

## 2025 Leadership Award Winners

### Debra Hart Policy & Practice Leadership Award

An individual who facilitates innovation and progress in inclusive higher education in an impactful way on a local, regional, or national level.



#### **Cate Weir**, Program Director, Think College

Cate Weir is the Program Director, Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts, Boston. She has worked in the field of postsecondary education for students with intellectual disability for over 25 years and has served as the coordinator of the Think College National Coordinating Center (NCC), funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, since its inception. In that

role, Cate manages all aspects of the NCC, provides training and technical assistance to existing and developing college programs, families, students, and special educators, creates resources, and manages the Think College website. Cate's expertise includes the development and improvement of college programs for students with intellectual disability, program standards and accreditation, person-centered planning, and statewide planning for inclusive postsecondary education initiatives.

### The Laura Lee Leadership Award

A trailblazing self-advocate who currently attends or has graduated from a PSE program for persons with intellectual disability and whose advocacy significantly benefits individuals with disabilities – in their college or community, regionally or nationally.



#### **Mary White**, Self-Advocate, *The Awesome Mary Show*

Mary White is an advocate for people with disabilities and enjoys sharing her story. She has a series of YouTube videos called *The Awesome Mary Show* that focus on living with a disability. Her videos are informative, inspirational, and humorous. Mary has been recognized as a leader in advocacy, including the Self-Advocate of Distinction Award in 2024 from ARC of Alabama, the Jeff Ridgeway Advocacy Award, and the Vulcan Community Award, and was named one of Alabama Public Television's Young Heroes. She has

spent many hours speaking with legislators in the Alabama State House, advocating for the rights of people with disabilities. Mary graduated from the ACCESS Program at Mississippi State University in 2023. She lives in Birmingham and works at Children's of Alabama.

### **Megan Cartier Early Career Scholar Award**

An early career scholar who demonstrates a commitment to innovation in the field of inclusive higher education through research and service, while centering the voices and lived experiences of those with intellectual disability.



#### **Katie Ducett, PhD, SUNY Cortland**

Katie Ducett is an Assistant Professor in the Foundations and Social Advocacy Department at SUNY Cortland. Her research examines the everyday experiences of individuals with intellectual disability as they navigate college, employment, and community spaces, as well as inclusive research methods. Through her collaborative research, Katie works to highlight the expertise of people with intellectual disability as knowers of their own experience and as leaders in society. Katie is currently in her sixth year as a member of the State of the Art Conference Executive Committee and has served as chair of the

SOTA Student Leadership Conference for three of those years. She previously taught in the Rochester City School District and at Nazareth College. Dr. Ducett holds bachelor's and master's degrees in chemistry education, special education, and literacy from Nazareth University, where she worked in her first IPSE role as a peer mentor. She also holds a doctorate in Special Education and a Certificate of Advanced Study in Disability Studies from Syracuse University.

### **State Level Leadership Award -Two Winners for 2025**

An individual who reflects significant leadership through state-level alliance-building, leading efforts to enhance available funding for college students with intellectual disability or program development, and informing state legislation or policy to further the field of inclusive higher education.



#### **Julia Landau, Esq., Massachusetts Advocates for Children**

Julia Landau is the director of Massachusetts Advocates for Children's Disability Education Justice Initiative. Ms. Landau has over 40 years of experience conducting legislative advocacy and litigation focused on educational equity for children and young adults with disabilities. She has successfully led many major legislative campaigns, including

laws defending students' rights in the overhaul of the state's special education statute, transition rights of older students, assistive technology, and the establishment of rights and services for children with autism. Most recently, she played a key role in advocating for the first law in the country to provide individuals with intellectual disabilities and autism access to all state colleges

and universities. Ms. Landau has also developed extensive special education law training curricula and provided workshops for parents and professionals throughout the Commonwealth.



**Maria Paiewonsky, EdD, UMass Boston Transition Leadership Program**

Maria Paiewonsky is the Director for the Massachusetts Center for Inclusive Higher Education and Transition at the Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts, Boston. With over 20 years of leadership in transition services and inclusive higher education, she has developed and scaled evidence-based models that improve college, career, and community outcomes for students with intellectual disability. Maria has directed multi-institutional initiatives, provided statewide technical assistance, and advanced systems-level change across both education and adult service systems. In her current role, Maria leads Massachusetts' inclusive higher education efforts in partnership with the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, supporting colleges, schools, and families to build and sustain inclusive opportunities. She also directs the Transition Leadership Program at UMass Boston, originally funded by OSEP, which prepares transition specialists and features one of the nation's only graduate-level courses on inclusive higher education. At the national level, she serves as a consultant and represents Massachusetts in the Northeast Regional Postsecondary Alliance.

[Learn more about SOTA Leadership Awards](#)