Higher education leads to a variety of personal and financial benefits, and is an integral part of establishing a successful career path and enhancing earnings over a lifetime (Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah, 2011). However, up until recently, low expectations coupled with minimal opportunities have prevented people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) from receiving the benefits associated with higher education.

The current landscape of education and employment for adults with I/DD is bleak. Students with I/DD have the lowest percentage of postsecondary enrollment of any category of people with disabilities (Newman, Wagner, Knokey, Marder, Nagle, Shaver, Schwarting, 2011). Only 23% of high-school students with I/DD go on to attend a two-year or four-year college (Grigal, Hart, & Migliore, 2011). The employment outcomes for people with I/DD are equally appalling. In 2011, 81% of people with I/DD were being served in facility-based and non-work settings (Butterworth, Hall, Smith, Migliore, Winsor, Domin, & Sulewski, 2013). These individuals were not afforded the opportunity to access further education as adults and have little hope of ever obtaining a real job or making minimum wage.

Despite years of investment in special education, the poor outcome choices afforded to people with I/DD have prevented any substantial change in their transition and adult life outcomes. In 2011, the employment rates for transition-aged individuals (ages 16-21) were 18% or less than half the employment rate for people without disabilities (Butterworth et al., 2013). This gap becomes worse as people with I/DD age with only 32% of adults ages 20-30 having employment compared to 74% of people without disabilities (Sulewski, Zalewska, Butterworth, & Migliore, 2013).

Getting a job that pays a living wage is the basic standard for all Americans. However for Americans with intellectual and developmental disabilities sheltered work and subminimum wage is often the only option given to them. A recent survey of 11,599 adults with I/DD in 16 states found that only 14.7% were competitively employed (Human Services Research Institute, 2012). These abysmal outcomes may soon change due to recent positive changes made in the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act.

The Higher Education Opportunities Act of 2008 contains several new provisions aimed at increasing access to higher education for youth and adults with intellectual disabilities. In 2010, Congress authorized the creation of new model demonstration programs via the Office of Postsecondary Education (OPE) and awarded grants to 27 institutes of higher education (IHES) to fund Transition and Postsecondary Education Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability (TPSIDs). The goal of the TPSID program is to create, expand, or enhance high-quality, inclusive higher education experiences to support positive outcomes for individuals with I/DD. The OPE also awarded a TPSID National Coordinating Center (NCC) grant to the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston. The TPSID NCC has developed and implemented a comprehensive evaluation system to capture how these inclusive higher education programs are serving youth and adults with I/DD.

In just two years, this program has supported the creation or expansion of programs at 42 colleges and universities serving 792 students with I/DD (Grigal, Hart, Smith, Domin, & Sulewski, 2013). These students, who would otherwise have been written off to a lifetime of sheltered work or day habilitation, have been supported to take inclusive college classes, obtain career experiences through internships, and in some cases access integrated paid employment.

These programs demonstrate that given the opportunity, people with I/DD can and will benefit from higher education. In year two of the project, students with I/DD enrolled in 4,806 courses and the majority of students who...
were enrolled in inclusive courses were enrolled for standard 
IHE credit (58%) (Grigal et al., 2013). This unprecedented 
investment has allowed these individuals the chance to access 
higher learning and sets them on a path to a better future. This 
is a stark contrast to the outcomes experienced by those not 
afforded these opportunities.

Access to higher education via the TPSID initiatives has also 
demonstrated the potential impact that further learning 
can have on integrated competitive employment for these 
individuals. Balancing work and course responsibilities is a 
common experience for most college students, and the 
students with I/DD attending TPSID initiatives are finally having 
the chance to show that they too are up to the challenge.

According to the TPSID Annual Report, during year two of 
the grant, 282 participating students were involved in career 
development activities and internships. An additional 236 
students held paid jobs, and some students held 2 or 3 jobs 
while they were going to college (Grigal et al., 2013). The 
majority of students (74%) worked between 5 and 20 hours 
per week at their job. Eighty-two percent of the students who 
held jobs were paid at or above minimum wage. During year 
two, 45% of employed students had never held a paid job prior 
to entering the TPSID program (Grigal et al., 2013). Given the 
choice between sitting in a sheltered workshop and doing 
meaningless piece work for pennies a day, these students with 
ID now have the chance to attend inclusive college classes, 
expanding their minds and their social networks by engaging 
in all aspects of the college community. At the same time, they 
have begun to access real jobs and earn real wages.

Congress’s continued support for these programs and others 
like them demonstrate a real commitment to having the highest 
expectations for all youth including those with intellectual 
disabilities. The legacy of the investment made in the TPSID 
program will exceed the sum of its parts. These programs 
serve as an emblem of possibility, not only demonstrating 
that students with I/DD can be college students who benefit 
from higher education but also contributing to the continuing 
evolution of higher education on a path toward equity and 
diversity for all Americans.

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