

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*. The series 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 the retired former director of the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities and was the founding faculty member of Next Steps at Vanderbilt University, the first IHE program in Tennessee. This spotlight highlights the work of parent leader, **Sheila Moore**.

Sheila Moore

Introduction

Sheila Moore is the CEO of The Arc Davidson County and Greater Nashville. Matt Moore, a graduate of Next Steps at Vanderbilt, works at Best Buy and hosts his own podcast for a disability services provider in Franklin, Tennessee.

Why?

For Sheila Moore, the interest in IHE began when her son, Matt, was in high school. Sheila recalls that Matt, who has Down Syndrome, told her that “he wanted to go to college just like his friends and his sister.” Just as the family had done for developing things as Matt grew up, they began to look at what programs were available. At the time they started exploring options for Matt, there were no IHE programs in existence across the entire state of Tennessee.



How?

The Moores attended a meeting of the National Down Syndrome Congress in Atlanta in 2006, where information was shared about the emergence of IHE programs. The conference theme was “Open Possibilities.” Moore, who led the Down Syndrome Association of Middle Tennessee (DSAMT) at the time, began meeting with three others interested in developing programs in Tennessee – another parent, the head of the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities, and a local Arc director. The group soon expanded to include other interested family members, heads of area non-profits, and several representatives from area schools and state agencies.

The group began presenting publicly in 2006 and 2007, hosting its own postsecondary transition summit and also presenting at other disability agency conferences. Representatives from the



National Down Syndrome Society and Think College presented at the summit. “We still had a challenge in selling this idea of people with intellectual disability going to college,” Moore said. “We didn’t give up. We knew these programs were developing in other states and we wanted them in Tennessee.” Soon, the group invited Tennessee’s Special Education Director and several others to visit programs being developed in New Jersey with the help and support of the National Down Syndrome Society and its public policy team, Madeleine Will and Stephanie Smith Lee.

Soon the Tennessee Inclusive Higher Education Alliance was launched.¹ Moore and others worked closely with the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities, one of the first councils in the country, to fund the development of IHE programs and the Vanderbilt Kennedy University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities. In 2009, Vanderbilt University was awarded a three-year grant to develop Tennessee’s first inclusive education program, Next Steps at Vanderbilt.² The four-year program includes career exploration courses and internships or apprenticeships on campus or in the community as part of the curriculum.

Moore’s son wanted to attend college, and Moore remembers including this as part of his Individualized Education Program. The school personnel did not know about these programs; they could not understand why we were not considering the Vocational Rehabilitation-sponsored workshop. Her son was a member of Next Steps’ third class. Since graduating, Matt is employed by Best Buy, hosts a Podcast for a local disability agency, and is an active community volunteer.

In Closing

Moore continued her involvement as a member of the Next Steps at Vanderbilt Advisory Council. Moore shared that, “after Next Steps was launched and after other programs were developing, we always made sure that students were part of our meetings.” She moved from being the executive director of DSAMT to lead The Arc Davidson County and Greater Nashville in 2012. She also continued her work to build the Tennessee Inclusive Higher Education Alliance to grow the programs in Tennessee. Today, all IHE programs in Tennessee have employment and internship components. She continues today as a member of the Tennessee Inclusive Higher Education Alliance. Sheila offers the following advice to others interested in developing IHE programs.

Advice from Sheila Moore

Learn from Think College and the IHE programs that exist today. *“There is no reason to start from ground zero. When we weren’t making progress, we took the group to visit programs in New Jersey to see what could be possible.”*

People with disabilities and families can be your strongest supporters in encouraging college programs in communities where there is not anything available, but they must be involved in the process. *“Be sure and communicate clearly. It is very important to educate families, especially those who may feel that their sons or daughters are not capable.”*

Connect with other organizations and state agencies and emphasize the tremendous employment outcomes for students completing the programs. *“Through these programs, we have changed career opportunities for students with disabilities.”*

¹ The Tennessee Inclusive Higher Education Alliance is an alliance for the advancement of postsecondary education opportunities for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) in Tennessee. Find out more on the Tennessee Inclusive Higher Education Alliance on their website: <https://tmihealliance.org/>.

² Next Steps at Vanderbilt is a four-year inclusive higher education program at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. More information is available on the Next Steps website: <https://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/nextsteps/>.

