

Ten Years of the State-of-the-Art Conference: Reflecting on the Progress of Inclusive Postsecondary Education

Beth Myers, Ed.D.
Syracuse University

Meg Grigal, Ph.D.
*University Institute for Community Inclusion
University of Massachusetts Boston*

This year, 10 years of the State-of-the-Art Conference in Inclusive Higher Education was celebrated. The introduction to this issue of the Journal reflects on that decade of progress as noted in the keynote presentation at this year's conference. We discuss what it means to have been working with inclusive postsecondary education for ten years and consider the past, present, and future of the field.

In 1998, when Meg Grigal, one of the authors of this introduction, would suggest that people with intellectual disability should go to college, people were confused and doubtful. At that time there really were not any formal options. There was no legislation supporting or guiding inclusive postsecondary education. There were no data. There was not even any real demand, because most people could not even imagine college for people with intellectual disability as a possibility.

The first programs were often started by one family, one parent, one student, or one teacher. These "programs" were often kept quiet, sometimes even from the university. Students and teachers often operated as "squatters" in the college setting or began without official permission. A few universities started actual programs for a few students. Some dedicated individuals committed funding, time, or expertise to the cause. Many of these people were told they were being unrealistic or setting students up for failure.

Barriers were everywhere. Doubt was rampant. Programs were unavailable in most states. People did not know where to start and, given at the time there was no central source of information or network, everyone was working on their own. Options were hard to find and many students and families, facing a lack of options, set out to create access for themselves. Inclusive postsecondary education did not yet have a name, or a network, or a community. Soon, the tide began to shift and possibilities opened up. Hope, communication, and information was on the horizon.

One of the first big milestones was legislation. The Higher Education Opportunities Act in 2008 completely changed the field. It led to program development through the funding of the TPSID model demonstration program in 2010, and it led to students with intellectual disability being able to access federal student aid. It led to the creation of the National Coordinating Center, building the capacity to collect national data and access training and resources. These data allowed us to capture what was possible with high expectations and support, demonstrating students with intellectual disability could succeed in higher education.

Many other federal funding initiatives built our knowledge and expanded practices. OSEP funded early studies on college-based transition services. The National Institute of Disability Rehabilitation Research (NIDLLR) funded a center allowing us, for the first time, to gather information from all programs around the country. The very first State-of-the-Art Conference was funded by NIDLLR. Each of these initiatives helped the field progress, offering new knowledge, new data, and stronger connections between the people and the places where change was happening. This legislation and federal funding led to multiple outcomes: a public directory of programs, a national survey, state strategic planning, a national website, national standards, quality indicators, benchmarks, a literature and resource repository, and research on national datasets.

These federal initiatives also sparked and supported state-focused initiatives, leading to broader impacts on the field. State funding, support, and coordination between state entities fostered collaboration and problem solving. As the idea of inclusive postsecondary education became less elusive and more possible; more students and families wanted options. More colleges and universities began to open their doors. We had better information about program development and had mechanisms to share and grow the use of this information.

Another big milestone was research. With expanded funding for program development and greater access for students it was possible to conduct studies exploring these experiences and their associated outcomes. The breadth and diversity of research has increased tremendously over the last ten years. We now have a significant amount of data on student activities and outcomes documenting the value inclusive higher education has for students with intellectual disability. New research also helps to explore the methodologies of our field, highlighting effective practices which can be replicated. We are witnessing a new generation of doctoral students who are entering into the field of inclusive postsecondary education research and practice, broadening its potential impact in the future. Additionally, we see college students with intellectual disability being acknowledged and included in new research priorities from entities like the Institute of Education Sciences.

It is an exciting time. Existing and emerging research is leading us to a better understanding of what practices work and do not work. Research helps our field to reflect on not only our inclusive practices, but also to consider our program development pathways, our funding priorities, and helps to motivate us to advocate for and seek outcome data. The research done in the US has allowed us to say with confidence that inclusion leads to employment. We finally have data to support the proposition we had when we began this journey; that higher education is possible and results in positive outcomes for students with intellectual disability.

Student outcomes are strong. Growth has been demonstrated by the level of inclusive course access and student satisfaction level. Students are living on campus, taking classes in their area of interest, finding careers that they love, and earning wages that will help them live independently. Campus impact is positive. Faculty indicate inclusion makes them better teachers. College peers share that inclusion makes them not only better learners, but better people.

By creating inclusive higher education options, we are not only improving the lives of students enrolled and the lives of faculty teaching courses, but we are also changing the culture of campus communities. Inclusive higher education supports colleges and universities to be not merely receptive of diverse learners, but to embrace diverse learners and to welcome and enjoy all the wonder that can occur when a community is responsive, inclusive, and celebrates difference. Our job as higher educators is to prepare citizens for the future. Inclusive higher education provides the means to create citizens who expect students with intellectual disability to be valued as peers and as part of their community.

A final milestone, and a critical one, is the milestone of student leadership and advocacy. The students are the ones that are changing people's minds, changing policy, changing services, and changing practice. College students with intellectual disability have gone to Washington, D.C. as policy advocates, to speak to their state representatives about college and ask them to support practices, funding, and guidance. College students with intellectual disability have shared their stories in publications, on the news, and in the media. And, college students with intellectual disability are also speaking up for themselves and others on campus by serving as student government leaders. Students are more visible not only on campus, but also on college and university recruitment and communication tools, often being featured on brochures and websites. This representation demonstrates that college students with intellectual disability are a part of their campus communities and are as valued and as valuable as every other student on their campus. And of course, we have the Student Leadership Conference, aligned with the State-of-the-Art Conference, where students gather annually to develop advocacy in the field. Representation matters.

In reflecting on 10 years of growth and progress, we are grateful for how far this field has come. We are grateful for the determination and hard work of the many people who have contributed to this growth. And while many of these milestones have made change possible, we believe the most powerful agent of change is the high expectations we hold for students with intellectual disability. Our firm belief that people with intellectual disability can and should go to college has opened the doors of higher education to serve diverse learners. We are now cultivating these same high expectations in other realms. We expect colleges to teach our students. We expect service systems to support our students to access inclusive environments. We expect employers to want to hire our graduates. We expect the world to accept, embrace, and celebrate people with intellectual disability. These expectations have changed our field and they will continue to change the world. Hold them firmly and share them widely.