

Exploring Options to Increase Opportunities for Postsecondary Education for Students with Disabilities

Purpose

There are 6.6 million public school children enrolled in special education in the United States, 13 percent of all public-school students. Nineteen percent of undergraduates in 2015-16 reported having a disability. In 2015-16, the percentage of undergraduates who reported having a disability was 19 percent for male students and 20 percent for female students.¹ Their disabilities should not keep them from achieving the same educational advancements and achievements as their peers. Experts estimate that up to 90 percent of students with disabilities can graduate high school fully prepared to tackle college or a career if they receive proper support along the way. Yet, just 65 percent of special education students graduate on time, well below the 83 percent four-year rate for U.S. students overall. Many of those that earn their diplomas find themselves unprepared for the real world. After high school, students with disabilities have lower college graduation rates than their peers and earn less once they join the workforce.²

There are many reasons why students with disabilities do not pursue postsecondary education (PSE): teachers inadequately trained to support special education students, districts lacking funding to provide needed supports, lowered expectations of capable students being pushed into alternate diploma programs, thus, limiting their options, high school programs not stressing soft skills such as studying and time management needed for success in college, and lack of funding. In addition, many students with disabilities struggle to acclimate to the social demands of college life without the support system they received in elementary and secondary school. Currently, students with disabilities attend four-year colleges at half the rate of other students. Less than half who attend complete college. And very few students with learning disabilities in college willingly disclose their disability to seek the accommodations they need.

The opportunity to participate in PSE improves the likelihood of employment for students, as well as opportunities to experience greater community inclusion, independent living, and greater self-reliance.

College is usually an option only for those who can afford to pay privately. And many parents do not know what choices are open to their children to attend college.

Background

The Arizona Developmental Disabilities Planning Council (ADDPC) is collecting ideas from stakeholders on what would it take for a student with disabilities to go to college. There is a general lack of awareness of programs and resources available to help increase participation in PSE. Many families are not able to pay for college for their children which too often creates a barrier to education. ADDPC is exploring various funding mechanisms that could be used to help students and their families pay for college. ADDPC recognizes there are many issues and challenges related to PSE, this brief is really a starting point to begin a much broader conversation on how community partners can work collaboratively to increase PSE options and opportunities for students with disabilities.

Funding Options

An Empowerment Scholarship Account (ESA) is an account administered by the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) and funded fully by state tax dollars to provide options for the education of qualified students in Arizona. The qualified student must have a current IEP or evaluation on file at the time of services. According to the ADE *Empowerment Scholarship Program Parent Handbook: School Year 2020-21*, approved spending categories include tuition or fees at an eligible postsecondary institution and the purchase of required textbooks by that institution. ESA funds may be used for community college as defined in A.R.S. 15-1401, a university under the AZ Board of Regents, or an accredited private secondary institute. ESA funds cannot be used for room and board, meals, meal plans, food, etc.

A.R.S. 15-2402(B)(4)(c) allows the parent of a student with a disability to pay tuition for vocational and life skills education approved by ADE. ESA funds can be used for tuition at vocational/trade schools or programs such as Career & Technical Education Districts (CTEDs), trade schools, community colleges, and vocational schools.

An increasing number of states allow students with intellectual disability to use Medicaid Home and Community Based (HCBS) waivers to support participation in PSE. These waiver services support access to higher education for students receiving Medicaid services who might otherwise not be able to participate in PSE. HCBS waivers funding has been used to pay for peer support, career services, transportation, tuition fees, and more (Parisi & Landau 2018).³ Students in nine states (CA, DE, MI, NC, NJ, NY, OH, PA, VT) are using HCBS waivers as a funding source for service and supports while in college.

HCBS waiver programs, or 1915(c), prioritize access to community living and the provision of services in inclusive settings. All but three states have a 1915(c) waiver program, Arizona, Rhode Island, and Vermont currently provide HCBS services to people with I/D under Section 1115 of the Medicaid law, and do not use waivers. The 1115 waiver authority plans give states additional flexibility to demonstrate specific policy approaches for improving services to Medicaid populations (Arizona – 1115 Demonstration Waiver). Preliminary research indicates Arizona could use the “Habilitation” section of the 1115 waiver since members would be building a skill set. Arizona’s waiver allows flexibility and may be able to create a “Medicaid PSE program” and then place it into policy. This could be implemented under the 1115 waiver without a waiver change.

Arizona’s Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program will support PSE based on the needs of the employment goal and education requirements must be part of the plan and specified in an approved Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE). VR will pay for tuition at approved, accredited Arizona community colleges, universities, trade and vocational schools to obtain an Associates, Baccalaureate, Master’s degrees, certification or credential. VR will fund published in-state tuition rates based on the rate of the public institution with the lowest cost that is within commuting distance of the client (i.e. local community college) after all comparable benefits have been applied. Comparable benefits including PELL grant will be explored during every period of tuition renewal and all available benefits will be utilized to pay for PSE costs including tuition, books, supplies, transportation, maintenance support prior to using VR funds.

PELL grant is the largest federal grant program. It provides need-based grants to low-income undergraduate students from all backgrounds, and students with disabilities are encouraged to apply.

What about Dual Enrollment?

Dual enrollment is an opportunity for high school students to get a head start on college. Dual enrollment courses allow students to earn both high school and college credit simultaneously during regular school hours at their high school. The credit earned may be transferred to a community college or university upon high school graduation. Studies show that students are more academically successful at their chosen university when they successfully complete dual enrollment courses while still in high school. Students experience the rigor of community college course expectations and are better prepared when they become full-time college students.⁴

Partnership and Collaboration – Who can help implement a new program

Arizona needs a diverse cross-agency collaboration and community partnership to implement a statewide PSE program. Suggested stakeholders include the following:

Students and Families

Arizona Department of Education (ADE)

Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System (AHCCCS)

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR)

High Schools (guidance counselor, SPED, transition specialist)

Community Colleges

Universities

Disability Resource Centers

Institute for Human Development (IHD)

Sonoran UCEDD

Arizona Technology Access Program (AzTAP)

Arizona Developmental Disabilities Planning Council

Why it makes sense to promote PSE

A study of over 9,000 young adults with ID who received vocational rehabilitation services found that individuals who participated in PSE earned higher wages. They used 31% fewer government services than individuals with only a high school education. Although the cost of VR was higher for individuals while attending college, these higher costs were relatively minor compared to the lifetime of cost savings in government assistance that resulted. Research shows that VR costs would be mitigated in just a few years (Cimera, Thoma, Whittenburg & Rulh, 2018).⁵

Innovative Practices

The Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council is funding an initiative to create a statewide hub for postsecondary opportunities for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and provide customized technical assistance to any entity developing, implementing, or improving or expanding PSE programming. The statewide hub will connect, support, and train colleges and universities to develop or

improve inclusive higher education programs and dual enrollment programs. This initiative will allow more people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to have access to high quality, inclusive higher education options and lead to improving employment opportunities and increasing overall quality of life.

Think College Transition (TCT) is a refinement and more strategic version of college-based dual enrollment transition services for students with disabilities. Dual enrollment programs have been implemented throughout the country. In Massachusetts specifically TCT, leveraged an existing state grant funded program called the Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment Initiative that supports the creation of partnerships between institutes of higher education (IHEs) and local school systems to serve students with disabilities who are in the process of transition from school to adult life. While these programs each involve college, they are inconsistent in their use of critical components such as person-centered planning, peer mentors, inclusive course access, and customized employment strategies. The TCT model developed and implemented incorporated each of these essential components as part of a cohesive and inclusive transition program. This represents the first time this intervention has been implemented or evaluated. The theory of action underlying the TCT model is that a program of dual enrollment for students with ID/A will lead to greater job-seeking skills, career readiness, self-determination, and college self-efficacy. The components of the TCT model included training provided to both high school and higher education staff involved in the program to provide them with the skills and knowledge necessary to implement the TCT model; the development of a collaborative partnership between the school district, higher education institutions, and local partners; and student activities. It was predicted that when students participate in the TCT model elements provided by the high school and higher education staff, they would experience positive changes in job-seeking skills, career readiness, self-determination, and college self-efficacy. In addition, it was predicted, they would be more likely to hold integrated paid employment after completing the TCT model than ID/A students in business as usual transition programs.⁶

College Steps is a nonprofit that provides customized, college support for students with learning and social challenges such as learning disabilities, autism, and executive functioning deficits. College Steps recognizes that, for many students, the need for individualized academic and social support is essential to a successful transition to college and beyond. In response to the need, College Steps' Individualized College Plan (ICP) is developed to complement or pick up where the student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) may have left off, serving as a road map, outlining areas of need and tracking progress throughout the student's college experience through: academic enrichment, independent living, social involvement, and pre-employment training. It offers four levels of support to meet the individualized needs of students, and works with families, students, and partnering organizations to determine supports needed. Based on the determination, it then recommends an appropriate level of support necessary to achieve the goals of the student. The student-centered support utilizes peer mentoring and multidisciplinary collaboration on campus. Its structured educational support model emphasizes thorough planning and thoughtful action. College Steps is located at eleven 2-year and 4-year college campuses in Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Vermont, and Virginia.

[\(https://www.collegesteps.org/\)](https://www.collegesteps.org/)

The ClemsonLIFE (Learning is for Everyone) program at Clemson University offers a collegiate experience that prepares young adults with intellectual disabilities for competitive employment and independent living through a combination of academic coursework and career exploration. ClemsonLIFE differs from other postsecondary opportunities. The core principles support the concept that enhancing academic, social, employment, and life skills will better prepare students with disabilities to lead full and productive lives. It is a comprehensive residential college experience designed to raise the expectations

and skill levels of the students admitted to the program. ClemsonLIFE offers a 2-year Basic Program that incorporates functional academics, independent living, employment, social/leisure skills, and health/wellness skills in a public university setting with the goal of producing self-sufficient young adults. There is also a 2-year Advanced Program for students that have demonstrated the ability to safely live independently, sustain employment, and social integrate during the Basic Program. The Advanced Program progresses with an emphasis on workplace experience, community integration, and independent living with transitionally reduced supports. Student who successfully complete the Basic or Advance program will receive a corresponding certificate of postsecondary education.

<https://www.clemson.edu/education/research/programs/culife/resources/index.html>

Recommendations

- Start the PSE conversation much earlier
- Clarify expectations about what the educational system can and should do
- Provide consistent communication and messaging about PSE
- Schools, organizations, and agencies should focus on collaboration over competition
- Form allies and partnerships to develop a shared agenda
- Collect data that helps describe how PSE saves the state money
- Collect data on impact of PSE on health and well-being, increased employment outcomes, and social connectedness
- Ask families what they need to increase PSE, what will be helpful (e.g. FAQ, resource guide, info on 504/ADA), when do they need it, how do they need it

What are the Next Steps? Research the following:

Medicaid waiver

- What other states are doing under their 1115(c) waiver, what service category it is listed under. Is it Habilitation? Other? It may be listed under multiple categories.
- What policies are in place that support PSE. Can Arizona emulate the language?
- How are states administering their Medicaid PSE program?
- Does Arizona have the capacity to implement a Medicaid PSE program?
- What population is served?
- What would be required of current AHCCCS contractors?

Empowerment Scholarship Account

- What are the student requirements to use an ESA for PSE?
- How many students are using ESA for PSE?
- How are ESA funds used for PSE? What are approved spending categories?
- How long can ESA funds be used for PSE?

Vocational Rehabilitation

- Can VR funds be used to support a student with disability in a dual enrollment program?
- What is the process to fund PSE?
- How can VR funds be used for PSE? What are approved spending categories?
- How many students are using VR funds for PSE?

Conclusion

What do we really believe about people with disabilities and their abilities, aspirations, and desires? Our belief stems from our unconscious bias. We need to encourage students to pursue PSE. Allow them to try it out; allow them to experience college life and everything that goes with it. It is incumbent for us to provide supports when needed, provide encouragement, information, and guidance. Above all, we need to increase our belief that students with disabilities can attend college and be successful.

References

¹U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2019). Digest of Education Statistics, 2017. Chapter 3.

²Butrymowicz, Sarah and Mader, Jackie. *Almost All Students with Disabilities Are Capable of Graduating. Here's Why They Don't*. The Hechinger Report. November 4, 2017.

³Parisi, Paige and Landau, Julia. *Medicaid HCBS Waiver Support for Students with Intellectual Disability Attending College: What's Available in Your State?* Think College Insight Brief, Issue No, 44, 2020.

⁴ My Maricopa Dual Enrollment. <https://my.maricopa.edu/support/dual-enrollment>.

⁵Parisi, Paige and Landau, Julia. *Positive Outcomes for Students with Intellectuals Disability Attending College: Why Medicaid Waivers Should Provide Support*. Think College Insight Brief, Issue No. 43, 2019.

⁶*Developing Least Restrictive Environment for Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities: A Step by Step Guide for Replication*, Georgia Department of Education.

<https://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Special-Education-Services/Pages/Developing-LRE.aspx>.