



THINK COLLEGE AZ

5 Ways Arizona Can Help Students with Intellectual Disabilities Pay for College

The Big Picture:

Nationwide, more than [8,000 students with disabilities](#) are enrolled in college with the support of [327 inclusive post-secondary programs](#). These programs require long-term sustainable funding sources to succeed, grow, and reach more students. The five strategies outlined below can help Arizona fuel these life-changing programs to reach more students.

Arizona's IPSE Programs

Inclusive post-secondary education (IPSE) programs for students with intellectual disabilities exist in nearly all states. All four of Arizona's four public universities now boast programs.

- ★ The University of Arizona's [Project FOCUS](#) launched in 2011 as our state's first IPSE program for students with intellectual disabilities. The program partners with Pima County school districts so high school students can fulfill their transition requirements.
- ★ Northern Arizona University's [Supporting Inclusive Practices in Colleges Program](#) began in 2021 with federal and state grants.
- ★ Grand Canyon University introduced [L.O.P.E.S. Academy](#) in 2021 with a grant from a private donor.
- ★ Arizona State University's [Pitchfork Scholars](#) will launch in the fall of 2025.

[Learn more](#) about these programs.

Why IPSE Programs Matter?

Both students and the state win with these programs. Some of the benefits include:

- Inclusion: Inclusive postsecondary programs allow students to attend courses with peers and participate in all campus activities.
- Graduation & Employment Rates: Studies show that retention and completion rates for these programs are high, and graduates have higher employment rates.
- Quality of Life: Higher education offers a slew of benefits, from higher incomes to better health. Unsurprisingly, these benefits extend to students with intellectual disabilities too.

What's the Cost?

Like all university programs, IPSE programs can be expensive to run, and tuition can be high. Cost depends on the types of programs and services offered, in particular, if residential living is available.

Average Cost: A national survey indicated that the [average cost for these programs](#) is \$14,689 with some as high as \$70,000 per student.

How Are IPSEs Currently Funded?

Families can, and often do, simply pay tuition and fees for their college students. However, reliance on self-payment leaves behind students who cannot afford tuition and fosters an inequitable system for students with disabilities and traditional students alike.

The following three funding options currently exist to help families cover the cost of IPSE programs. While helpful, Arizona must identify other long-term sustainable funding sources.

1. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Many IPSE programs also serve as dual enrollment programs for high school students with intellectual disabilities. Since it helps the high school provide a unique transition program, the school district can reimburse the college with their IDEA funds.

See It in Action: The University of Arizona's [Project FOCUS](#) offers a good example.

2. Achieving a Better Life Experience (ABLE) Accounts

Federally authorized [ABLE accounts](#) function like the familiar 529 college savings accounts but with a broader range of qualified expenses, including college. Families can save for their family members with a

tax-exempt savings account without jeopardizing any federal benefits. There are over 36,000 ABLÉ accounts in Arizona.

Spread the Word: Arizona has authorized ABLÉ account contributions to qualify for a state tax deduction. Now it's time to get the word out to families.

3. Empowerment Scholarship Accounts (ESAs)

Arizona families opting out of public schools may apply for Empowerment Scholarship Accounts (ESAs). Families can use the funds deposited in their ESA account for various education-related expenses, including tuition, fees, and textbooks at an eligible postsecondary institution. Funds may also be used for vocational and life skills education. Furthermore, any monies that remain after high school graduation may be used for postsecondary education.

Extra Time: Federal and state law allows public school students with disabilities to stay in high school through age 22. Similarly, students with disabilities who are receiving ESAs may qualify through age 22.

5 New Strategies to Fuel ISPE Programs

If IPSE programs are going to succeed and grow, they can't just depend on grants, donors, or self-funding students. Programs need long-term sustainable funding sources. There are five ways Arizona can sustainably fuel IPSE programs for students with intellectual disabilities.

1. Engage Community Colleges

Many students begin their postsecondary careers at community colleges, and students with disabilities are no exception.

- By the Numbers: 72% of Arizona's students with disabilities enrolling in postsecondary education choose community colleges.

Every county in Arizona has a community college, yet the state's only ISPE programs are at the state's four universities.

Next Step: Community colleges can partner with school districts to leverage dual enrollment and vocational programs to also fulfill student transition requirements. These possibilities also come with unique funding opportunities.

What Are Other States Doing?

- Support Networks: [North Carolina](#) funded a pilot project to build college and career pathways with support networks on community college campuses.

- Access to Support & Accommodations: [Illinois](#) legislation requires community colleges to offer students with intellectual disabilities access to the support and accommodations they need.

Illinois ([110 ILCS 805/3-29.18](#))

Sec. 3-29.14. Students with disabilities.

(a) Each community college district shall provide access to higher education for students with disabilities, including, but not limited to, students with intellectual or developmental disabilities. Each community college is encouraged to offer for-credit and non-credit courses as deemed appropriate for the individual student based on the student's abilities, interests, and postsecondary transition goals, with the appropriate individualized supplementary aids and accommodations, including general education courses, career and technical education, vocational training, continuing education certificates, individualized learning paths, and life skills courses for students with disabilities.

2. Use Federal Financial Aid

Students with intellectual disabilities can receive federal financial aid if they are attending programs that have received the official Comprehensive and Transition Postsecondary (CTP) status established in federal law.

- By the Numbers: Over 125 college programs for students with intellectual disability have been approved as CTP programs, but [none are in Arizona](#).

Next Step: Arizona can offer grants to incentivize and support the efforts of existing programs to become official CTP programs.

3. Create Scholarships

College scholarships are a valuable source of funding for students. However, students with intellectual disabilities may not be eligible for typical scholarships.

Next Step: Arizona could consider using a portion of the state's [PROMISE scholarship](#) programs for students with intellectual disabilities.

What Are Other States Doing?

- The [South Carolina Comprehensive Transition Program Scholarship](#) awards students up to \$5,000 per semester.
- The [Florida Postsecondary Comprehensive Transition Program Scholarships](#) awards students \$7,000 annually.

4. Leverage Medicaid

Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS) provided under Medicaid for people with disabilities promote independence and minimize the use of institutional care. Some states allow students with intellectual disability to pay for some of the related costs of college through their state's Medicaid waiver.

Next Step: Arizona can review its Medicaid waiver to see what amendments would allow for the payment of college-related costs. (Some services might be able to qualify under existing categories with some clarity.)

The Arizona Developmental Disabilities Planning Council could convene a subcommittee to tackle this.

[What Are Other States Doing?](#)

- **Peer Mentors:** Vermont's HCBS waiver program pays for college peer mentors as part of its Community Supports services.
- **Tuition & Fees:** Pennsylvania's Education Support service allows for the payment of college tuition and fees as well as peer mentors in campus residential halls. (There is a lifetime limit of \$35,000 that participants can receive for tuition.)

5. Access Vocational Rehabilitation Funds

Postsecondary education improves employment outcomes for people of all abilities. Consequently, Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services could consider college and related costs as qualified services for students qualifying for VR.

Next Step: Policymakers can direct Arizona's Department of Economic Security to develop a plan for Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services to include college and related expenses as qualified services. While service decisions should be individualized, VR will need a process to guide decision-making. The new plan could amend existing guidance documents, update training manuals, and develop family-friendly documents.

What Do the Feds Say?

The U.S. Department of Education addressed this issue in 2019 [guidance](#). When asked if VR funds can support a student with a disability in a CTP, the answer was “yes.”

“VR funds can be used to support students with disabilities in CTPs if certain conditions are met. Students, youth, and their families, with the assistance of the VR program as appropriate, should consider the wide array of postsecondary options that are available, including but not limited to, two- and four-year colleges and universities, career and technical schools, adult education programs, and comprehensive transition and postsecondary education programs . . . A comprehensive transition program is an example of one postsecondary option for which the VR program could provide assistance to students and youth with intellectual disabilities when appropriate and agreed.

What Are Other States Doing?

- The Peach State: [Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation](#) clearly states that VR can support up to \$3,000 per semester toward programs that are Certified Transition Programs.
- Across the Nation: Think College’s presentation [What’s Working with Vocational Rehabilitation Partnerships in Higher Education](#) explores VR partnerships with post-secondary schools.

Learn More

Explore these resources from [ThinkCollegeAZ](#) to learn more about how Arizona can help students with intellectual disabilities pay for college.

- [Paying for College](#)
- [Paying for College: Exploring Funding Sources for an Inclusive Postsecondary Education Program](#)
- [Use of Medicaid Waivers to Support Students with Intellectual Disability in College](#)
- [Positive Outcomes for Students with Intellectual Disability Attending College : Why Medicaid Waivers Should Provide Support](#)
- [Medicaid HCBS Waiver Support for Students with Intellectual Disability Attending College: What’s Available in Your State?](#)