

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

A Series of Family Perspectives

August 2024

About this Series

This profile is part of the series, *Building Inclusive Higher Education Programs in Places Where They Don't Exist: A Series of Family Perspectives*. Author **Elise McMillan, J.D.** is the retired former director of the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD) and was the founding faculty member of Next Steps at Vanderbilt University, the first inclusive higher education (IHE) program in Tennessee. In this series of briefs, Elise presents an introduction to IHE, shares lessons learned, and presents the stories of parent leaders who helped create IHE programs in places where they didn't exist. This spotlight highlights the work of parent leader, **Julie Lackey**.

Julie Lackey

Introduction

Julie Lackey created and currently directs the Oklahoma Inclusive Postsecondary Education Alliance.¹ Her son, Jacob Lackey, graduated from college in December and works in sound design.

Why?

There were no IHE programs in Oklahoma in 2012 when Julie Lackey began her quest to build these opportunities. She and her husband were determined that their son Jacob who has intellectual disability (ID), then in middle school, along with others with Down syndrome, autism spectrum disorder, and similar disabilities, should have the same opportunities to attend college as their peers.² From the beginning, she wanted to build something to impact the entire state. She saw no reason students should have to leave Oklahoma to continue their education.



¹ The Oklahoma Inclusive Postsecondary Education Alliance is a statewide alliance dedicated to ensuring that Oklahoma students with intellectual and developmental disabilities have the opportunity to achieve higher education and participate fully in campus life. More information can be found at <https://www.okipsealliance.org/>.

² The Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) includes a definition of a student with an intellectual disability (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 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>.



“We have always been advocates for our son, who has autism and a mild intellectual disability. I had a friend who picked up a handout about what was going on in South Carolina, and she shared that with me. I reached out and learned about the programs there.” After that, Lackey began working closely with other families and started researching IHE programs. “We didn’t just want to have a program that made people feel good. We wanted programs with results that would lead to greater employment opportunities.”

How?

Lackey’s group talked with industry leaders in Oklahoma about the potential of IHE programs. This included discussions with some of Oklahoma’s largest employers. They also started working through their grassroots contacts to find who had legislative connections. “We were doing everything as volunteers until we finally found a potential donor who offered funds if we had somewhere to put them. We decided to go the non-profit route. We honed our message and really worked on building collaborations.” She founded LeadLearnLive, a non-profit with the mission of establishing fully integrated, comprehensive post-secondary programs in Oklahoma for students with intellectual or developmental disabilities.³

The group provided development, support, and start-up funding for two IHE programs in Oklahoma. The first university, Northeastern State University, began the RiverHawks Scholar Program in 2018.⁴ The second, Oklahoma State University, began Opportunity Orange Scholars in 2022.⁵ Both programs include components focused on independent living, social skills, academics, and employment.

She is also director of the Oklahoma Inclusive Postsecondary Education Alliance, where she continues to build and expand its initiatives. Lackey said collaborating with the Think College Inclusive Higher Education Network was key in building the Alliance. She continues to advocate for and promote IHE. “It never ceases to amaze me that people do not know about IHE and what all-inclusive higher education programs can offer.”

The Oklahoma Alliance meets three times a year and includes leaders from all the related state agencies and resource groups. “Students give a report at all the meetings and we pull them into as much as possible,” Lackey said. Continued involvement of students and families is essential. “Panels that feature students with ID sharing all their accomplishments and career plans are always favorites. I always have students and sometimes family members who can talk about their experiences and jobs as much as possible when we present.”

³ LeadLearnLive was created to establish, raise awareness for, and support degree and/or certificate inclusive postsecondary education programs for students with intellectual/developmental disabilities in Oklahoma that increase independence, social skills, academic abilities, and career development. More information can be found at <https://www.leadlearnlive.org/>.

⁴ The RiverHawks Scholar Program is a four-year inclusive certificate program for students with intellectual disability at Northeastern State University in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. More information can be found at <https://academics.nsuok.edu/continuingeducation/RiverHawksScholarProgram/default.aspx>.

⁵ Oklahoma State Opportunity Orange Scholars is a two-year certificate program at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, Oklahoma. More information can be found at <https://education.okstate.edu/departments-programs/human-development-family-science/opportunity-orange-scholars/>.



In Closing

Jacob graduated from college in December 2023. He started school in Oklahoma, but transferred to an inclusive program in another state because a concentration in audio and sound design was not available in Oklahoma. He now works part-time in sound design and hopes to build his career in this area. Julie continues to lead LeadLearnLive and the Oklahoma Inclusive Postsecondary Education Alliance.

Advice from Julie Lackey

Focus on the bigger picture. *“Collaboration is a must. It is really important to remember that it is not about you, it is about a whole bunch of young people whose lives can change dramatically. Focus on that and have a larger vision.”*

Engage people with disabilities and their families. *“Whether you are building a program in a community or for an entire state, it should all begin with people with disabilities and with families. That needs to be your base. Keep those individuals and families connected and informed. Make sure that they understand what you are saying. Understand why you are doing what you are doing. You cannot be all things to all people. Your messaging is critical.”*

You don't have to be an expert. Do your research and make connections to learn about existing programs. *“I didn't know this world. My background was architecture and design,”* notes Lackey. She emphasizes the importance of learning and building connections.

