

The Inclusion Notebook

Problem solving in the classroom and community

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ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF ALL STUDENTS WHO WISH TO PURSUE POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

In the Fall 2019 Issue of *The Inclusion Notebook: Problem Solving in the Classroom and Community (TIN)*, we focused on Think College for Students with Intellectual Disabilities as another option for family members to consider (Vol. 1, Issue 1). The Think College model described in that edition presents an opportunity specifically for individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) to experience college like their peers without disabilities.

In this issue, we address considerations for ALL students with disabilities who want to pursue ANY type of postsecondary education. The goal is to address the many misconceptions about whether a student is “ready” in a traditional sense to attend postsecondary education programs (PSEPs). It encourages parents and school staff to avoid limiting an individual student’s desire to explore and prepare for a PSEP that will work for them if they are motivated to enroll. We take the position that PSEPs are the ones to make the decisions of whether or not to accept a student but it is the responsibility of the secondary education program to set the stage— just like is done for other college-bound students -- for best supporting any student pursuing their dreams for postsecondary education.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

What Does Postsecondary Education Mean?	2
Who Might Want to Enroll in PSE?	2
How Can Students with More Significant Disabilities Benefit?	3
The Myth of Not Being “College Material”	3
Meaningful Preparation for PSE	4
Curriculum Overlapping	4
For Students Who Attend Their PPT Meetings	5
When Students No Longer Have PPT Meetings	5
About Expectations	6
Preparing Families for Postsecondary Education	6
Ways Parents Can Help Prepare Their Students for PSE	7
Guiding Students to the “Right” PSEP for Them	8
Guidance Cautions	9
CT Core Transition Skills That Can Be Learned through Concurrent Educational Enrollment	9
Summary	11
References	12



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WHAT DOES POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION MEAN?

Postsecondary education is any formal education after the academic high school program has been completed or a student has “aged out” of special education services. This includes ANY level of study such as:

- Two- and four-year colleges and universities
- Vocational / trade schools
- Career schools
- Community Adult Education leading to certificates of value
- Apprenticeship programs through the CT Department of Labor

These postsecondary programs and services provide a variety of options that can be a good match for many different strengths, interests, and preferences that students have. School guidance offices have many resources for students to explore available options and it is the case manager who needs to make sure that students with disabilities have access to the same information.

Sometimes, certain students who are supported with 504 plans or receive special education services (i.e., have an IEP) in public schools don’t get access to the same information as their peers without disabilities. Guidance counselors, teachers, and related services staff need to discuss postsecondary education with all students and provide information to each of them and their families about college fairs, guest speakers from specific higher education programs, and other opportunities to learn about future jobs that require some additional education. There are always alternative routes to getting a job you really like!

WHO MIGHT WANT TO ENROLL IN PSE?

Students with disabilities have many of the same reasons’ peers without disabilities have for pursuing a PSE. Reasons students with disabilities may want to attend college include (1) everyone else in the family attends or attended college; (2) siblings, friends, or relatives have gone away to continue their education after finishing high school; and (3) being more aware that a college education is often the key to getting a better job, having more financial stability, and having a better quality of life than students who do not go on to PSE.

Although options for PSE should be described and discussed with all students, disability or not, we are not advocating that all students must have a formal education after high school. We are advocating, however, that premature decisions not be made about who will or will not be successful given the right opportunities. Moreover, the choice is the student’s to self-determine whether or not they may want to attend postsecondary education without the pressure to attend or not attend from anyone. While some students may want to attend a postsecondary education, others may want to search for employment instead. Similar to students without disabilities seeking PSE, these students should be supported in making their own decisions. Parents and teachers should inform the student that, even if they do not pursue PSE right now, they can still attend a PSEP in the future when they are ready to.

DID YOU KNOW?

Parents still concerned about progress in academics can support their student in furthering these skills in PSEPs where their students may be more motivated than they were in high school. There are also community-based programs such as Literacy Volunteers of America and options to audit entry level courses in community colleges.

HOW CAN STUDENTS WITH MORE SIGNIFICANT DISABILITIES BENEFIT FROM PSE?

There is solid evidence that postsecondary education (PSE) benefits students with more significant disabilities. Here are the results of some studies that support this claim:

1. *Sannicandro (2019)* found that students with intellectual disabilities and autism who had PSE were twice as likely to be employed and stay employed in comparison to students who had not.
2. *Wetherby (2015)* and others report their development of specific interest-based job skills.
3. *Nasr et al. (2015)* concluded that students with significant disabilities developed true friendships with non-disabled peers that extended after the PSE program ended.
4. *Miller et al. (2018)* documented parents' perceptions of increased independence in community living skills that their sons and daughters had post-PSE. This was one of many factors that demonstrate parents' positive perceptions of their adult children's PSE experiences.
5. PSE instructors reported observations that, as students progressed through their PSE, they became more dynamic and more engaged (*Taylor et al., 2021*). They also cited benefits that they, as instructors, received from having such students in their classes (*Jones et al., 2016*).
6. Studies reported that students demonstrated increased self-awareness, self-advocacy, and self-determination skills (*Boyle, 2018; Nunes, 2017*).
7. Although a number of studies have shown benefits to non-disabled colleges students who serve as mentors or education navigators, Erik Carter from Vanderbilt University reported that some enjoyed the experience so much that they switched majors from STEM to human services even though they were highly successful pursuing STEM degrees (*personal communication, 2017*).

It can no longer be claimed that postsecondary education for students with more significant disabilities, including intellectual disabilities and autism, is not an evidence-based practice. Clearly, it is.

THE MYTH OF NOT BEING “COLLEGE MATERIAL”

To be employed in many occupations nowadays, applicants often need to have a degree, license or certificate. Regardless of public-school staff and parent beliefs about a student with a disability's ability to obtain these credentials, i.e., whether or not they are “college material,” they need to support any student who wishes to obtain a credential. Just like typical students, they can make one of three decisions if they self-determine that what they signed up for is more difficult than they expected. They can decide:

1. To work really hard and surpass everyone's expectations by actually earning the degree, license, or certificate (with any essential 504 accommodations that may be needed and other student supports such as tutoring);
2. To take enough credits to be able to approach an employer for an entry level position or apprenticeship in the same field if their interest is sustained (even if PSE classroom learning is not working out for them); or
3. To seek another field because what they thought they wanted to do is not really what they expected.

(continued on page 10)

MEANINGFUL PREPARATION FOR PSE

Inclusive education in academics as well as Unified Arts is one of the most powerful opportunities for students with disabilities to prepare for PSE. The more time students with disabilities spend with peers without disabilities from preschool through high school, the greater the benefit is for both students with and without disabilities. Inclusion in classes, during down time, and in co-curricular activities allows students with disabilities to learn from other students who do not have disabilities. An inclusive high school environment can prepare students with and without disabilities to support and truly appreciate each other as they go on to PSE and beyond.

This is not the same thing as “mainstreaming” students without supports. Instead, it is leveraging the power of the IEP to hand pick classes, teachers, student navigators, school-sponsored activities during and after school, work experiences, volunteerism, and opportunities to become equal members of the school community . It means orchestrating opportunities for students with and without disabilities to learn academics, problem-solve, share experiences, and socialize and communicate better with each other. Although it is well-known that students without disabilities can serve as role models, peer tutors, mentors, etc., consider expanding opportunities in which students with and without disabilities are viewed as equal participants. We know students tend to learn much more from other students than from adults – especially during adolescence and early adulthood.

CURRICULUM OVERLAPPING

Specific qualities to nurture and explicitly teach all students (but especially those with disabilities who may not have had the same chronologically age-appropriate social opportunities to build social-emotional skills as their non-disabled peers have had) include:

- awareness of self (including strengths and areas in which support is needed),
- self-advocacy skills,
- self-confidence,
- the ability to make informed choices about what’s right for them,
- how to handle lack of success with poise,
- the ability to learn from mistakes and not get discouraged,
- how to successfully navigate new experiences,
- how to ask for help when they need it,
- having a positive outlook, and
- being able to identify what they like, don’t like, and are interested in and what to do about it.

Students with disabilities also need to feel comfortable having challenges, explaining their challenges to others, recognizing that disability is not something they are going to outgrow (although they may develop more compensatory strategies so they are challenged less), and be able to identify what works and doesn’t work for them personality-wise, as learners, and as future adults. This includes building awareness of, and the ability to advocate for, reasonable accommodations they need to level the playing field. *(continued on p. 10)*

FOR STUDENTS WHO ATTEND THEIR PPT MEETINGS

Before, during, and after Planning and Placement Meetings (PPTs) are when high school students can really begin advocating for what courses are of interest to them, what type of post-secondary institution they may be interested in, and what they may be interested in studying or pursuing as career. IEP goals and objectives should reflect this student input.

A student's strengths should be highlighted during these meetings. It is okay to acknowledge that they have a disability, i.e., they may learn and think differently than others, but a strengths-based, person-centered approach such as that used in Charting the LifeCourse approach ([LifeCourse Nexus – Exchange Knowledge | Build Capacity | Engage Collaboratively \(lifecoursetools.com\)](https://lifecourse.org/)) is needed. This means looking at what students can do right now and supporting them in making a decision themselves about skills they have not yet acquired. These decisions involve getting answers to these questions:

1. Is an area of weakness something the student wants to address?
2. Does the PPT feel the student can reasonably learn what they need to know during their high school years? Can they learn these skills during concurrent enrollment in a PSE while they are considered procedurally to be still in high school? Can they learn them in PSE? Which setting would be most appropriate for acquisition and maintenance of those skills?
3. Does the student need to learn compensatory strategies? An example is, if a student cannot do simple "mental math," can they use a calculator for this and more complex math?
4. Is this something the student is likely to need lifelong support for? These students may be eligible for long-term supports as adults but this does not mean they are headed for a group home. They often can still live independently with part-time support in their own home. Examples may include money management or making and keeping health care appointments.

Living in a college dorm or off-campus housing helps all students learn more skills in independent living because they can no longer rely on their parents.

WHEN STUDENTS NO LONGER HAVE PPT MEETINGS

As students get older, there will come a time when they no longer have PPT meetings and are no longer eligible for public school services. This may be because they have completed all academic work and have no need for a transition program, they may have completed their transition goals and objectives, or they may have aged out on their 22nd birthday. There are several resources for adults with disabilities who decide they want PSE.

Students who need further support can access adult services to guide/support the PSE opportunities and perhaps benefit from other supports (e.g., transportation, peer mentoring) that they are eligible for.

ABOUT EXPECTATIONS

As educators, we know high expectations can lead to high performance. We know that conversations with students can include statements such as “Even if others have low expectations of you, YOU can have high expectations for yourself.” In fact, the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 specifically mentions that universal design for learning (UDL, an evidence-based set of practices) “...reduces barriers in instruction, provides appropriate accommodations, supports and challenges, and maintains high achievement expectations for all students, including students with disabilities...”

Who in the high school uses UDL and may be better able to accommodate students inclusively, even in courses that have more challenging subject matter? At what PSEs is UDL used? How else can expectations for students who want to pursue PSE be raised?

ADULT SUPPORTS FOR HELP WITH PSE

- Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS) <https://portal.ct.gov/AgingandDisability/Content-Pages/Bureaus/Bureau-of-Rehabilitation-Services>
- Department of Developmental Services (DDS) case managers <https://portal.ct.gov/DDS/Family/Family/Im-looking-for-information-about->
- Disability Rights Connecticut <https://www.disrightsct.org/>

PREPARING FAMILIES FOR POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Students in elementary, middle, and high school who have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and/or 504 Plans may still have their parents actively participate in their education. Once the student is 16 years old it is mandated that they are given the option to attend their IEP or 504 plan meetings especially when their transition plan is being discussed. This may mean re-structuring the meeting to emphasize strengths and present weakness in terms of “things to learn” or “supports needed.” In some instances, schools may invite the student or the parents may request that their student be present if the student wants to be there. Parents need to feel comfortable giving permission for their children to participate, self-advocate if the meeting is hurtful or contentious, and self-determine their IEP or 504 plan contents.

Parents need to be encouraged to have comfortable relationships with their student so they are trusted and will be asked for advice or assistance if the student needs this. There are alternatives to guardianship and conservatorship that families should learn about so, if they feel it is necessary, the student will continue to allow them to participate in PPTs after their 18th birthday when they become a legal adult.

At PSEs, students continue to be covered by the ADA as well as what are now components of the Workforce Innovations and Opportunities Act (a/k/a 504 accommodations). Neither the students nor any parents have the same due process rights afforded to them by special education law. In fact, at the PSE level, parents do not have any rights to access the student’s academic records due to Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). *(continued on p. 10)*

WAYS PARENTS CAN HELP PREPARE THEIR STUDENTS FOR PSE

Parents can support their students' preparation for PSE by presenting teachable opportunities/scenarios outside of school. These are some of the ways school staffs can support parents in participating more fully in this role:

1. **Addressing age-appropriate issues of "stranger danger."** Parents may discuss the importance of stranger danger awareness, walking in well-lit areas at night with a peer, and being prepared with your key before you get to your entryway.
2. **When and where students can get help in different situations.** 911 may be the solution but there may be other ways, e.g., which friend or relative can they call if they miss the last bus. There are also apps students can be taught to use which contain, e.g., health and medical information, if they are injured and need professional attention.
3. **What information is private.** Some information can be shared but some should remain confidential/private, especially around strangers. Where and when it is okay to share private information?
4. **The importance of carrying identification at all times.** Almost all schools today require students to wear identification cards either pinned to their clothes or on a lanyard. Carrying identification cards, why this is needed, what to do in case ID has been misplaced, and who is safe to show your ID to if they ask are important concepts.
5. **Appropriate and inappropriate levels of relationships.** All late adolescents and young adults need to have open discussions with trustworthy people around appropriate and inappropriate levels of relationships. This may include knowing what consent is in various relationships (e.g., sexual relationships), understanding boundaries with others including family and friends, and that every action has a reaction (e.g., their behavior affects another's behavior/response to them).
6. **Disclosure of disability as needed to obtain reasonable accommodations.** Students can choose to disclose their disability in PSE settings (usually to the disability services office) to receive accommodations. Unlike high school, though, they will not be sought out to ensure they get accommodations. The student must request accommodations and provide appropriate documentation to receive them. It is the student's responsibility to do this NOT the parents. How will the student be able to do this?
7. **Messaging.** Students will not have an opportunity to understand certain message before enrolled in a PSE unless they participate in a summer program to acclimate them to PSE life or an orientation before the first semester actually starts. Parents still can provide consistent messaging that:
 - It is up to you to speak up if something is not right for you in your PSE setting.
 - It is up to you to find out who you should go to in order to solve any PSE-related problems you may have.
 - If we don't like what's happening or want to see how you're doing, we need to talk to you and hopefully, as an adult, you will discuss our concerns or share information with us.
 - There is a special federal law called FERPA that means we have to rely on you for information. Maybe you can sign a waiver if you really need our help but talk to us first.
 - If you advocate for yourself but no one listens, there are usually ways to change this. Other students can help. So can we.
 - Did you know most college students do not want their parents involved? They would rather make mistakes and learn from them without their parents telling them what to do. This is called Dignity of Risk.

GUIDING A STUDENT WITH A DISABILITY TO THE “RIGHT” PSEP FOR THEM

When beginning the journey of choosing /considering PSEs, there are certain things students with disabilities can and should look for. These include:

- A welcoming, student-centered, diversity-oriented vision and mission.
- Supports for student engagement (e.g., new student orientation, clubs, on campus activities).
- A range of academic support resources for ALL students (e.g., tutors, writing lab, faculty-student relationships).
- An overall “universal design for learning” approach to academics.
- Residence hall supports and supervision.
- Campus-related social and work opportunities.
- Availability of and encouragement to use technology for ALL.

Students with disabilities can benefit from College Selection Checklist such as that found at [*College Selection Checklist \(weebly.com\)*](http://College Selection Checklist (weebly.com)) or <https://www.checkli.com/checklists/viewro/5b52bf7322a89>. The district may have its own inventory for students to use. Such checklists help all students in identifying and prioritizing:

- Their best learning environments.
- The physical traits and location of their ideal campus.
- The overall atmosphere of the PSE and whether they feel it is a “good fit” for them.
- Places that can provide a program of study in the student’s current area of interest.
- Places that provide their “must-haves” such as sports, quiet study places, etc.

IMPORTANT ADVICE

Information about PSEs is generally developed by marketing professionals and may not always portray an accurate image of the PSE. Students and families must go see for themselves.

GUIDANCE CAUTIONS

Even if a student with a disability has not had experience in inclusive learning environments, it is important to avoid assumptions about where they will do best for PSE. For example:

- Some PSEs have a reputation for, or advertise that, they specialize in students with disabilities or a specific disability. This may work for some individuals but not for all, even if their disability label is the same.
- Disability Services Offices do not always offer the specific accommodations the student needs. It can be helpful to visit the Job Accommodation Network <https://askjan.org/> with the student to identify possible accommodations that may be needed for PSE. Then the question is whether or not the PSE is willing to provide those or meet the need in a comparable way.
- Recommendations about PSEPs from other parents or students require that an individual student still go see for themselves if the PSEP is a good fit for them.
- Not all programs listed in the Think College website <https://thinkcollege.net/college-search> offer the same degree of inclusion, support, learning opportunities, etc., or have the same outcomes. A phone call or email exchange with one of the Think College team members <https://thinkcollege.net/about/think-college-staff> may help navigate those listed.

CT CORE TRANSITION SKILLS THAT CAN BE LEARNED THROUGH CONCURRENT EDUCATION ENROLLMENT

Concurrent Education Enrollment means that a student still has an IEP but is, at the same time, enrolled in a college or trade school. In Massachusetts, this is in state law as it is in some other states. CT does not have statutory authority to implement this and it has not been current practice here. Instead, each student's Planning and Placement Team needs to make a decision, on an individual basis, about what is the least restrictive, appropriate, and individualized environment in which a student can meet their transition goals and objectives. These are ways a student can make progress on the 16 transition skills identified as essential by the CT Transition Community of Practice ([Connecticut CORE Transition Skills](#)):

1. They can learn to explain his/her disability to others including individual strengths, needs, preferences and interests. In a PSE setting, "others" may include classmates without disabilities, faculty, staff, supervisors, and the Disability Services Office.
2. They can self-determine many choices, solutions to problems, personal goals, etc., by communicating these to others. Such skills are needed in negotiating an alternative assignment with an instructor, deciding which activity to participate in or club to join, selecting courses with an advisor, etc.
3. They will discover the broad range of their personal strengths and challenges through real-life opportunities in a PSE setting whether this involves getting to and from the PSE institution, changing majors, dropping out of a course, or excelling in new experiences.
4. Assisting with the development of his/her Individualized Education Program (IEP) allows students to assist with the development of their PSE Program of Studies.
5. Attending, participating in, and/or facilitating their Planning and Placement Team (PPT) meeting provides an opportunity for students to develop the self-advocacy skills they will need to use with their advisor, student-run meetings in PSE environments, and elsewhere.
6. PSE supports leadership skills in expecting students to abide by their Code of Conduct as well as being involved in many aspects of the PSE community.
7. Students will have deeper opportunities to learn about disability legislation by taking disability studies or related courses. They will have in vivo opportunities to learn what to do if their adult rights are violated.
8. Especially for students who live on campus, they will be better able to responsibly perform home activities necessary for survival (e.g., food prep, med management) by modeling peers without disabilities, having to problem solve with peers or by themselves, and not having their parents around to do things for them.
9. PSE settings provide many opportunities for students to have meaningful social interactions, and to learn how to develop/maintain other meaningful relationships, in classes, between classes, at PSE social events, etc. When they are in inclusive PSE settings, such opportunities can lead to relationships with others who may, for example, be future landlords, employers, companions, etc.
10. Access to the PSE infirmary, campus counseling services, or contacting health care providers when needed due to illness, life problems, or injury are natural ways for students to learn how to navigate adult healthcare resources to meet individual needs.
11. From using the bookstore to going out with friends, there are multiple opportunities for PSE students to learn to navigate community resources to access goods and services needed to survive. This is often accomplished as peers without disabilities are in the same position.

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THE MYTH...

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Lots of students without disabilities change their majors, take gap years, or drop out of PSE altogether. The difference for them is that this is usually their choice (with some advisement) *after* they have experienced the dignity of risk to fail. Students with disabilities need to be afforded the same advisement about whether or not to continue their postsecondary education. They need to have the same dignity of risk to fail even if it has taken more time and effort to get them enrolled.

CURRICULUM OVERLAPPING...

(continued from page 4)

Self-advocacy and self-determination are both skills that students should develop while still in high school. To learn these skills, they need to be empowered to seek help when needed, to direct others about the help they need, to know and use the accommodations they need, and to speak up as necessary. Developing self-advocacy skills provides students the confidence to have their voices heard within meetings as well as in the classroom and work environment. These skills are continuously a work in progress but building a foundation throughout their high school years will benefit students academically and socially as they move towards a PSE.

None of these skills need to be taught in isolation. In fact, there is solid evidence that students learn, apply, and generalize these skills better when learned in natural environments than when taught in isolation (*Doyle & Giangreco, 2013*).

PREPARING FAMILIES...

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In addition to not having access to their students' PSE records, parents cannot advocate for their students or request supports on behalf of their student like they were able to in high school. FERPA protects the student's rights and privacy of records at the college level although there are situations in which a student can sign a waiver granting permission for the PSE institution to share certain information.

Parents may provide input on their student's choices regarding college but the student makes the final decision on where they pursue their PSE (within reasonable limits such as affordability just like other students). Once in PSE, parents will only be allowed to share any concerns directly with their student but may recommend they seek more assistance with coursework or advisement in, e.g., course selection or changing their career goal.

Ways parents can get involved in their students' PSE include:

- Helping pay for PSE and related expenses.
- Having an occasional meal with their student in the PSE cafeteria or off campus.
- Giving rides to and from college if there is no other transportation and they don't drive.
- Going to any public events on campus like sports events, theatre, museum displays, and so on (with or without their student).
- Supporting the PSE by participating in fundraisers that include parents or making donations to the PSE.

CORE TRANSITION SKILLS...

(continued from page 9)

12. Attendance at PSEPs makes this core skill moot.
13. Since most colleges and universities today have academic programs to prepare all students to have meaningful integrated, competitive employment when PSE ends, the same opportunities are available to students with disabilities. Students also have more work experiences available to them through volunteerism, paid internships, or actual jobs they have while taking classes.
14. There may be many instances (already described) in which a student will need to advocate for personal accommodations needed to ensure equal access and full participation in life – including with Disability Services Offices.
15. Transportation (either public or private) preparation for adulthood includes catching rides with other students, taking campus transportation, using public transportation to get to and from their PSEP, or meeting up with friends.
16. Technology to support daily living, employment, learning, and community involvement is a way of life for all PSE students. Assistance from peers, specific instruction from technology departments or the library, coursework, and managing one's PSE schedule are all ways in which students concurrently enrolled in their district's transition program and a PSE program can become more proficient with technology.

SUMMARY

This Inclusion Notebook provides tips on how best to support students in pursuing their dreams for PSE. Postsecondary options are described, evidence of benefits provided, and advice for school staff (including guidance counselors) given on how to assure that ALL interested students are included in the exciting preparation of college-bound high school students. Tips are also provided for how school staff can guide families in this journey.



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