



Employment Activities and Outcomes of College-Based Transition Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

By Meg Grigal and Amy Dwyre

There are currently over 250 college programs serving students with intellectual disabilities (ID) in the United States (www.thinkcollege.net). Approximately half of these programs would be considered dual enrollment transition programs, in which students ages 18-21 with ID receive their final 2-3 years of public school transition services on a college campus. While the focus of service varies significantly between these programs (Katovich, 2009), most dual enrollment transition programs address the issue of employment in some capacity, such as through internships, job shadowing, and community-based work experiences (Grigal, Neubert, & Moon, 2001; Hart, Zimbrich, & Ghiloni, 2001).

In 2004, the Postsecondary Education Research Center (PERC) Project was established by TransCen, Inc. through funding from the U.S Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. The project's purpose was to demonstrate and research exemplary practices in supporting students with intellectual disabilities ages 18-21 in dual enrollment programs in postsecondary education settings. The PERC Project collaborated with existing dual enrollment programs for students with ID operated by public school systems in collaboration with local institutions of higher

education in Maryland and Connecticut. The program in Connecticut was implemented on the campus of a four-year university and the program in Maryland was implemented at three campuses of a community college in the same county. Each program was coordinated and staffed by a local school system, in partnership with the colleges, and served 8-12 students each year.

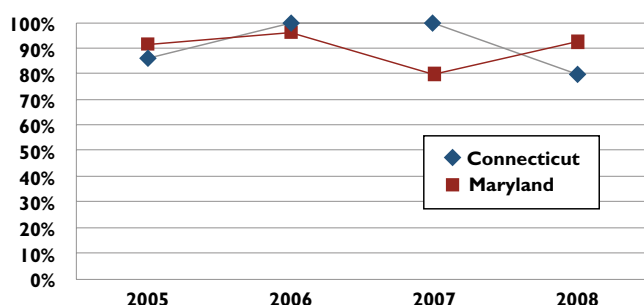
Students with intellectual disabilities who participated in dual enrollment programs in postsecondary education settings had a high rate of paid employment.

Students in both programs engaged in a wide array of college experiences. Students were able to audit or enroll in a variety of college courses that either reflected their personal interests or supported their career plan. Students also participated in college clubs and organizations, accessed other campus resources such as the career center, library, and fitness center, and had internships both on and off campus. In addition to these activities, students were expected to seek and retain paid employment while in the program.

Employment data was collected twice annually on all participating students while they were receiving services, and upon exit from the program. Employment variables included:

- Job title / type of job
- Start date / end date
- Type and frequency of support
- Wages per hour
- Hours per week

Figure 1: Percentage of Students Employed



Employment was defined as an individual being hired and directly paid competitive wages by a business or employer. Therefore, these data did not reflect or include volunteer experiences, unpaid job training or internship experiences, jobs that had sub-minimum wage or stipend pay, or group or enclave work.

Findings

Between 2005 and 2009 data was collected on 96 students with ID. Of these 96 students, 89 were employed in paid jobs while they attended the dual enrollment program. The average wage earned was \$8.00 per hour and students worked on average 19 hours per week.

Types of Jobs

Students were employed in an array of career areas. The table below identifies the types of employment and the number of students working in each area.

| Type of Employment* | Number of Students | Percent of Jobs |
|---------------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| Clerical | 21 | 18 |
| Food service | 18 | 15 |
| Maintenance | 8 | 7 |
| Personal care | 12 | 10 |
| Retail | 56 | 47 |
| Trades | 4 | 3 |

*Note: Some students held more than one job.

The most frequent challenges to obtaining or sustaining employment were transportation issues, management changes, layoffs due to seasonal work, difficulty balancing academic responsibilities with work, and a reduction in work hours.

Supports

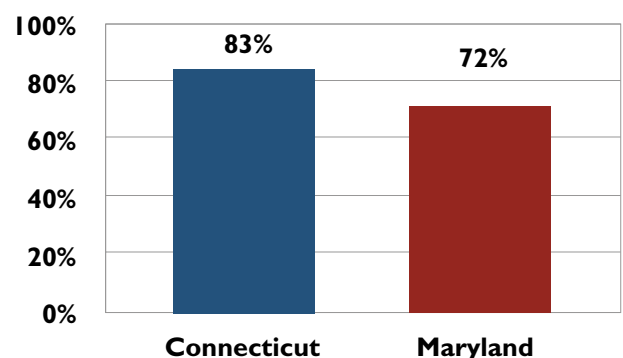
The type of supports provided to students included teacher support, natural supports, and direct job coaching and these supports were consistently used in both the Maryland and Connecticut programs. The majority of job site check-ins were provided monthly in Connecticut and weekly in Maryland.

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Paid Employment After Exit

Of those students who completed exit and follow up surveys, 83% of students from the Connecticut program and 72% of students from the Maryland programs were engaged in paid employment after they exited the college-based transition program.

Figure 2: Paid Employment After Exit



DISCUSSION

Overall, students with intellectual disabilities who participated in dual enrollment transition programs in postsecondary education settings had a relatively high rate of paid employment. Some factors that may have contributed to these strong employment outcomes include:

- **Setting paid employment as a goal.** These two dual enrollment programs identified paid employment as a specific goal and expectation for all participants. While many students also participated in job exploration experiences and internships, these activities were conducted in conjunction with students engaging in and maintaining paid employment.
- **Time and staff dedicated to job development and placement.** The Connecticut program dedicated part of their budget to hiring a part-time job developer whose only role was to develop partnerships with local businesses in order to fill their hiring needs with qualified students. In Maryland, the responsibility for job development and placement was shared between program coordinators and para-educators, and each of these people carved time out of their schedules to conduct these activities.
- **Staff trained in job development strategies.** Both programs identified a need for additional training in the theory and practical application of customized employment and job development. Each received this training from PERC project staff and were able to implement these strategies successfully.
- **Flexible staff schedules.** To successfully develop relationships with businesses that would hire students, staff schedules in each of these programs were kept flexible. Job developers were able to leave the campus during the day in order to meet with employers. In addition, when job coaching was required after school hours, staff could provide this support.
- **Flexible student schedules.** Students were flexible about when they could work and were not limited to employment opportunities only during the school day. In Maryland, students received training on the use of public transportation from their campus to their jobs and then home. This meant they could be available after school hours if needed by their employers.
- **Career discovery process.** Person-centered planning was infused into the structure of the programs – during orientation into the program and during the IEP development process – allowing for each student to create an individualized career development plan. As a result, each student had his or her own idea about what type of jobs to pursue based on personal skills, interests, and support needs. In addition, students could choose college courses that matched these interests, allowing them to further develop skills related to their desired careers. This provided the job developer with key information about which businesses to approach and what attributes to feature in securing employment for a student.

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Given the flexibility in scheduling and access to community businesses, college-based transition programs may be able to address the transition area of employment for students with ID more effectively than some traditional high school programs. The two programs researched varied in terms

of location, structure, and staffing. However, a common feature was that each provided students with ID the expectation that they would obtain paid employment and the staffing needed to make it a reality. In addition, it was critical that program staff were provided with training in effective job development and customized employment strategies (Grigal & Hart, 2010). The Higher Education Opportunities Act (HEOA) (PL 110-315) supports the premise that college programs* for students with ID should result in gainful employment. Practitioners and researchers must continue to examine how paid employment can be infused into college experiences for students with intellectual disabilities, and the variables (staffing, expectations, training) that influence successful employment outcomes.

*The HEOA refers to these college programs as *Comprehensive Postsecondary Education and Transition Programs*.

ABOUT PERC

The Postsecondary Education Research Center (PERC) Project (2005-2010) was established by TransCen, Inc. to demonstrate and research exemplary practices supporting dually enrolled students ages 18-21 with intellectual disabilities in programs in postsecondary education settings. The PERC Project website www.transitiontocollege.net features Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) regarding establishing, maintaining, and improving services in college-based transition programs. The website offers information on events, news items, and a variety of resources and tools including free access to the PERC Postsecondary Program Evaluation Tool, a self-assessment tool for college and community-based services.

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