

A Legacy of Leadership and Vision: Honoring the Impact of Debra Hart on the Field of Inclusive Postsecondary Education

Meg Grigal

University of Massachusetts - Boston

The field of inclusive postsecondary education lost one of its staunchest advocates in December 2023 when Debra Hart, the Education and Transition Team Director at the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) at the University of Massachusetts Boston, passed away. Debra had worked in the field of disability, special education, transition, and higher education for over 50 years. Her wide-ranging career included work with transition-age youth, inclusive recreation, personnel preparation, alternative assessment, universal design for learning, supporting self-determination, access to assistive technology, and inclusion.

For the last 20 years or so, Debra's work focused on the field of inclusive postsecondary education. It is hard to quantify the impact of a single person on a field. So much of what we do is collaborative, and our accomplishments reflect the interdependence of many contributors. It is likely that each of you reading this has made contributions to our strong but growing field of inclusive postsecondary education. However, it is hard to miss the impact that Debra's unique leadership and vision has had on our field's foundation and advancement toward future growth.

Debra's early work occurred long before we had the language we now use to describe the students and the field of study. To be honest, when she began the work, it's unlikely she could have imagined the impact and change it would lead to. But this early work articulated many of the values and constructs we now look at as foundational in our best practices. For example, in 1998, Debra received an Office of Special Education (OSEP) funded grant called the College Career Connection to work collaboratively with five school districts and five community colleges in Massachusetts to enable students ages 17 to 22 with significant disabilities to share adult postsecondary options with their nondisabled peers. This work demonstrated students with significant support needs were capable of attending college, and these experiences could have a positive impact on their employment outcomes (Zafft et al., 2004).

This study focused on some methods that are still relevant and prevalent today. The individual support model (Hart et al., 2001), a means to build the support around student needs, was the precursor to the current person-centered planning approach required for all federally funded Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) programs and those seeking to be approved as comprehensive transition and postsecondary (CTP) programs for federal financial aid eligibility. This passage from Zafft, Hart, and Zimbrich (2004) describes the model (p. 47):

The CCC model was designed to take into account the unique characteristics of all participants, including their aspirations for the future, family wishes, and cultural background. The model was based on five guiding principles: (a) individual student

vision set the direction and controlled decision-making, (b) all options explored with students were inclusive and occurred in settings that reflected a natural proportion of students with and without disabilities; (c) there were no special programs or specially designated classes (i.e., segregated classes or course sequences just for students with disabilities), (d) the development of supports emphasized individual needs and preferences rather than "one size fits all," and (e) collaboration among systems was necessary for an effective process.

It is worth noting the model for this project was developed with a grant funded in 1998, a decade prior to the passage of higher education legislation requiring person-centered planning and inclusion in college courses. Demonstrating a commitment to inclusion, trusting students to guide their life paths, and building in systemwide collaboration to support positive outcomes were hallmarks of Debra's approach to this work since the beginning.

The partnerships developed in this model also set the groundwork for the creation of the Massachusetts Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment Initiative (MAICEI). This state-funded initiative supports partnerships between local school districts and public colleges and universities in Massachusetts to offer college-based transition services to students ages 18 to 22 with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Funded since 2007, this initiative has expanded recently to serve those beyond age 22. Debra regularly provided testimony to the legislature on the importance and impact of this initiative, and supported efforts to provide technical assistance and evaluation in partnership with the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education. This work also informed Debra and others' future work on dual enrollment (Grigal & Hart, 2010; Hart et al., 2005; Neubert et al., 2002; Paiewonsky et al., 2017).

In 2004, Debra and others published the results of a national survey conducted with 25 programs serving dually enrolled students with learning, cognitive, and intellectual disability (Hart et al., 2004). This survey was important for a few reasons. First, it was one of the first surveys to include students with intellectual disability in any national survey of college access. Second, it extended the existing concept of dual enrollment to include students with cognitive (intellectual) disability. Finally, it provided one of the first notions of a continuum of inclusion. In describing the service structure of the respondents to the survey, Hart et al. stated: "Programs surveyed typically fell into one of three categories of postsecondary models: substantially separate, mixed, and inclusive" (p. 57). These categories of practice guided planning discussions, development, implementation, and evaluation of postsecondary options for the next decade. The article also called for the development of a clearinghouse of information and a need to identify and address policy barriers to postsecondary education such as diploma requirements and eligibility for financial aid. Both issues were ultimately addressed in the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act in the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) in 2008.

In the early 2000s, Debra and her colleagues at the ICI also were partners in the Coalition for the Support of Individuals with Significant Disabilities in Post-Secondary Education. This group was led by the National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational Supports at the University of Hawaii, the Institute for Community Inclusion at

University of Massachusetts-Boston, and a national network of consumers and other key partners. The Coalition held multiple summits and capacity building institutes throughout the country, bringing together people who were involved in demonstrating that students with cognitive disabilities could go to college.

These summits provided an opportunity for colleagues to share their current work, share insights about effective practices and the positive impact of college access for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and discuss future policy needs (Stodden, 2002; Stodden & Kiernan 2002; Whelley & Stodden, 2003). Debra's approach to future projects was shaped by the impact she saw from these events—she learned the path forward depended on building partnerships with other organizations, colleges, and universities around the country with a commitment to expanding access to higher education for people with intellectual disability. These collaborative efforts also led to the creation of resources which were used to inform policy leaders on future guidance and funding.

Two funding initiatives in 2008 created opportunities for additional growth in our field, and Debra was integral to both of them. In October 2008, the National Institute on Disability Rehabilitation Research, under the Department of Education, awarded a *Center on Postsecondary Education for Students with Intellectual Disabilities* to the ICI at the University of Massachusetts-Boston and TransCen, Inc. from FY2009-FY2012. During this same period, the Administration on Developmental Disabilities awarded a five-year national training initiative to develop a consortium of University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDDs) addressing postsecondary education for youth and young adults with developmental disability. The ICI at the University of Massachusetts-Boston competed and secured the funding to develop the *National Consortium on Postsecondary Education for Individuals with Developmental Disabilities* in partnership with seven UCEDD's (Delaware, Minnesota, Hawaii, South Carolina, Tennessee [Vanderbilt], Ohio, California) and the Association of University Centers on Disabilities (AUCD) from FY2009 to FY2014.

These two centers established an emerging knowledge base by gathering information about the impact of postsecondary education from existing datasets; gathering information about existing programs and services; and created resources to illustrate how and why these efforts mattered. These important initiatives led to the development of our searchable college directory and resource library and the development of the Think College Standards, Quality Indicators and Benchmarks (Grigal et al, 2012). If you are reading this article right now, you have likely used at least one of these tools in your work. These centers also helped to launch Think College as a recognized national technical assistance entity. Once Think College was established, it becomes a little more difficult to differentiate Debra's contributions from the achievements of Think College and its team; and this is by design, because Think College represented all of us.

Another important resource Debra helped develop was the book, *Think College! Postsecondary Education Options for Students with Intellectual Disability* (Grigal & Hart, 2010). This book shared the history and background of the developing field of inclusive

postsecondary education, the current practices and perspectives of students and families, high schools, and colleges, as well as the impact of policy and legislation. Debra hoped the book would offer guidance to those newly entering the field to prioritize inclusion in their efforts. Its publication in 2010 aligned with the implementation of a new era of practice launched by the TPSID model demonstration projects funded by the of the US Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education (OPE), and was an important resource for those creating new programs or expanding existing ones.

The launch of the Think College National Coordinating Center (NCC) as part of the TPSID model demonstration program in 2010 really changed our work at Think College. For the first time, it provided a chance to work strategically with others throughout the country, all seeking the same goal of improving access to and the quality of higher education for students with intellectual disability. The work of the NCC in the early days was focused on developing a system to evaluate and capture the practices used by the TPSIDs, while simultaneously learning how to partner with the grantees to support their evolution.

One of the most impactful elements of the NCC was the establishment of its Accreditation Workgroup. This group was formed originally in 2012 and has adapted over the past 12 years to meet the needs of each stage of the work, from developing accreditation standards (Think College National Coordinating Center Accreditation Workgroup, 2016) to developing an accreditation process and launching an independent accreditation council (Inclusive Higher Education Accreditation Council, see <https://www.iheacouncil.org>).

Debra knew accreditation would be a game changer for inclusive postsecondary education. Each stage of the development of the standards (getting public input, field-testing the standards, modifying and finalizing the standards) allowed us to bring the reality of having an established accreditation system closer. The Inclusive Higher Education Accreditation Council was launched in 2023, and the University Participant Program at Western Carolina University was the first to be accredited. Debra was a part of every step of this process and was thrilled to witness this extraordinary moment in the history of our work. She was so hopeful about the positive impact accreditation would have on our field.

The NCC has now been funded three times since 2010, and we are hopeful it will continue to foster growth, quality improvement, and positive outcomes for college students with intellectual disability. In 2021, another center was funded by the OPE to focus more extensively on the growth and improvement of programs outside of the TPSID network. Debra and the team at Think College secured this funding to launch the Inclusive Higher Education Network, which began its third year of funding in October 2023. This center focuses on building capacity and knowledge at the local, state, and regional levels, by developing alliances, launching a public awareness campaign, and strengthening employment outcomes via a focus on career and technical education, vocational rehabilitation, and other adult support systems.

This impressive timeline of grants and projects strategically and effectively built upon each other to create a developmental road map of our field. Debra would be the first to say that she didn't do any of this work alone. Many amazing professionals contributed to each of the projects described herein. But she was an important part of each of these projects, and this body of work has helped establish knowledge and set goals for implementing stronger and more effective practices in the future. The milestones along the way have included groundbreaking legislation, significant levels of federal and state funding, access to federal financial aid, a national dataset on the experiences and outcomes for college students with intellectual disability, accreditation standards, and an accrediting agency. Debra was at the forefront of each of these milestones.

If she were still here, she would be telling each of us, in no uncertain terms, to settle for nothing less than full inclusion, and to eliminate segregated and specialized practices and environments. She truly believed it was possible, and necessary, to create higher education opportunities where students with intellectual disability were never segregated. She believed students with intellectual disability should be welcomed in every classroom, on every campus, and in every dorm; learning, and living, and working with their peers, just like everyone else does.

So, let's do that, shall we?

Let's prove her right.

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Figure 1

Foundations of Our Current Work

Review these recommendations developed by Debra Hart and colleagues 18 years ago and see how many of them are reflected in today's funding policy and practice.

The following recommendations for improving access to postsecondary education (PSE) focus on strengthening three key elements: awareness, policy, and capacity-building.

Awareness

- Develop a multimedia public awareness campaign on the options for and benefits of PSE for students with an intellectual disability. The campaign should reach students and families, school K-12 personnel, adult disability and generic service systems, and the higher education community.
- Encourage state departments of education to identify the current status of PSE options in local districts, monitor student activities and outcomes, and share information about exemplary programs and services in postsecondary environments.
- Inform institutions of higher education and their supporting organizations (e.g., National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education, Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities) of current partnerships serving students with intellectual disabilities. Clearly articulate the institutional and individual benefits of such collaborations.
- Inform national disability organizations (e.g., TASH, AAMR, AUCD/University Centers of Excellence, ARC, UCP, PACER/Parent Training Information Centers, AHEAD) about the options for and benefits of PSE for students with intellectual

disabilities.

Policy

- Secure “Dear Colleague” letters from the U.S. Department of Education to state superintendents/commissioners informing them that IDEA funds can be used to support students with disabilities in PSE and develop or enhance options and services.
- Ensure that the State Performance Plans (SPPs) and indicators 13 and 14 required under IDEA include PSE options and track outcomes for students with intellectual disabilities.
- Develop an “alternate” or universally designed "ability to benefit" test that creates access to PSE for students with intellectual disabilities.
- Modify and align existing legislation (e.g., IDEA, HEA, NCLB, WIA, SSA, Transportation Act, DD Act, Medicaid, Olmstead) to support increased access to PSE for students with intellectual disabilities.
- Identify or develop mechanisms for students with intellectual disabilities to access federal financial aid.
- Develop or modify existing policies to support students with intellectual disabilities to gain access to campus housing.

Capacity-Building

- Fund demonstration and research on PSE models to increase the number of available options and develop/disseminate replication materials.
- Partner with a national organization to integrate a focus on PSE for students with

intellectual disabilities. This partnership can organize information and resources, provide training and technical assistance, conduct and coordinate research efforts, and

advocate for needed legislative and policy changes.

- Develop strategies that support national accreditation for PSE options that integrate students with intellectual disabilities.
- Establish a national set of standards and quality indicators for PSE.
- Integrate information on PSE for students with intellectual disabilities in pre-service training of all general and special education teachers, rehabilitation professionals, and support personnel.

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