P. L., Schelly, C. L., & Spooner, C. L. (2013). Measuring the effectiveness of Universal Design for Learning intervention in postsecondary education. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 26, 195–220.
- Deno, E. (1970). Special education as developmental capital. *Exceptional Children*, 37(3), 229–237.
- Deno, S. L. (2016). Data-based decision-making. In S. R. Jimerson, M. K. Burns, & A. M. VanDerHeyden (Eds.), *Handbook of response to intervention* (2nd ed.). Springer.
- Francis, G. L., Duke, J. M., Fujita, M., & Sutton, J. C. (2019). “It’s a Constant Fight:” Experiences of College Students with Disabilities. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 32(3), 247–262.
- Grigal, M., Dukes, L. L., & Walker, Z. (2021). Advancing access to higher education for students with intellectual disability in the United States. *Disabilities*, 1(4), 438–449. <https://doi.org/10.3390/disabilities1040030>.
- Grigal, M., & Papay, C. (2018). The promise of postsecondary education for students with intellectual disability. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 2018(160), 77–88. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.20301>.
- Gopalan, M., & Brady, S. T. (2019). College students’ sense of belonging: A national perspective. *Educational Researcher*, 49(2), 134–137. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189x19897622>.
- Hanover Research (2024, March 1). Increasing higher ed student retention and preventing drop-out. *Insights Blog*. <https://www.hanoverresearch.com/insights-blog/increase-college-student-retention/?org=higher-education>.
- Hartsoe, J. K., & Barclay, S. R. (2017). Universal Design and disability: Assessing faculty beliefs, knowledge, and confidence in Universal Design for Instruction. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 30, 223–236.
- Hendrickson, J. M., Carson, R., Woods-Groves, S., Mendenhall, J., & Scheidecker, B. (2013). UI REACH: A postsecondary program serving students with autism and intellectual disabilities. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 36(4), 169–194. <https://doi.org/10.1353/etc.2013.0039>
- Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, PL 110-315, 122 Stat. 3078.
- Hines, E. M., Mayes, R. D., Harris, P. C., & Vega, D. (2023). Using a culturally responsive MTSS approach to prepare Black males for postsecondary opportunities. *School Psychology Review*, 52(3), 357–371. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2021.2018917>.
- Hosp, J., Huddle, S., Ford, J., & Hensley, K. (2016). Learning disabilities/Special education. In S. Jimerson, M. Burns, & A. VanDerHeyden (Eds.), *The handbook of response to intervention: The science and practice of assessment and intervention* (2nd ed.). Springer.
- Hromalik, C. D., Myhill, W. N., & Carr, N. R. (2020). “ALL faculty should take this”: A universal design for learning training for community college faculty. *TechTrends*, 64, 91–104. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-019-00439-6>.
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 (2004).

- Inclusive Postsecondary Education Association (2025). *What is the IPSE association?* <https://community.ipseassociation.org/ipse-assoc-vs-think-college>
- Jimerson, S. R., Burns, M. K., & VanDerHeyden, A. M. (Eds.). (2016). *Handbook of response to intervention: The science and practice of multi-tiered systems of support* (2nd ed.). Springer Science + Business Media. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4899-7568-3>.
- Kearney, C. A., & Graczyk, P. A. (2020). A multi-dimensional, multi-tiered system of supports model to promote school attendance and address school absenteeism. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 23(3), 316–337. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-020-00317-1>.
- Lee, S., Rozell, D.M., & Will, M.C. (2018). *Addressing the policy tangle: Students with intellectual disability and the path to postsecondary education, employment, and community living*. Inclusive Higher Education Committee.
- Lombardi, A., & Lator, A. (2023). Including disability in the discourse: Extending and advancing the definition of diversity in higher education. In P. A. Pasque, N. Ortega, J. C. Burkhardt, & M. P. Ting (Eds.), *Transforming understandings of diversity in higher education* (pp. 148–162). Routledge.
- Martinez, D. C., Conroy, J. W., & Cerreto, M. C. (2012). Parent involvement in the transition process of children with intellectual disabilities: The influence of inclusion on parent desires and expectations for postsecondary education. *Journal of Policy & Practice in Intellectual Disabilities*, 9(4), 279–288.
- Murdock-Perriera, L. A., Boucher, K. L., Carter, E. R., Murphy, M. C. (2019). Places of belonging: Person- and place-focused interventions to support belonging in college. In M. B. Paulsen & L. W. Perna (Eds.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research. vol 34* (pp. 291–323). Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-03457-3_7
- Morningstar, M. E., Lombardi, A., & Test, D. (2018). Including college and career readiness within a multitiered systems of support framework. *AERA Open*, 4(1), 2332858418761880.
- Morningstar, M. E., Lombardi, A., Mazzotti, V. L., Buddeke, K., Langdon, S., Taconet, A., Rifensbark, G., & Kwiatek, S. M. (2023). Perspectives of college and career readiness among educational stakeholders. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 35(3), 143–153. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10442073231177405>.
- Neubert, D. A., & Leconte, P. J. (2013). Age-appropriate transition assessment: The position of the Division on Career Development and Transition. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals*, 36(2), 72–83. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2165143413487>.
- Newman, L. A., & Madaus, J. W. (2015). An analysis of factors related to receipt of accommodations and services by postsecondary students with disabilities. *Remedial and Special Education*, 36(4), 208–219. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07419325155729>.
- Newman, L. A., Madaus, J. W., Lator, A. R., & Javitz, H. S. (2021). Effect of accessing supports on higher education persistence of students with disabilities. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 14(3), 353. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000170>.
- Papay, C., Unger, D. D., Williams-Diehm, K., & Mitchell, V. (2015). Begin with the end in mind: Infusing transition planning and instruction into elementary classrooms. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 47(6), 310–318. DOI: 10.177/0040059915587901.
- Petroff, J. G., Pancsofar, N., Schleppy, M., & DeMonte, B. (2020). A post program survey of graduates from a college-based program for students with intellectual disabilities. *Journal of Inclusive Postsecondary Education* 2(2). <https://doi.org/10.13021/jipe.2020.2697>
- Raley, S. K., Shogren, K. A., Rifensbark, G. G., Lane, K. L., & Pace, J. R. (2021). The impact of the self-determined learning model of instruction on student self-determination in inclusive, secondary classrooms. *Remedial and Special Education*, 42(6), 363–373. <https://doi.org/10.1177/074193252098>.
- Rao, K., Smith, S. J., & Lowrey, K. A. (2017). UDL and intellectual disability: What do we know and where do we go? *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*, 55(1), 37–47. <https://doi.org/10.1352/1934-9556-55.1.37>.
- Reardon, K., Bromley, K. W., & Unruh, D. (2019). The promise of universal design in postsecondary education: A literature review. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 34(3), 209–221.
- Riley-Tillman, T. C., Burns, M. K., & Kilgus, S. (2020). *Evaluating educational interventions: Single-case design for measuring response to intervention*. Guilford Publications.
- Stoiber, K.C. & Gettinger, M. (2016). Multi-tiered systems of support and evidence-based practices. In Jimerson, S. R., Burns, M. K., & VanDerHeyden, A. M. (Eds.), *Handbook of response to intervention: The science and practice of multi-tiered systems of support* (pp. 121–141). Springer Science + Business Media. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4899-7568-3>.

- Taylor, A., Domin, D., Papay, C., & Grigal, M. (2021). "More dynamic, more engaged": Faculty perspectives on instructing students with intellectual disability in inclusive courses. *Journal of Inclusive Postsecondary Education*, 3(1). <https://doi.org/10.13021/jipe.2021.2924>.
- Thomas, E. R., Lembke, E. S., & Gandhi, A. G. (2023). Universal design for learning within an integrated multitiered system of support. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 38(1), 57-69. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ldrp.12302>.
- Think College (2019). *What is Think College?* <https://thinkcollege.net>.
- Uditsky, B., & Hughson, E. (2012). Inclusive postsecondary education: An evidence-based moral imperative. *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities*, 9(4), 298-302. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jppi.12005>.
- Zhang, D., Roberts, E., Maddalozzo, R., Li, Y.-F., Orsag, M., & Glass, T. (2023). Postsecondary education outcomes for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities: Self-determination, independent living, employment, and the impact of COVID-19. *Behavioral Sciences*, 13(10), 832. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs13100832>.

Julia P. Gorman received her B.A. degree in elementary and special education and M.Ed. in early and special education from Boise State University. Her experience includes working as a graduate assistant in special education and inclusive postsecondary education research, and working as a special education teacher and department head in Idaho. She is currently the Associate Director of the Educational Access Center and a doctoral candidate at Boise State University. Her research interests include multi-tiered systems of support, inclusive postsecondary education, and disability and higher education. She can be reached by email at: juliagorman@boisestate.edu.

About the Authors

Dr. Jeremy W. Ford, NCSP, received his B.S. degree in psychology from Northland College (WI), his MS.Ed. and Ed.S. degrees in school psychology from the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, and his Ph.D. in Teaching and Learning (Special Education) from The University of Iowa. His experience includes working as a school psychologist for the now named Central Rivers Area Education Agency and serving as a Co-Chair for the NorthWest Inclusive Postsecondary Education Alliance. He is currently an associate professor of special education in the Department of Teaching, Learning, and Community Engagement at Boise State University. His research interests include curriculum-based measurement, explicit instruction, postsecondary transition and education for students with disabilities, Response to Intervention / Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, and instructional decision-making. He can be reached by email at: jwford@boisestate.edu.