

The Inclusion Notebook

Problem solving in the classroom and community

THINKING COLLEGE FOR STUDENTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES: Another Option for Family Members to Consider

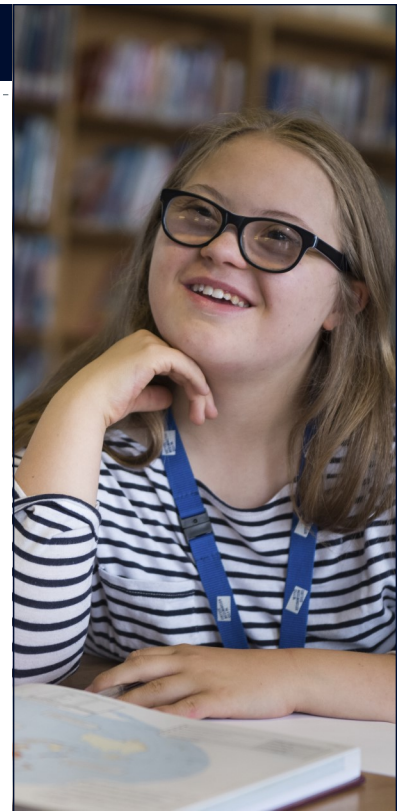
As a family member or other caregiver of a person with an intellectual disability, you may still dream of a meaningful college experience for that person. Or you may have given up on the dream. Or maybe you never have had the dream at all. Although this article is addressed to families/caregivers, it may still be of interest to you if you're interested in learning about a cutting edge, evidence-based opportunity.

You are probably aware that students with an intellectual disability (ID) may not have the college preparatory and career readiness experiences that their high school classmates heading for college have had. They may not be able to get good scores on some of the pre-admission requirements like College Board examinations or express themselves competitively in an admissions interview. Because they are still eligible for special education transition services, they may not have actually accepted their high school diplomas yet. These are just some of the reasons students with ID who wanted to attend college have been previously excluded from the opportunity to do so.

Despite these challenges, the answer to the question, "Should your student go to college even if she or he has an Intellectual Disability?" still is a resounding "YES!" If the student wants to go, that is.

In this article we'll discuss why the answer is "Yes" and what you as a family member/caregiver can do both individually and as part of an important national movement to allow students with ID to Think, and actually **do**, College.

think
COLLEGE!



UConn

UNIVERSITY CENTER FOR
EXCELLENCE IN
DEVELOPMENTAL
DISABILITIES

www.uconnucedd.org

Follow us on
social media



[@uconnucedd](https://www.facebook.com/uconnucedd)



[@uconnucedd](https://twitter.com/uconnucedd)



[@uconnucedd](https://www.instagram.com/uconnucedd)

What Does Thinking College for Students with Intellectual Disabilities Mean?

You may not know that, since the 1990's, some individuals with ID around the country have been able to have transition and young adult services provided in a college setting. Sometimes these students audited or took inclusive college classes that aligned with their interests. Sometimes they had jobs on campus. Sometimes they socialized with college students without disabilities. Sometimes they participated in other college events. Unfortunately, these tended to be individual and isolated situations.

Since 2008, however, a change to a federal law called the *Higher Education Opportunity Act* (P.L. 110-215) created systematic opportunities to attend college for

individuals with ID because they are greatest risk of being denied a college education. This law specifically applies to people who have a diagnosis of Intellectual or Cognitive Disability that meets the standard definition (i.e., significant limitations in both cognitive/intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior involving thinking, social, or daily living skills). This almost always includes students who are currently, or were formerly, eligible for an Individualized Education Program under the national special education law called the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*. If you are a family member/caregiver of someone with an intellectual disability who attended public school or were funded by public schools from pre-school on, you are probably very familiar with this law also known as the IDEA.

What Exactly Did P.L. 110-215 Do and What Is “Think College”?

The *Higher Education Opportunity Act* funded a number of “model demonstration projects” which have shown, by collecting data, that all the reasons for someone with ID to attend college are generally valid. These projects are called “Think College” and there is a Think College National Coordinating Center (www.thinkcollege.net) that provides information and resources for schools, families, students, colleges, and others who are interested in students with ID being included in higher education.

The law specifically allows interested students with ID to attend college as part of their high school transition plans or even through self-determined adult services. It says:

- They do not need to have a high school diploma or a transcript showing good grades in college preparatory courses.
- They do not have to pass typical entrance requirements.
- They do not have to fully enroll in college and take all the typically required general education courses.
- They can also enroll in a non-degree program.
- They just have to be motivated to go, be the best student they can be, and demonstrate that they are actually benefitting from the experience.

DID YOU KNOW?

As a result of a change in federal law, there is an important national movement underway for students with Intellectual Disabilities to Think, and actually DO, College.

As a result, “thinking college” means that you can seriously consider college opportunities among the many options for transition-aged or young adult students with ID. It also means, if you do, that you need to think about more than just taking a class or two, though. It means assuring that the student with ID fully experiences college by taking part in social activities, joining and enjoying clubs and organizations, making friends, having on- or off-campus employment, learning to be more independent, and truly having all the other opportunities and benefits college students without disabilities have. Having an intellectual disability should no longer be an obstacle. And Think College demonstration projects have shown this can be both possible and successful (and safe).



Why would someone with ID want to attend college?

The answer to this question is, “it depends.” Some want to go because they know that having a credential of value will lead to better career options. Some want to take courses that were not available in their high schools. Some want to go because their high school friends or siblings have had college experiences. To paraphrase what one parent said, “People in our family go to college – no matter what.”

In other words, the reasons someone with ID may have for wanting to go to college are the same as the reasons all college students have!

How Do We Know an Individual Student Benefits from a Think College Experience?

Proof of benefiting relates back to the higher education law’s requirement that each student with ID enrolled in a “Think College” program or service has an individual Program of Studies with individualized goals and objectives that are measurable. Programs of Studies also must assure:

- A schedule where s/he spends, at minimum, 50% of time with non-disabled peers.
- Opportunities to develop more independent living skills related, e.g., to safety, self-advocacy, and self-determination, and employment.
- A direct link to employment either by taking courses to advance skills in your area of interest and preferences (such as graphic design, history, or animal science) or by learning the types of skills (such as independence, problem-solving, or critical thinking) that develop in college and better prepare most students for adult life in the workplace.
- Work experience in competitive integrated employment settings on or off campus just like many other college students have to.

DID YOU KNOW?

For students with ID who want to go to college, benefits are well-documented.

These include:

- increased independent living skills
- increased skills in accessing community resources
- access to the same social and organizational opportunities that all college students have
- learning how to be a better self-advocate
- interim employment either on- or off-campus
- a greater likelihood of employment after completion because of coursework and other experiences that build on individual strengths, interest, and preferences which link directly to employment goals.

DID YOU KNOW?

When a CT college or university has what federal law calls a "Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary Program," students with ID are:

- eligible for financial aid
- able to earn a degree, certificate, or other credential of value through an individual Program of Studies
- provided with support they need to be successful in their individual Program of Studies through Writing Labs, Disability Services Offices, and trained faculty
- able to spend at least 50% of their time with non-disabled peers who can provide peer support today and lifelong connections for friendships, community living, and work tomorrow!

What Else Is Required?

Of course, any family who can afford to send their relative with ID to college and has the time and resources to shop around for where the individual with ID will be welcome can still do this on an individual basis. However, when a higher education institution establishes what the law called a Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary Program for students with intellectual disabilities that may be a degree, certificate, or non-degree program, students with ID are eligible for funding available through Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) just like other students who meet the FAFSA income eligibility requirements. Other requirements for post-secondary schools establishing Comprehensive Transition Programs are that they provide an advising and curriculum structure; a focus on academic components; and equal access to all the other offerings of the post-secondary institutions.

Most model Think College demonstration projects also have developed systems of peer support that have proven to be successful. Most have provided training to faculty to enhance their ability to teach to all students, including those with ID. This means faculty learn, for example, to allow students with ID to use their cell phones to keep track of due dates or complete alternative assignments to show they have mastered the curriculum. When college faculty make these accommodations for students with ID, *all* students benefit.

Further, most model Think College demonstration projects have provided training within existing college resources like Writing Labs, Disability Services Offices, and Career Development Offices to meet the needs of students with ID. Academic advisors know how to develop individual Programs of Study and other campus staff learn how to be respectful and supportive. Additionally, the Think College National Coordinating Center developed Quality Indicators to assure that students with ID who attend colleges, universities, vocational or technical schools receive comparable benefits regardless of where they attend school.

So What's the Problem?

The main problem is that not enough families and potential students with ID know about this incredible opportunity so there is not yet a huge demand for Think College in CT. Public school staffs have typically not been "thinking college" as an opportunity for students with ID. It's also important to understand that "co-located" programs – that is, programs based on college campuses but run by public school systems individually or cooperatively – do not provide the same benefits as inclusive "Think College" programs do. Additionally, programs listed on the Think College National Coordinating Center's website do not necessarily meet the standards set in the national Quality Indicators.

How Can This Problem Be Solved?

Connecticut, through a strategic planning grant received from that National Center, has made a commitment that *CT will have a higher education system where ALL students, regardless of ability, have an opportunity to participate fully in all programs and services of every College, University, and postsecondary career training program.*

Those involved in the strategic planning process also developed consensus values about Think College in CT as follows:

- Be grounded in the principles of self-determination.
- Provide opportunities both inside and outside the classroom.
- Provide a safe environment with assurances of safety and security to families and students.
- Be supportive and inclusive.
- Allow for/aim for competitive employment.
- Assure human dignity, dignity of risk, respect.
- Provide access to all programs and services.
- Encourage independence to the greatest possible extent.
- Assure a welcoming educational experience.
- Be fully supported by college leadership that creates expectations of college-wide inclusion.
- Measure success in terms of personal growth, friendship, and positive outcomes (e.g., self-confidence).
- Assure that students w/ID enhance the college experience for all.
- Be individualized (from faculty/college points of view).



The strategic planning process includes self-advocates, family members, public schools, state agencies, post-secondary programs, and employers.

How Can YOU Help?

You can help by making your own wishes known, advocating for your child's IEP to address greater college preparation, and preparing your child with high expectations, inclusive high school education, participation in community-based and extra-curricular activities, identifying where you would like your child to attend school if she or he did not have an intellectual disability, and otherwise doing what typical family member/caregivers do to best prepare their children for a positive life-changing experience with long-term benefits.

You can learn more about this yourself by exploring the Think College materials on the UConn Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities' website (www.uconnucedd.org) and on the Think College website mentioned earlier. You can look for and attend meetings, workshops, or conferences – both in CT and nationally – where Think College presentations are made. You can support local parent groups to bring in guest speakers about this topic.

As we move forward, you also can help spread the word about Think College and join activities that will make this a reality in our state. This may include assisting with researching barriers, participating in Workgroups to address those barriers, publicly advocating for Think College, and sharing information about the benefits of Thinking – and *doing* – College for individuals with ID.

DID YOU KNOW?

CT already has a Strategic Plan for Think College in place encouraging families to:

- learn more about Think College
- learn about related strategies to support their student with ID in going to college
- spread the word about Think College to other families
- advocate for Think College to be available throughout CT

Why would anyone want a family member with ID to go to college?

Think what college offers to people who want and are allowed to attend. Although some requirements are common to all students, student schedules truly are highly individualized as students decide which course to take and what activities to participate in so that they can meet the goals and objectives in their individual Programs of Study. Depending on what college is attended, students can experience community resources on and off campus including shopping, using public transportation, participating in recreational activities (e.g., theatre, attending a sporting event, or joining clubs), eating out, and/or becoming a member of a faith community. College students usually are not dependent on highly structured schedules, group staffing, and special transportation limitations that are typical of public schools or adult day programs for people with ID of the same age. College students are surrounded by peers of the same chronological age who serve as young adult role models and with whom they can study, live, learn, and be friends. Some of these relationships may continue beyond their college years.

These same benefits are enjoyed by many students with ID who go on to higher education. Further, just like typical college students, those with ID have opportunities to develop friendships, experience real-life challenges, develop the critical thinking and problem-solving skills needed to address those challenges (even if it means just knowing when to ask for help), increase independence across life's domains, and become employed in a job that is compatible with their strengths, interests and preferences, which lasts after they age out of IDEA-mandated special education services.

We know these benefits can be true because of students with ID who have been and still are attending college in some places.

In other words: You Too Can Think College!

DID YOU KNOW?

By experiencing real life challenges away from home, students with ID who go to college also develop critical thinking and problem solving skills -including when to ask for help when they need it and how to get that help!

For More Information



- The Think College National Coordinating Center website <https://thinkcollege.net/>
- The Think College Initiative on the University of CT Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities website <https://uconncedd.org/projects/think-college-initiative/>. Here, you will find copies of a Needs Assessment done in 2016, a 2018 report to the National Coordinating Center in response to a mini-grant, and a copy of The CT Strategic Plan for Think College.
- Grigal, M., Hart, D., & Weir, C., (2012). Think College Standards Quality Indicators, and Benchmarks for Inclusive Higher Education. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion available at <https://thinkcollege.net/resource/foundations-think-college-standards/think-college-standards-quality-indicators-and>