

Building Inclusive Higher Education Programs in Places Where They Don't Exist

A Series of Family Perspectives

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About this Series

This series of briefs introduces inclusive higher education (IHE), shares lessons learned, and presents the stories of parent leaders who helped create IHE programs in places where they didn't exist. Author **Elise McMillan, J.D.** is a parent and former director of the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD). She was one of the founders of the Tennessee Inclusive Higher Education Alliance and the founding faculty member of Next Steps at Vanderbilt, the first IHE program in Tennessee. She is a past president of The Arc US and a member of the board of the Inclusive Higher Education Accreditation Council (IHEAC). Her son, Will, is a graduate of Next Steps at Vanderbilt and works at the Office of the District Attorney of Nashville/Davidson County.

Introduction to IHE: A First-Person Perspective

IHE programs are post-high school educational opportunities where people with intellectual disability (ID) can continue their education in college or certificate programs that include peers with and without disabilities, and where students with disabilities are afforded the same opportunities and experiences as students without disabilities.³ There are currently more than 300 IHE programs at colleges across the country, and employment and job training are important aspects of these programs. When IHE programs began developing at both four-year and community college campuses, there were essentially three models: (1) programs on college campuses but students are not included in other college activities, (2) programs with some

Importance of Higher Education for Disability Employment

Employment is an essential outcome of college for all students, including those with ID attending postsecondary or "higher" education programs.¹ Students with ID who participate in an inclusive higher education program have a 59% competitive integrated employment rate one year after leaving college.² As such, job development is a core component of inclusive higher education programming. Job development focuses not only on gaining the skills needed for employment but also attaining and sustaining competitive integrated employment during and after college. Therefore, programs must plan for how job development is integrated into their support from the beginning.

¹ In this series, we primarily use the term higher education to refer to postsecondary educational programs providing academic opportunities beyond high school. In some cases, we use the term postsecondary to refer to education or other career interests following high school/secondary education.

² Think College. (2023). Job Development. <https://thinkcollege.net/resources/resources-by-topic/job-development>.

³ The Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) includes a definition of a student with an ID. Provisions of the HEOA including federal financial aid, Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary Programs (CTP), and Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) are specifically provided for students with ID. The term Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD) is often used to describe students with both ID and another developmental disability (DD) or students with ID or another DD. Some of the alliances mentioned in this

inclusive aspects but also parts of their programs that were not inclusive, and (3) programs that were fully inclusive.

As we worked to develop programs in the Southeast, there were excellent models in the Northeast region and out West, but not many programs in the Southeast and in the middle of the country. One of the reasons why it is beneficial to expand these programs to other regions is because of the positive employment outcomes for students who have participated in these programs. More programs began developing with the passage of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA), which introduced opportunities for qualifying programs to offer federal financial aid to students, set up a national coordinating center, and set up the Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) program to fund model demonstration programs.⁴

More than 300 programs are a wonderful accomplishment, but more programs are needed to serve the thousands of students with ID who want a college experience. Attending college still provides one of the strongest paths to successful competitive, integrated employment, yet many communities still do not have programs at their four-year or community colleges. There is still one state with no programs, and many more with only two or three programs. Only 11 states have more than 10 programs. Currently, there is only one program at a Historically Black College and University (HBCU), which is at Tennessee State University in Nashville, Tennessee.

As the field of IHE grows, there are an abundance of resources to support colleges and communities in the development and expansion of such programs, including briefs, guides, and webinars for developing programs on campuses. Through its Think College Inclusive Higher Education Network, the capacity of regional alliances has expanded. Additionally, the IHEAC in partnership with the Think College Coordinating Center and working closely with regional and state alliances, supports the implementation of Program Accreditation Standards and other information to develop model programs. These standards include specific expectations for career/employment outcomes in Student Achievement and Curriculum Standards.

The U.S. Department of Education Comprehensive Transition Program (CTP) provides guidance on specific career/employment activities that should be part of any inclusive higher educational programs.⁵ In many states, Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), state legislatures, and other state agencies have also been active partners by providing funding and support for colleges and for students enrolled in IHE programs.

But what about the many communities and colleges where there is still no inclusive college program available to prospective students with ID? How can individuals with ID and families grow

series are working to build programs and services for the broader category of students with IDD who in some cases may not have an ID. Find out more information at <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/highered/leg/hea08/index.html>.

⁴ Find out more information at <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/tpsid/index.html>.

⁵ A Comprehensive Transition Program (CTP) for students with ID means a degree, certificate, or nondegree program that is offered by a college or career school and approved by the U.S. Department of Education. CTP Programs are designed to support students with ID who want to continue academic, career, and independent living instruction to prepare for gainful employment. More information can be found at <https://studentaid.gov/understand-aid/eligibility/requirements/intellectual-disabilities#ctp-programs>.






interest and support to engage colleges in their communities to build this important pathway to employment? This informational resource shares interviews with six parent leaders from across the country who were part of starting IHE programs and/or alliances in their respective states across a span of 20 years. Key to this development in Virginia, Tennessee, Oklahoma, California, Minnesota, and North Carolina was involvement from individuals with disabilities and their families. All of the programs and alliances promote strong career/employment opportunities for students and graduates. Their experiences and advice can serve others well in the development of this field.

Strategies to Develop IHE Programs or Coalitions






The growing movement to develop IHE programs for students with ID on college campuses presents opportunities for DD Network partners as well as family/advocacy groups to be part of planning and developing partnerships and resources to support IHE programs and coalitions.⁶ Key advice from the parent leaders interviewed for this series offers many opportunities that are part of the work of these organizations. **Exhibit 1** below summarizes key takeaways from these parent leaders’ experiences developing IHE programs in their respective states.

Exhibit 1. Key Takeaways from Parent Leaders

	<p>Keep students with disabilities and their families front and center. UCEDDs, P&As, and Councils are already involved with many students with disabilities and their families across their states through advisory councils, programs, and other initiatives. Enlist their help in building the movement by sharing their postsecondary interest, concerns, and barriers.</p>
	<p>Inform the mission, purpose, and focus through research. As part of this research, conduct an inventory of potential partners, resources, and needs. UCEDDs, P&As, and Councils conduct state assessments related to the needs of individuals with developmental disabilities and their families on a regular basis. Findings from these studies can provide critical information about needs and resources in the state to help make the compelling case for IHE expansion.</p>
	<p>Share the successful employment rates in competitive, integrated employment for program graduates of existing IHE programs. Engage employers and the business community. Many DD network partners are involved in statewide coalitions to support increased competitive and integrated employment. Successful employment rates and presentations by IHE graduates can be shared as part of these coalitions. Graduates can share how their IHE experience helped remove barriers to employment. These results can also help promote systems change within states.</p>

⁶ The DD Network consists of State Councils on Developmental Disabilities (Councils), UCEDDs, and Protection & Advocacy Systems (P&As). The DD Network was established when the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act was passed in 1963. Find out more about the DD Network here <https://acl.gov/news-and-events/announcements/developmental-disabilities-dd-network-statement-60th-anniversary-dd>.



	<p>Funding is critical to program launch, implementation, and sustainability.</p> <p>Bringing some type of funding to the table is helpful when approaching a college. This could be from private funds raised, sponsorships, information about an upcoming grant opportunity, or introductions to foundations and other entities working in the same area. All three DD Network partners can be helpful in preparation of proposals for fundings. In a number of cases, Councils have provided funding for IHE initiatives.</p>
	<p>Engage key state agency leaders and members of the state legislature.</p> <p>Councils keep policymakers informed about disability issues. Sharing the stories of students who want to go to college can be very powerful for building the case for state and federal funding for programs and students. State agencies including VR, disability, and state Medicaid agencies provide support for students and programs in various states. A number of states have passed legislation providing funding and support for IHE programs. P&As can provide legal support to achieve system change. They can be incredibly helpful as new legislation is developed or current laws and statutes are reviewed to determine impact on students in new IHE programs.</p>
	<p>As outreach is conducted, consider race and representation.</p> <p>All three DD Network partners have the opportunity to ensure that traditionally unserved or underserved populations are included in outreach about the opportunities IHE offers students. This can be through activities including training and technical assistance, dissemination and ensuring that materials are accessible to all.</p>
	<p>Use evidence-based practice program guidelines already developed as guidance for building new programs.</p> <p>A number of UCEDD leaders have been involved in the development of Model Accreditation Standards for Higher Education Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability.⁷ New and developing programs have access to these standards, posted on the Think College and IHEAC websites, as they build their programs. UCEDDs can be very helpful in assisting programs address issues as they develop programs. UCEDD trainees can be helpful in training, technical assistance, and project development.</p>
	<p>Find or develop a champion or champions at the colleges you want to engage. Share information on the impact of IHE programs with other students at the college. Connect the proposed programs to the college's missions of diversity, outreach, and teacher preparation.</p> <p>UCEDDs provide a unique role as liaisons between academia and the community. UCEDDs can help identify potential college champions and can also share information on the impact of IHE with other students at the college. They can also help connect the proposed programs to the college's mission of diversity, outreach, and teacher preparation.</p>

Looking Ahead

While those interviewed for this series come from different backgrounds and states, many of their experiences and recommendations for building community support for IHE programs at local universities or community colleges was similar. They have provided resources and strategies for engaging colleges to partner in developing IHE programs and alliances.

⁷ Think College National Coordinating Center Accreditation Workgroup (2021). *Report on Model Accreditation Standards for Higher Education Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability: Progress on the Path to Education, Employment, and Community Living*. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion. https://thinkcollege.net/sites/default/files/files/TCreport_Accreditation-full_2021.pdf



The future is bright for partnering to build more IHE programs that have a strong career and employment emphasis and outcomes. IHE programs can be another pathway to improved employment outcomes for students with disabilities. Several free and accessible resources are available for development of programs. Opportunities to visit other programs either in-person or virtually are also available. Application of nationally recognized Program Accreditation Standards and evidence-based strategies for assuring optimal career development and employment outcomes post-college is recommended when building new programs.

Resources

To learn more about IHE and opportunities for career and employment advancement, check out the following resources:

- [Administration on Disabilities \(AoD\)](#), a federal agency dedicated to improving outcomes for people with disabilities.
- [IHEAC](#), an accrediting agency for college and university programs for students with ID.
- [Opening Doors to College](#), a film by Dan Habib that follows several students with ID through university.
- [Pacer's National Parent Center on Transition and Employment](#), a center that supports families of youth with disabilities in achieving success in higher education, employment, and life.
- [Think College National Coordinating Center](#), a center that provides coordination, technical assistance, training, and evaluation for TPSID.
- [Think College Inclusive Higher Education Network](#), a technical assistance and dissemination center dedicated to improving IHE for students with ID.
- [U.S. Department of Education Office of Postsecondary Education TPSID](#), a U.S. Department of Education Office that provides grants to higher education institutions to enable them to create or expand TPSID for students with ID.



Access the spotlights for each parent leader in this series on the Disability Employment Technical Assistance Center website: <https://aoddisabilityemploymentcenter.com/detac-publications/>.

