

## What's in a Name? Analysis and Reflections on Naming of Postsecondary Education Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability

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### Abstract

Postsecondary education programs for students with intellectual disability have a variety of names. The name of a program sets the tone for what to expect from that program, for families, students, and other stakeholders. We sought to address a lack of guidance on considerations for naming a postsecondary education program for students with intellectual disability by first analyzing the names of existing programs for common words and themes. Using data from the Think College programs directory, we coded the words and themes in 310 program names. We found that acronym was the most common theme, present in 40% of all program names, and that there were some differences in the names of programs at two-year vs. four-year institutions. Based on this analysis, we offer reflections and suggestions for future practice and research.

*Keywords:* naming TPSID programs, program names, developing inclusive IHEs, inductive analysis

### Plain Language Summary

- There are more and more colleges that have a program for students with intellectual disability. Each program has a different name.
- It is important what the name of the program is. The name says a lot to students and families and other people about what the program does.
- *What we did in this study:* We looked at the names of 310 college programs and listed common words and themes used.
- *Findings:* The most common theme was a program name that was an acronym - shortening a longer name into letters that are said as a word. Some programs had names that were about the school, such as the school mascot. Other program names used words like "inclusion."
- *Conclusion:* After we looked at all the names, we made some suggestions that programs could think about when they are naming their program. Our suggestions are meant to help programs give themselves names that show these are academic programs and focus on what students in the program will learn.

Developing a postsecondary education program for students with intellectual disability is a process that takes a great deal of time, effort, and collaboration. The development process should be entered into with careful consideration of the broad range of stakeholders who will be impacted by the program and with an understanding of the need and purpose for the program (Papay & Griffin, 2013). A step that should occur early on is articulation of the vision or guiding philosophy behind the program (Plotner et al., 2019) to ensure that all stakeholders enter the development process with the same goal in mind. Other preliminary considerations include identifying and collaborating with partners and developing plans for program staffing, funding, and sustainability (Kelley & Westling, 2019).

One aspect of developing a new program is giving the program a name. This seemingly simple step has been overlooked in the literature, yet is deserving of attention. A program name is often the first piece of information that families and prospective students receive about a higher education opportunity: “Have you heard about the [program name] at [college or university name]?” It can set initial expectations for those prospective students for what might be involved in the program, the potential areas of focus, or the intended outcomes. On campus, the name may be used to refer to students attending the program. Students might be referred to using the program’s name much the same way students are referred to by their major or focus of studies, for example, “Business students” or “Fine Arts students.” The program name, therefore, carries a great deal of weight, and the implications of a name should be carefully considered by the persons responsible for developing or operating the program.

Oftentimes, program developers look to existing postsecondary education programs for students with intellectual disability for models to emulate; and this can include selecting a name like that of an existing program. This may be a reason that many programs have similar names. The similarities in the names of existing programs may leave the impression that program developers must select a name for their new program that is an acronym or that is constructed from a short list of common words. To date, we have found no advice in the literature on inclusive higher education related to considerations for the naming of a program. We sought to address this gap by first conducting a systematic analysis of the names of postsecondary education programs for students with intellectual disability in the U.S to identify common words and themes. Based on our findings, we offer recommendations for those who are naming (or renaming) their higher education program for students with intellectual disability.

## Method

We analyzed data on program names from the Think College programs directory (see <https://thinkcollege.net/college-search>). The programs directory is a public database of postsecondary education programs for students with intellectual disability in the U.S. and is intended for use by students and families in their college search. Staff from Think College contact programs annually to request updated data, and ongoing updates are made throughout the year to add or remove programs as needed. A list of all programs in the directory was downloaded on August 31, 2021. There were 310 programs in the

directory on this date. These programs were located at 109 two-year institutions of higher education (IHE), 179 four-year IHEs, 12 technical schools, and 10 other types of IHE.

Two researchers familiar with the data conducted an abbreviated inductive analysis of program names. Initially, a frequency analysis was conducted of the words used in program names. Then, a seven-step iterative process was used to identify larger themes in program names (Thomas, 2006). The following steps were followed in this iterative process: First, the sample was split into five equal samples (listed alphabetically;  $n = 62$  in each sample). Second, one researcher independently read the words used in program names in the first sample, creating codes that covered the sample. Third, the researcher reread the coding for the first sample and applied the codes accordingly. Fourth, the researcher applied the codes to the second sample, noting where codes did not match, or where new codes were needed. Fifth, codes were altered or added based on the second sample notes. Sixth, samples one and two were recoded using the altered/new codes. Seventh, this process was repeated until all five samples were coded.

The second researcher then independently applied the codes to the entire sample of program names. Both sets of coded program names were compared to identify disagreements. The researchers noted only 25 disagreements (96% inter-rater reliability; Miles & Huberman, 1994) and jointly resolved all outstanding disagreements which concluded in 12 total themes. The final codes are shown in Table 1. Coding focused on the words within each program name; therefore, one program name could have multiple themes (e.g., an acronym followed by a word related to a school mascot was coded as both acronym and school).

Data analysis was conducted in Microsoft Excel. After applying the codes, a frequency analysis was conducted on themes in program names. A comparison between themes in program names was made between the two largest groups of IHEs: two-year and four-year IHEs.

## Results

Table 2 shows words found in 10 or more program names. The most common word was *program* ( $n = 66$  program names; 21% of programs), followed by *college* ( $n = 43$ ; 14%), *transition* ( $n = 33$ ; 11%), *life* ( $n = 31$ ; 10%), and *career* ( $n = 28$ ; 9%). A word cloud showing words in program names sized by the frequency of use is shown in Figure 1.

Table 3 shows the count of themes in program names in order of most to least frequently identified. *Acronyms* were the most common ( $n = 124$  program names; 40% of all programs), followed by the themes of *program* ( $n = 103$ ; 33%), *path* ( $n = 86$ ; 28%), and *education* ( $n = 79$ ; 25%). The least common theme was *credential/academic program* ( $n = 19$ ; 6%).

The frequency of themes in program names was compared across type of institution (two- vs. four-year institutions; see Figure 2). Eight themes were more prevalent in names of programs at four-year IHEs than two-year IHEs: acronym (45% of four-year IHEs vs. 33% of two-year IHEs), inclusive (17% vs. 6%), independent living (17% vs. 14%), school (16%

vs. 2%), success (15% vs. 14%), credential (10% vs. 1%), students (10% vs. 6%), and general (6% vs. 4%). Four themes were more prevalent in names of programs at two-year IHEs than four-year IHEs: program (38% of two-year IHEs vs. 30% of four-year IHEs), path (32% vs. 25%), education (32% vs. 22%), and employment (23% vs. 13%).

## Discussion

### Limitations

Before offering reflection on the findings, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the present review. The abbreviated inductive analysis used by the authors was deemed an appropriate method to identify themes within names of postsecondary education programs for students with intellectual disability because these program names had not been evaluated prior to this work and we had no underlying theory before analysis. Use of the abbreviated thematic analysis allowed us to identify patterns and commonalities among program names. However, two main limitations from our chosen method must be addressed. First, we did not proceed with further qualitative inquiry to understand why programs chose their names. This means we cannot address the possible utility or purpose of the program name in establishing a program, recruiting students, appealing to financial donors, etc. Second, only two authors participated in the coding of program names. Though we believe that the expertise of the authors is comprehensive for this work, the inclusion of other researchers familiar with programs in the coding/thematic analysis process could have increased the validity of the results.

### Reflection

With these limitations in mind, we offer a brief reflection on the findings of the analysis of program names. When considered as a whole, the currently utilized program names may offer a way to reflect on the current state of postsecondary education programs for students with intellectual disability as it relates to being presented as an academic program awarding a meaningful credential to deserving and capable students who have chosen to attend.

The analysis clearly shows a preference for the use of acronyms when choosing a name for the program, especially for programs located at four-year IHEs. Anecdotally, we have learned from program staff that these acronyms are often designed to articulate values or principles of the program in much the same way as a company or service may do, using a name to communicate to customers what their product or service stands for. However, this is not a typical approach for academic programs within higher education, which are overwhelmingly referred to with a name related to the credential the program awards its graduates. Many of the credentials awarded by these programs are, at this time, generic in nature to allow for person-centered planning and individualization of its course of study. Due to this current reality, it may be considered that referring to the program by a name that reflects its credential (e.g., *Certificate of Completion*) is seen as too vague, too broad, or not providing sufficient information about the program. However, the amount of information that programs believe their acronyms provide to the public may be less than intended, as the acronym requires significant explanation to describe what it stands for

and why it was chosen. Further, it has the negative effect of being different from how academic programs are named elsewhere at the institution. Although the acronym may represent laudable principles such as community, diversity, independence, and success, the primary message an acronym may send is that this is not an academic program of the college or university, but more of a social program or support service.

The use of a program name that includes words such as inclusion or that has a focus on disability, either directly or through implication, may inadvertently disclose to others on campus that students in that program have a particular disability diagnosis. The choice of whether and when to disclose a disability should be the student's (Freedman et al., 2017). The stigma attached to intellectual disability, the possibility of being viewed as having limited academic potential, or other personal reasons may lead students with intellectual disability to choose not to disclose their disability to instructors, peers, and supervisors (Freedman et al.). A program name that has the effect of identifying its students as having a disability is subverting the students' choice of whether to disclose a disability.

The use of the school mascot in a name, which was evident in 124 of the program names we analyzed, almost entirely programs at four-year IHEs, shows a recognition of the importance of aligning with the IHE but could also have an unintended negative impact. Too often, individuals with disabilities are not included as equal and valued members of a community but rather viewed as recipients of charity or kindness to the less fortunate. Their role within a community can unfortunately sometimes be relegated to that of a mascot, rather than a full-fledged person with equal status to others. This unstated and very often unconscious attitude may be exacerbated or amplified by a program name that includes a mascot.

## Recommendations for Practice

If a college program for students with intellectual disability has a goal of aligning its practices to those of other programs on their campus, the first choice of a name should be to refer to the program by the name of the credential it awards, for example *College and Community Studies*, *Integrated Studies*, or *Interdisciplinary Studies*. Referring to a program of study by the name of its credential is common and standard practice at all institutions of higher education. By following this well-worn path, the program is assuring that the name of the program does not call attention to it as a special program for students with disabilities but instead emphasizes the program of study for all students in that program, in the same way that *Early Childhood Education*, *Welding*, or *English* are used to describe the program of study of the students in those academic programs. To enhance a generic credential name, the program could consider the addition of concentrations to emphasize each student's focus area, as in *Integrated Studies with a concentration in Dramatic Arts* or *Career and Community Studies with a focus on Business Operations*. If the program does not award a credential, a name that conveys the focus of the program in clear terms is preferable. Examples of this might be *Transition to Postsecondary Education* for a college-based transition program or *Career Studies* for a program with a focus on preparation for employment.

For staff at existing programs who are reading this paper, we encourage you to think about the information provided and consider if your program name could be improved. Some IHEs have already begun this work, noting that as their programs evolve and improve, their program names should, too. For example, the University of North Carolina Greensboro recently engaged in this process for their program, formerly known as Beyond Academics and now renamed Integrative Community Studies (see Figure 3 for more information). Renaming a program is not easy, but we hope the present analysis can create the opportunity to pause for reflection on the implications of an existing program name.

### **Future Research**

A future research study could involve conducting a qualitative study using a grounded theory framework with deductive analysis to understand why programs chose their names and how the name has impacted, supported, or hindered authentic inclusion and the perception of the students in the program as legitimate and full members of the campus community focusing on earning a credential. It is of particular importance to examine the experiences and perspectives of students on the names of the programs they attend. Additionally, if acronyms are viewed as beneficial for conveying program values to prospective families and students, a future research study could seek to determine the best approach to naming through empirical data.

### **Conclusion**

The analysis presented here offers the first systematic look at the names of postsecondary education programs for students with ID. The findings of the study reveal frequent use of acronyms as well as names that could have negative impact on students through unintended disclosure of their disability or implication that the students are mascots rather than full-fledged members of the campus. We hope the recommendations provided offer pause for thought, both for those who are engaged in the program development process and for those who are associated with existing postsecondary education programs.

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<https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214005283748>

Table 1

*Coding of Program Names*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Words in the program name</b>
Acronym	An acronym that is pronounced as a word (e.g., FOCUS, DREAM)
School	A word related to school mascot, nickname, or similar
Success	Achieve, advancement, growth, prep, future, next, forward, raise/raising, expectations, readiness, ahead, elevate, excel, reach, soar, goal
Independent Living	Life, independent, independence, leadership, friends, spiritual
Education	College, learning, postsecondary, higher ed, campus
Students	Scholars, adults, participant, young adult
Path	Access, connect, link, bridge, support, opportunities, leveraging, options, explore, road to, discovery, fostering, steps, advanc-, transition
Inclusive	Inclusive, integrated, diverse, disabilities, community, experience, neuro, "Think College"
Employment	Career, work, job, skills
General	Not otherwise discernable
Program	Program, initiative, project, center, academy, institute, partnership
Credential/ Academic Program	Certificate, studies

*Note.* Advanc- refers to all related words such as "advance," "advancing," or "advancement"



**Table 2***Words Found In 10 Or More Program Names*

<b>Word</b>	<b>Number of Program Names</b>
Program	66
College	43
Transition	33
Life	31
Career	28
Education	22
Academy	17
Studies	15
Community	14
Project	14
Inclusive	13
Access	12
Independ-	12
Steps	10
Success	10

*Note.* Independ- refers to any related words such as “independence” or “independent”

**Table 3***Count of Themes in Program Names*

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<b>Theme</b>	<b>Number of program names</b>
Acronym	124
Program	103
Path	86
Education	79
Employment	50
Independent Living	49
Success	45
Inclusive	38
School	32
Students	23
General	21
Credential/Academic Program	19

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**Figure 1**

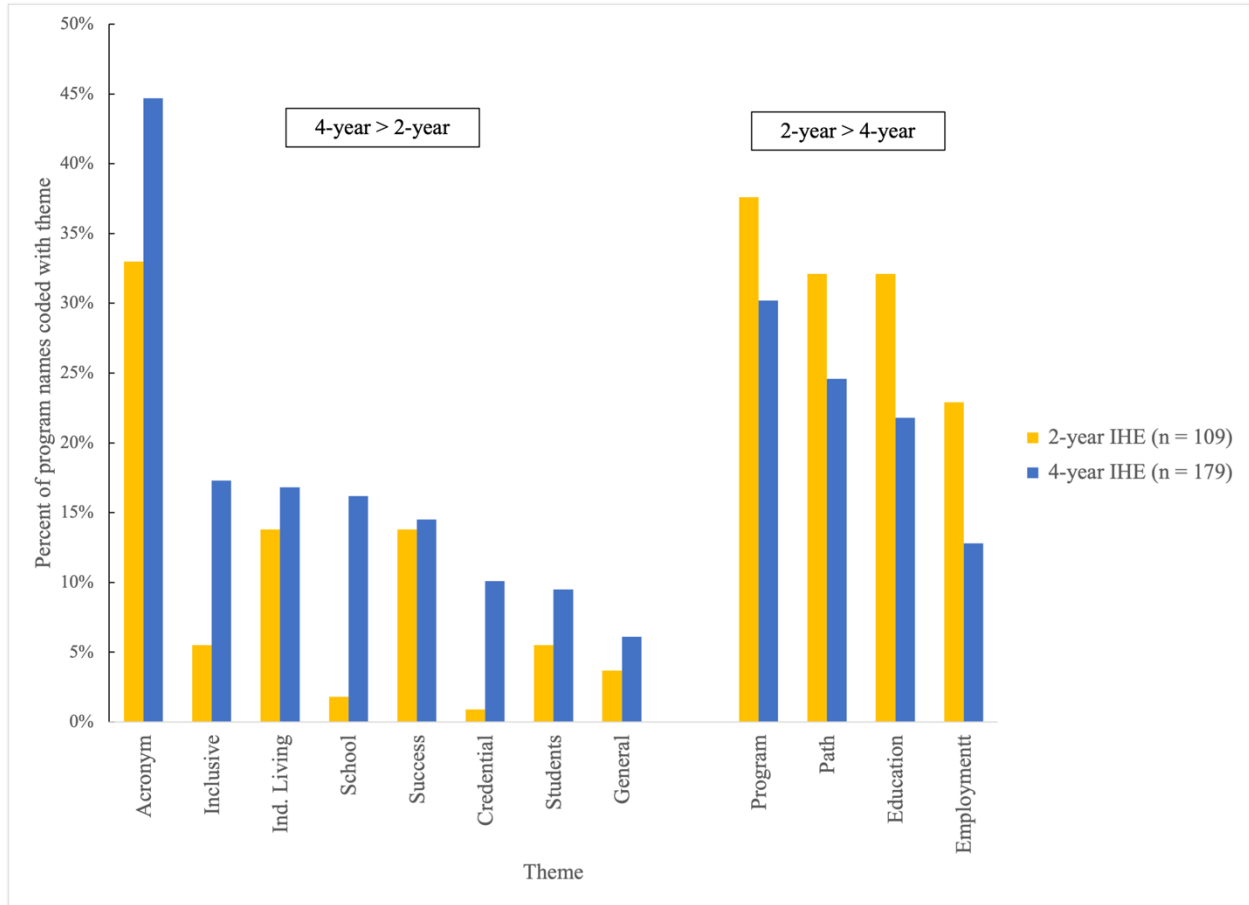
*Word Cloud of Common Words in Program Names*



*Note.* The size of a word in the figure is related to how often the word was found in the list of program names.

**Figure 2**

*Percentage of Program Names Coded by Theme at Two-Year Vs. Four-Year IHEs*



**Figure 3***UNC Greensboro's Description of Program Name Change*

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) remains committed to its Comprehensive Transition Postsecondary (CTP) program. Entering the CTP program's 14th year, there have been important programmatic advances and additional funding opportunities to increase access for students with intellectual disability on our campus. The original name, "Beyond Academics," helped to signify the start of an important way in which UNCG operationalizes its commitment to accessible excellence for all students. Continuing our motto of "no more different than necessary" and our journey to deeper alignment with other majors/certificates within higher education, the name of the program is now simply the name of the certificate that students graduate with - Integrative Community Studies.

- Lisa Pluff, Director of Integrative Community Studies, UNC Greensboro