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Opening the Door to Postsecondary Education for All: Accessing the Higher Education Act

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## Introduction

In this legislative session, the 108<sup>th</sup> Congress is charged with the reauthorization of no less than five bills which, if passed, will affect how individuals with disabilities realize their visionary dreams of self-determination, community inclusion, competitive employment, and improved quality of life. These bills aim to provide a revalued freedom for people with disabilities as well as to provide access and full participation in democratic American society. Congress is poised to address the reauthorizations of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA), the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA, 1997), the Work Investment Act (WIA, 1998), and The Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act (1998). The retooling of these legislative acts offers Congress the opportunity to integrate important postsecondary education issues in **common**, include provisions that provide for postsecondary education for students with intellectual disabilities in traditional postsecondary settings. This paper explores a new pathway toward a better future for individuals with intellectual disabilities. By facilitating access to postsecondary education and supports to funding for postsecondary education found within the Higher Education Act of 1965, young people with intellectual disabilities will achieve an improved quality of life and future.

At present, although many students with intellectual disabilities have moved from grade to grade along with their non-disabled peers, they are usually relegated to wait outside the college doors. Their non-disabled classmates who have moved through high school with them are prepared to enter those doors that open to competitive employment and other post-school activities. Preparation of students to earn a diploma and prepare for productive adult lives is a major goal of accessing the general education curriculum (D. R. Johnson, Stodden, Emanuel, Luecking, & Mack, 2002). Washington's Governor Locke warned, "if our democracy is to

continue to thrive, all Americans must leave high school prepared for college, work and civic contribution” (2001). However, opening the doors wide to postsecondary education in the higher education settings of colleges and universities remains difficult for students with intellectual disabilities, if they are not completely barred, and thus, effectively blocked from any future prospect of an improved quality of life. Many students with disabilities come to realize their potential of access to higher education in college or university settings with some success. Yet, many students with intellectual disabilities remain in the high school environment or return to segregated and separate programs, sequestered from their non-disabled peers as they continue their individual education with educational services until they meet their IEP, or until they “age out” upon their twenty-first birthday.

### **Accessing Postsecondary Education through the Higher Education Act**

The new goal is to look toward those programs already established and to facilitate the means for entry to postsecondary education for all individuals, including those with disabilities. The 108<sup>th</sup> Congress will address the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act of 1965 this term. As the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), the Olmstead Act (1999), and the Rehabilitation Act (1998) have already opened access to people with disabilities, many are now looking to address this same goal with the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. Four primary categories of programs and activities give purpose to the Higher Education Act (HEA): 1) student financial aid, 2) services to help students complete high school and succeed in postsecondary education, 3) aid to improve K-12 teacher training at postsecondary institutions, and, 4) aid to institutions. We focus here on the first three and their potential to bring students with intellectual disabilities into college life and learning.

## **Financial Aid for Students**

The greatest portion of federal funding for the HEA is located in Title IV financial student aid programs which include the Federal Pell Grant, the Federal Family Education Loan, the William D. Ford Federal Direct Loan, the Federal Perkins Loan, the Federal Work-Study program, the Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant, and the State student Incentive Grant Programs. The original purpose of the HEA was to remove financial barriers to educational opportunities for postsecondary education and training through financial aid programs. Demonstrated financial need that targeted the poor and minorities, especially in cases where the student in question was the first member of the family to attend college, is the basis for these financial aid programs.

However, in order to receive financial aid, federal and state regulations require the student to possess a high school diploma, to have earned a General Education Development Diploma (GED), or to have passed the “Ability to Benefit” assessment. At play is a two-pronged issue to accessing grant or loan funding for students with intellectual disabilities. First, most students, despite the mandated access to general education coursework, have been tracked into a specialized curriculum that circumvents the rigor of general education competencies and its expectation of meeting state standards. For many students, at the termination of their high school years, they are awarded with a certificate of completion, which is a form that states that the named young adult had participated in, though not graduated from, high school--even if the individual had mastered all his IEP goals. Secondly, those students who have had access to the general education curriculum may have had their curriculum adapted to such an extent to accommodate their disability that even with accommodations; the standardized test would be too daunting to success.

The “Ability to Benefit” measures academic prowess previously not measured during the student’s high school years. The assessment may be a nationally recognized, standardized, industry-developed test that meets a particular school’s guidelines. Assessments measure the college applicant’s aptitude to complete the program or course to which he or she has applied successfully. Some colleges or professional technical schools may offer a session of individual counseling or interview appropriate to the student and the program to which the student is applying in order to determine the applicant’s ability to benefit from it. Those students who do not satisfy the institution’s testing requirements, may be directed to enroll in remedial courses or programs that address the deficit areas.

At issue is the definition of and the implications of the criteria “ability to benefit.” As structured currently, that term carries a rigorous academic reference. However, studies have shown that many students with disabilities do derive benefit from the college experience, in that it improves their quality of life, and when supports and accommodations are in place, they have the ability to benefit substantially. For those who continue on to postsecondary schools, whether two year community colleges or four year universities, there is a high correlation of positive competitive employment outcomes for students with intellectual disabilities who participate in postsecondary education within the vocational rehabilitation system (Hart, Zimbrich et al., 2001). According to Grigal, Neubert, & Moon (2002), “The overall goal for providing education services in postsecondary settings is to give older students with disabilities age-appropriate settings for their final public education and transition experiences”. Of the students studied in the second National Longitudinal Transition Study, youth with intellectual disabilities were the only group with a significant decrease in the dropout rate, and the largest rate of increase in holding a work-study job. However, of all the groups studied they were the only disability category not to

experience a significant increase in earning more than the minimum wage (Wagner, Cameto, & Newman, 2003).

Several programs in the HEA provide educational services and students to augment their regular school programs and set them on the path towards postsecondary education and achievement. These programs promote academic preparation by providing supplementary education to low-income, first-generation, and migrant students in secondary school, populations traditionally underrepresented in postsecondary education. Such programs were designed to aid in reaching the national goals for participation and success in postsecondary education. The Upward Bound, TRIO program, GEAR UP and HEP have improved support for students from sixth grade through high school. Two TRIO programs, namely Student Support Services and the Ronald E. McNair Post Baccalaureate Achievement Program, as well as the CAMP, extend that support for students during their collegiate careers.

The aforementioned programs, especially GEAR UP, stimulate and support important statewide initiatives to improve early outreach to prospective students. They encourage students to plan for and prepare for postsecondary education. Many states have created innovative and productive initiatives with new and systemic thinking about preparing students for the possibility of postsecondary education. Because federal entitlements continue to benefit students with intellectual disabilities beyond their eighteenth birthday, the GEAR UP and TRIO programs could be a viable avenue to college for them, forming the nexus between IDEA mandate and the HEA support system. Advocates suggest further exploration and development during the reauthorization process of HEA, with these programs forge a pathway to accessing postsecondary opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities as a viable option.

Programs for secondary students that set the stage for college have also spurred the movement for some states to consider educational services that encompass preschool through the first years of college, also known as P-16. Data has shown the benefits of postsecondary education and students reap a greater benefit when their education is seamless and goal-oriented. Nurturing learning in the preschool years into the elementary and secondary period and then extending the commitment to learning beyond high school allows students to develop not only the skills required by our twenty-first century workforce now and in the future, but also prepares them for civic contributions. The alignment of a P-16 educational system builds capacity for all students, changing the focus of school from “sorting to success for all (Locke, 2001).

However, many of our nation’s schools are not ready for this commitment to a seamless service of education. For the most part, there exists a chasm of disconnection. Educational services have little or no connection or coherence. By bringing education into alignment from preschool through college, the possibilities to close the achievement gap as well as the accessibility gap are obtainable. IDEA currently embraces a P-16 approach of entitled services to which GEAR UP programs are a foothold into that college door. The time is ripe now for all students with disabilities to benefit.

### **Aid to Improve K-12 Teacher Preparation and Recruitment**

The Report of the President’s Commission on Excellence in Special Education (2002) points to the dismal shortage of adequately trained personnel to provide education and related services to children with disabilities. The SPENSE study cited in the report notes more than 12,000 openings for special education teachers left vacant or filled by Substitute Teachers in the 1999-2000 school year. Added to this crisis is the lack of special education faculty members in

higher education that result in fewer people being able to train new teachers and ease the shortage of such specialists (Fine, 2002). Teacher training for general education teachers is now guided by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) legislation which aims to produce a professional field of highly qualified educators. Needed in the qualifications of a highly qualified educator is the inclusion of skill-set required to work with a diverse population. As students with a wide range of backgrounds and abilities enter the classroom, the educator and school must be ready to build capacity for all.

So that students with intellectual disabilities are ready to graduate to a self-determined life that meets all indicators of quality of life, community inclusion, and prepares them for competitive employment, teacher preparation curriculum for educators of students with disabilities needs to include theory and best practice methodology that aligns with the definition of an individual with an intellectual disability. Current research literature supports the benefits of postsecondary education in assisting youth with disabilities to meet their aspirations (Bellis, 2003; Career and Transition Services, 2002; Frieden, 2003; Whelley, 2002; Williams & Leary, 2000). Essential knowledge for the educator is the paradigm that educating students is a function of making the fit between the learner in his or her environment and the accommodations needed to make him/her successful. The remaining step would be to continue that successful education process into the postsecondary level.

### **Educating Youth with Intellectual Disabilities on College Campuses**

In order to benefit from the changes to be brought about by the HEA, students must prepare themselves to take on adult roles and to be ready to establish the personal and social relationships that will enable them to participate actively and independently in the community

and help define their quality of life. The term ‘activities’ is meant to designate postsecondary education, employment, and the possibility of maintaining a home (Halpern, 1994).

Since the late 1970s, the transition of students with disabilities into postsecondary education has tripled. While accessing supports through the Higher Education Act remain a dream, this has not deterred students with disabilities from accessing postsecondary schooling. Today colleges and universities are more cognizant of the rights and needs of students enrolled in higher education (Rumrill, 2001). In addition, students are receiving a wider range of support services and accommodations that provide for increased capacity building. Students with disabilities who have completed postsecondary education are better prepared for today’s ever-changing labor market. The result of increased education possibilities is that employment rates rise significantly for students who have not only their high school diploma, but also at least two years of college experience, climbing from 27.3% to 40.9%. The gainful employment rate of students who complete four years beyond high school climbs to 50.6% (Whelley, 2002).

For some students with intellectual disabilities, however, transition into postsecondary education is hindered by a curriculum that is still delivered in segregated settings with its focus on daily living skills, functional academics, and pre-vocational instruction, without alignment to the standards of the general education curriculum. Students with significant disabilities continue to benefit from federal entitlements that lead them to remain in separate special education programs beyond their eighteenth birthday while their non-disabled peers move on to college, technical school, or full-time employment (Hart, Zimbrich et al., 2001). Despite efforts to provide a “seamless” transition from secondary to postsecondary schooling, outcomes indicate that only 15 percent of youth in special education actually move onto postsecondary options. Students with significant disabilities more often move from segregated high school programs

into segregated adult programs (Hart, Zimbrich et al., 2001). Even with the multitude of laws and policy in place for people with disabilities, much work remains before they positively affect all the lives of people with intellectual disabilities.

For those who have made it to postsecondary schools, whether two year community colleges or four year universities, there is a high correlation of positive competitive employment outcomes for students with intellectual disabilities who participate in postsecondary education within the vocational rehabilitation system (Hart, Zimbrich et al., 2001). “The overall goal for providing education services in postsecondary settings is to give older students with disabilities age-appropriate settings for their final public education and transition experiences” (Grigal et al., 2002, p. 68). Of the students studied in the second National Longitudinal Transition Study, youth with intellectual disabilities were the only group with a significant decrease in the dropout rate, and the largest rate of increase in holding a work-study job. However, of all the groups studied they were the only disability category not to experience a significant increase in earning more than the minimum wage (Wagner et al., 2003).

Postsecondary education programs within the last ten years, many funded by the Office of Special Education Programs, attempted to determine and develop the successful strategies, supports, and programs that would lead to successful transitions (i.e., meaningful work, living, recreation, and participation in their communities). In 1998, the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) of Boston, Massachusetts, established partnerships with five urban high schools and their local colleges to improve adult outcomes for students with significant disabilities. This partnership worked to improve access to postsecondary education options by replicating best practices outlined by The National Transitional Alliance (NTA), including the use of a student-centered framework to identify students’ strengths and preferences. Such best practices also

incorporated the use of an interagency team and Student Support Teams (SST) to develop services and supports for those pursuing the personal goal of postsecondary education. The Student Support Team, a wide range of members from the school, the community, the agency, and family-identified individual services and supports for the individual came together to develop solutions to systemic barriers (Hart, Zafft, & Zimbrich, 2001, p. 21).

Many community colleges have not only provided services for students with disabilities, but have also provided specially designed programs for their students with significant disabilities. One of these, Lakeshore Technical College (LTC) in Cleveland, Wisconsin, enrolled 133 students listed as having significant disabilities (four had intellectual disabilities) during the 1996-97 school year, 63 in 1997-98 (one had intellectual disabilities), and then increased enrollment to 392 students (13 had intellectual disabilities) by the 1998-99 school year. In the 1996-97 school year, of the 133 students with significant disabilities, 86 percent met their goals and continued their postsecondary education. Administrative support, LTC instructors committed towards student retention, accommodations, and continuous professional development by the special needs instructors to remain current within the field further promoted student independence in college, making the LTC approach effective and successful (Gugerty & Knutsen, 2000).

Kapi`olani Community College, in Honolulu, Hawai'i, learned two keys to success in teaching students with intellectual disabilities. First, it was necessary to have a school committed to serving students with disabilities, and its staff to have an accurate perception of the extent of a student's disabilities. Second, the student needed to be willing to ask for help and use the help available (R. Johnson, 2002). Students not only needed to learn skills for their future, they

needed opportunities to interact with their college peers to continue their development of appropriate social skills (Dolyniuk et al., 2002).

Currently, other examples of campus locations that serve students with intellectual disabilities include Maryland's Anne Arundel, Anne Arundel Community College; Baltimore City, Baltimore City College; Baltimore Essex Community College; Southern California's El Camino College in Torrance and in Richmond, Virginia, J. Sergeant Reynolds Community College's Program for Adults in Vocational Education (*Pave Program*, 2002). Some colleges, like LTC, may have a policy of waving required admissions tests based upon documentation of a Multidisciplinary Team Report or an IEP from the public schools (Gugerty & Knutsen, 2000).

Four-year colleges or universities have also established programs for students with significant and cognitive disabilities. Maryland and Kentucky schools systems have programs that serve students between the ages of 18-21. Others, such as Virginia's George Mason University's Learning into Future Environments (L.I.F.E.) Program, now entering its second year, provides services for students who no longer fall under the mandate of IDEA (George Mason University, 2003). Many state universities, such as New Hampshire and Massachusetts, coordinate with families, the school system, and others to develop supports, services, and meet specific individual needs, rather than create "programs."

### **The Future Awaits**

The young adults with intellectual disabilities are ready for their future. They are eager to continue their successes in school by venturing into postsecondary educational opportunities on colleges and universities campus. At the same time, those colleges and universities are readying themselves for these committed students. All that remains is for Congress to recognize the value of these young people with intellectual disabilities, and to open the way for the educational

services and federal funding mechanisms. Continued education in college will be one of the greatest benefits to both the postsecondary college student and his community. They await their future as Congress debates opening access to Higher Education and the door to an improved quality of life for individuals with intellectual disabilities.

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