

## Statewide Strategic Planning: Promoting Postsecondary Education Options for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities

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Inclusive postsecondary education (PSE) for individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) has gained momentum nationally. While once a dream for youth with ID, many individuals are now attending college/university and receiving essential supports to enable their participation in the academic, social, residential, and recreational aspects of college life. Postsecondary opportunities vary by state, with activities ranging from strategic planning to pilot projects to established programs.

In an effort to support the continued growth in postsecondary options across the country, Think College funded Statewide Strategic Planning grants to 18 University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDDs) in 18 states from 2010 to 2012. These \$15,000 grants were funded by the Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

This brief provides guidance for others interested in embarking on a strategic planning process to increase PSE options. It synthesizes the experiences of the UCEDDs in Kansas, Illinois, Utah, Wisconsin, and Wyoming, all of which received Think College Statewide Strategic Planning grants in 2011.

These five centers identified effective, replicable strategic planning activities that can help others develop or expand inclusive postsecondary initiatives.

In each state, the statewide strategic planning process created a sense of urgency and expectation of success by fostering movement out of organizational and individual comfort zones and into new ways of thinking. Looking at ways to increase postsecondary education options for students with intellectual disabilities became a conversation about possibilities and new frameworks for success for youth with ID.

### STRATEGIC PLANNING ACTIVITIES EMPLOYED BY THE MINI-GRANTS

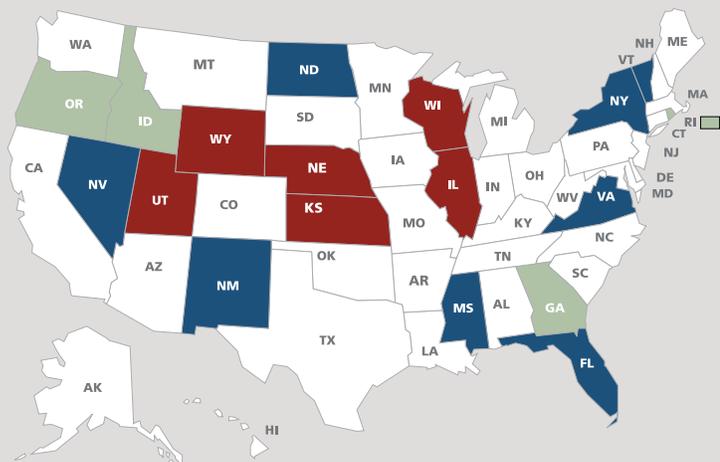
#### Identify a Planning Facilitator/Coordinator

Much of the work of developing or expanding inclusive postsecondary options can and will be done through the voluntary efforts of individuals. However, maintaining momentum requires someone to coordinate the numerous moving parts and communication efforts. To ensure that consistent and ongoing attention is given to this effort, it is helpful to designate a coordinator. If possible, this person should be provided with some minimal funding (10-20% FTE) to facilitate the work of a statewide stakeholder group. Without a designated person to run such a group, planning efforts may not be organized toward action, and will tend to slow down or stop after an initial period of interest.

For the five states highlighted in this brief, funds from the mini-grant supported a planning coordinator during the 10-month grant period. With the support of the UCEDD, the efforts to increase PSE for students with ID continued to some degree after the grant-funding period. Each UCEDD also offered additional essential resources, such as infrastructure support, meeting space, and conference phone lines both during the period of the grant and afterward.

#### Mini Grant States

■ 2010  
■ 2011  
■ 2012



In the absence of specific funding for statewide planning, a UCEDD or other agency could consider tying postsecondary planning efforts to existing projects on a related theme, such as transition, employment, or postsecondary efforts. Agencies that could consider this option include parent training and information centers, Arcs, state Down syndrome associations, state developmental disabilities councils, state college or university systems, and statewide transition efforts. Planning grants may also be available through state funding or developmental disabilities councils.

### **Establish a PSE “Alliance” that Includes Related Existing Initiatives**

One key strategy that all mini-grant recipients used was the creation of a stakeholder group or alliance of existing initiatives in their states to create a core planning team. This is an important step for anyone establishing an organized planning effort.

Develop a comprehensive list of people, organizations, and related initiatives in the state with potential interest in inclusive PSE, and contact them to request their involvement. Invite individuals within these organizations to attend planning meetings, either in person or virtually. Gaining the involvement of state-level organizations helps to ensure that inclusive PSE is on the agenda of these entities, and identifies “champions” in those organizations who can bring resources, information, and expertise to bear for the planning efforts.

A core planning team needs to include professionals, advocates, students, and family members to ensure that diverse voices are heard. Be thoughtful about supports all members will need to participate in a meaningful way. For example, when meetings are held face to face, offer travel reimbursement and ensure appropriate supports and accommodations. For those who cannot attend in person, provide a toll-free number for conference calls.

Examples of state-wide and regional partners to engage are the Alliance for Full Participation (APSE Employment First, Employment Now) teams and other employment and transition initiatives, state departments of education, two- and four-year colleges and universities, higher education

systems offices, existing PSE programs for students with ID, developmental disabilities councils, UCEDDs, vocational rehabilitation agencies, and parent and self-advocate organizations.

### **ILLINOIS**

In Illinois, the UCEDD began their Think College project by contacting key state-level players who had been involved since 2006 in organizing a roundtable and postsecondary education summit about inclusive options. The UCEDD requested materials from those events. With those materials, a contact list was created inviting people to join the Think College Steering Committee. Invitees included representatives from collaborating organizations from the five existing postsecondary programs for students with ID in the state: the Illinois Council on Developmental Disabilities, the Illinois Community College Board, the Illinois Board of Higher Education, the Statewide Independent Living Council of Illinois, and Illinois government divisions, e.g., developmental disabilities, special education, and rehabilitation.

### **UTAH**

In Utah, key community partners including self-advocates and families had already been working together for several years to improve the overall transition experience for young adults with ID. While none of their previous efforts had focused on inclusive postsecondary opportunities, working together on other transition issues had created strong, collaborative working relationships, which provided a solid base for the inclusive PSE strategic action plan project to build upon. In addition, advisors for Project PEER, a substantially separate postsecondary program in Utah, shared their lessons learned and challenges faced throughout the development of this program; this helped to guide the direction of the Utah strategic planning effort.

### **WISCONSIN**

Over the past several years, various programs in Wisconsin, particularly those related to education, health, and employment, put a lot of time, energy, and resources into developing strong transition programs. The core team involved with the Think College mini-grant engaged with these complementary efforts to add a focus on postsecondary education as a desirable transition goal for students with ID, thereby adding the development of postsecondary opportunities to the task list of the ongoing transition-related efforts.

## Provide a Knowledge Base for all Participants

Developing a strategy to increase options for inclusive PSE requires articulating common interests, ensuring a shared commitment, and establishing a common baseline of understanding regarding the issues involved. Once the members of the alliance have been identified, host an initial meeting that focuses on a review of current research and literature related to PSE for students with ID, presentations from existing programs in the state, and other activities that provide a foundational knowledge on PSE for students with ID in your state and nationally.

### WYOMING

The Wyoming Think College project provided copies of Think College: Postsecondary Education Options for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (Grigal & Hart, 2010) to all members. Chapters were assigned as reading and discussed in the meetings. In addition, national Think College personnel attended a meeting and provided an overview of the national perspective and program examples.

### KANSAS

Kansas established a work group with participants from around the state who had an interest in inclusive postsecondary education and brought varying perspectives to the table. Members represented community colleges and universities, secondary and transition programs, the state Department of Education, family organizations, community service providers, vocational rehabilitation, the Developmental Disabilities Council, and other related state and local agencies, as well as self-advocates.

Think College personnel attended the first meeting to provide an overview of current practices nationally in postsecondary education for students with ID. In addition, staff from postsecondary programs for students with ID within the state and region shared their experiences with the group. The work group met quarterly in face-to-face meetings supplemented with monthly conference calls. UCEDD staff provided resources as questions and needs were identified by the work group.

### WISCONSIN

After holding several information-gathering sessions around the state, Wisconsin held a statewide meeting to develop the Think College Wisconsin State Plan. Individuals with disabilities, family members, and representatives of state agencies and academic institutions attended the meeting. The PATH process was used to facilitate the discussion and to generate a series of recommendations on steps that should be taken to further develop PSE opportunities in Wisconsin. Those recommendations served as the basis for the first draft of the Think College Wisconsin State Plan. The draft plan was sent to all participants and other key stakeholders for review and comment. Those comments were integrated into the final plan.

- Wisconsin State Plan  
[www.waisman.wisc.edu/thinkcollege/wi\\_plan.php](http://www.waisman.wisc.edu/thinkcollege/wi_plan.php)

### Develop a Strategic Plan

Strategic planning is used to set priorities, focus energy and resources, ensure that stakeholders are working toward common goals, and establish agreement around intended outcomes. Strategic planning helps to articulate the actions needed to make progress, and to establish measures of success. A strategic planning process provides focus and structure for the work of the alliance that has been assembled. The finished plan offers guidance for the ongoing work.

To create a strategic plan that can guide the development and/or growth of PSE options for your state, conduct a purposeful planning process with all or some members of the stakeholder group. Many of the mini-grantees used the PATH planning process (<http://ilr-edi-r1.ilr.comell.edu/PCP/course05e.cfm>) to create their strategic plans. PATH is a team-facilitated graphic planning process that was developed by Marsha Forest, Jack Pearpoint, and John O'Brien (see Inclusion Press, [www.inclusion.com/path.html](http://www.inclusion.com/path.html), for the PATH workbook). PATH combines the best elements of a number of vision-building and future planning tools, and is very useful for listening, planning, and community-building. Other strategic planning processes were also used. The choice of planning tool was often related to one where trained facilitators were available to the group.

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WISCONSIN'S COMPLETED PATH PLAN



UTAH

Utah created a core action team to develop the project objectives and activities, conducted a needs assessment/asset mapping, and used that research to draft an initial strategic plan for the larger community action team to review and revise.

- Utah State Plan: [www.thinkcollege.net/resources-database/item/t-110/1784](http://www.thinkcollege.net/resources-database/item/t-110/1784)

WYOMING

The overarching goal of the Wyoming Think College mini-grant application was to create a vision for postsecondary education to guide statewide efforts to establish an inclusive post-secondary education program for students with intellectual disabilities. The core team working with the grant gathered input from stakeholders regarding their conceptualization of how postsecondary education should be made available in Wyoming, and used that to create a strategic plan, using the PATH planning process.

- Wyoming PATH Plan: [www.thinkcollege.net/resources-database/item/t-110/1783](http://www.thinkcollege.net/resources-database/item/t-110/1783)

KANSAS

Kansas developed a Strategic Plan that focused on “content organization” and included the following sections: 1) Introduction to inclusive PSE, 2) Developing a vision, 3) Surveying state strengths and resources, 4) Articulating the issues and challenges facing the state, 5) Disseminating products and plans, 6) Determining recommendations to guide a statewide initiative, and 7) Exploring future activities. The plan was disseminated around the state and posted on the UCEDD’s website.

- Kansas State Plan: [www.thinkcollege.net/resources-database/item/t-110/1785](http://www.thinkcollege.net/resources-database/item/t-110/1785)

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It is critically important to ensure that a strategic plan is not just a piece of paper or a report that gets filed and forgotten. Action must be taken to ensure momentum and movement toward the goals and objectives that have been established. Once a strategic plan is developed, decide how the group will be organized to complete the activities outlined in it.

### WISCONSIN AND KANSAS

Wisconsin and Kansas established workgroups/subcommittees to address different aspects of the strategic plan. The whole group worked together on this endeavor at its monthly meetings, with subcommittees taking on responsibilities to complete tasks between meetings. To promote statewide interest and buy-in, Kansas workgroup members were encouraged to make presentations to their own and other local groups. Two PowerPoint presentations, complete with detailed notes, were developed and made available to work group members. These could then be individualized to meet audience needs.

### UTAH

Utah used a community action team of mid- to upper-level administrators of key state and community agencies. All these people had the authority to make statewide decisions about postsecondary options. They served as an advisory council to the core action team and provided overall guidance on project activities, feedback on the development of the strategic plan goals, and linkages to higher-level comprehensive transition discussions happening in the state.

### Engage in Information-Sharing to Sustain and Grow the Effort

Increasing opportunities for students with ID to go to college requires great diligence and a commitment for the long haul. Training opportunities around inclusive PSE can help get personnel from different systems on the same page and create a cultural shift within each agency that is more supportive of including PSE as a transition option for youth with ID.

### UTAH

In Utah, both pre-service and in-service training efforts were used to ensure that youth and their families received consistent and reliable information about PSE from education and rehabilitation agencies. First, the Special Education Department at Utah State University began the first Transition Specialist master's degree program in the state. This program offered an entire course on inclusive postsecondary education. Additionally, Utah's Office of Education and Office of Vocational Rehabilitation provided a joint training on the roles and responsibilities of all parties involved in a youth's transition, including a module on inclusive PSE and best practices.

### Maintain a Functioning and Active State Team

Keep the group involved in concrete activities that can be documented, and for which they are at least moderately accountable. Using the strategic plan as a guide, assign tasks to group members and to subcommittees. A key activity of this alliance/state team may be to inform and involve additional relevant key stakeholders, e.g., education leaders, state legislators, and parent groups.

To promote communication and the sharing of ideas, activities, and resources, many teams used a website, or a listserv, as well as holding ongoing meetings. The mini-grantees used the infrastructure of their UCEDDs to create websites specific to PSE and ID to share state-specific resources, personal narratives, and related activities of key players from around the state.

State-level websites that share information about inclusive PSE, many developed through the efforts of mini-grantees, can be found on the Think College website at:

**[www.thinkcollege.net/whats-happening-in-your-state](http://www.thinkcollege.net/whats-happening-in-your-state)**

### SUMMARY

The work of the five grantees featured here highlights the importance of a statewide coordinated effort when attempting to create, improve, and grow opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities to go to college. Their experiences provide useful and field-tested strategies that can be adopted and adapted in other states looking to increase PSE opportunities.

In each mini-grant state, work has continued beyond the grant-funding period, and opportunities for students with ID in those states are growing. Each state is unique, and growth is happening at different rates, but for each state (the other 13 states that were awarded Think College mini-grants), the establishment of a state-level team that worked together on a strategic plan was the impetus for growth and change.

### REFERENCES

Grigal, M., & Hart, D. (2010). Think College! Postsecondary education options for students with intellectual disabilities. Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing Co.

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