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*The content in this publication was adapted from presentations made at the 2017 Southeastern Postsecondary Education Alliance Capacity Building Institute. The publication was edited by staff of the Tennessee Developmental Disabilities and Independent Living Networks. Project leadership, production, and design was provided by the communication and graphic staff of the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities. 03/2018*

## LETTER FROM SOUTHEASTERN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION ALLIANCE (SEPSEA) CHAIR

On behalf of the SEPSEA Board of Directors, conference planning committee, and the Tennessee Inclusive Higher Education Alliance, I am pleased to share with you this publication full of information from the 2017 Southeast Postsecondary Education Alliance Capacity Building Institute. The 2017 institute took place at Vanderbilt University in June of 2017. It would not have been possible without the ideas and support of the planning committee, which represents some of the finest inclusive higher education programs in the country. We are excited to share this valuable information with you. The practices and perspectives offered in this publication will be helpful for promoting new programs and enhancing those already in existence. Even though the program took place in the southeastern United States, the information is applicable no matter the region!

We are grateful for the work of the Tennessee Developmental Disabilities and Independent Living Networks for bringing this publication together.

Also, my thanks to you, the reader, for everything you are doing to advance inclusive postsecondary education within your institutions of higher education, your community, your state, the southeast, and the nation. We hope the information in this booklet will lead to new ideas for programs and an extended network for continued collaboration.

Thank you for believing that learning is for everyone and from everyone!

With warm regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Susanna Miller-Raines". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Susanna Miller-Raines, MSW  
SEPSEA Chair  
Center for Leadership in Disability, Georgia State University

# INCLUSIVE HIGHER EDUCATION AND A FUTURE OF FLOURISHING

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ERIK W. CARTER

Allow me to highlight a portion of our history that ought to remind us just how noteworthy it is that we have assembled a publication focused on college pathways for students with intellectual disabilities. I turned 43 this year and I thought my age might help anchor a timeline of our progress. The year I was born, the right to a public education was not available to children and youth with disabilities in the United States. The doors to elementary and secondary schools across this country were not fully open. Our expectations were quite low, our vision so very small. The right to a public education did not arrive until a couple of years later in 1975 when what we now know as the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act* was first passed.

It wasn't until I was approaching my own high school graduation that our field first made a clear commitment to ensuring every young person with a disability found formal support as they made the transition to adulthood. The birth of federally mandated transition services came in 1990, and it was then that we started giving serious attention to what happens to the students we serve after the school bus no longer arrives.

It was not even 10 years ago when we celebrated the reauthorization of the Higher Education Opportunities Act. The Act introduced provisions to (a) establish of a set of model demonstration programs across the country, and (b) provide access to financial aid for students with intellectual disability.

And now here we are in 2017, sharing what we are learning about accomplishments of young people with disabilities and the ways in which our campuses are being transformed by their presence, participation, contributions, and engagement. Just a few weeks before I wrote the words you are reading, nearly 70 students with intellectual and developmental disabilities graduated from five college programs in Tennessee. Nearly 250 other colleges across the country held similar ceremonies.

## NINE COMMITMENTS

I'd like to use a framework of nine commitments that I think ought to mark our movements as a field focused on inclusive higher education for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. These commitments should penetrate our practices on campuses across the country. I share these observations as someone who is both watch-

ing this postsecondary educational movement from a distance (as a researcher and advocate committed to equipping young people with disabilities to navigate well this transition to life after school), but who also sees it from fairly close up (as someone proudly connected to the Next Steps program at Vanderbilt University). I think you'll find these nine proposals have important implications for the opportunities we provide, the supports we offer, and the perspectives we hold.

### 1. Led By Aspirations

The first commitment may be most important: We must be led by the aspirations of the young people we serve. In all of our work, our starting assumption must be that there is no separate set of dreams for young people with intellectual disability—for life after high school, for life in college, and life after graduation. What are those dreams and aspirations?

Take yourself back to high school. Think about how you might have answered that perennial question: What are you looking forward to most about life after high school? About going to college? As young people on the brink of adulthood, we all had great excitement about the future. And hopes of living the “good life,” however you defined that for yourself.

The very same is true for young people with labels of intellectual and developmental disabilities. My point is a very simple one: The presence of a disability label is not a reliable predictor of people's aspirations for their lives. Spend some time eavesdropping in the conversations in the campus commons, quads, courtyards, and cafeteria; listen in on a person-centered planning meeting and what you hear will sound so utterly ordinary:

A satisfying job, great friendships, a comfortable place to live, involvement in their community, a

chance to give something back, a place to belong, and perhaps most relevant to the topic at hand, a college degree. The presence of disability is just not a reliable predictor of what people want for their lives.

Having that label has endured as a far-too-reliable predictor of the opportunities these young people receive in their lives. This is a call for us to continue to do even more listening and more responding to young people in our communities, so that the directions we are pursuing on our campuses and across our region reflect their aspirations, and not merely our own. Looking back on our history, it seems to me that their aspirations have almost always exceeded our expectations. *Where would we go if we were led by our student's aspirations?*

### 2. Ensure Full Access

If we take those aspirations seriously, eventually it will lead us into every corner of our campuses. It will push us to pursue full access to campus life for our students. What does full access look like? I think it means helping students:

- » to access courses throughout the whole curriculum, rather than picking from a small slice of options;
- » to become active members of a wide variety of clubs and student organizations that pull upon their passions;
- » to be part of orientation events, campus programs, and other experiences that expose them to new perspectives and possibilities;
- » to access those generically available campus supports that any other student might draw upon;
- » to be part of internships and campus jobs that inform their career trajectories;
- » to enjoy the social aspects of college life that help them forge new, lifelong relationships;
- » and to experience life in the dorms lived with others.

Most of what college students learn about themselves and their world does not come from a textbook; indeed, most of the lasting lessons do not. This is not to minimize the courses students take, but to challenge you to think about the entire campus as the classroom.

For some of you, the call for full access will immediately resonate. But I suspect for many of you, this might seem too bold and too quick of an “ask”—after all, we are just now gaining a place on campus (and in some cases, we don’t even have that). Perhaps we should start small with just a few aspects of campus life and work our way in? My point here is not so much about the pace at which you move, but about your end pursuits. The formative experiences of college are just too hard experienced from the peripheries of the campus. *How might you move toward full access for your students? What is your vision for your campus?*

### 3. Change our Introductions

You are quite likely to encounter at least a little hesitation to this idea of full access. Long pauses in people’s response. A little reluctance; furrowed brow and a cocked head. Most likely resistance or even push-back. This is true in so many areas of our society where we are making this push—workplaces, neighborhoods, congregations, and K-12 schools. More and more, I wonder how much of this reluctance leads back to how the students we serve have come to be known. So often by a set of labels. A set of labels that serves to introduce people first and foremost in terms of what they cannot do or struggle to do.

Labels are quite powerful things. Aren’t they? I am afraid we so often choose the wrong ones. In educational and professional circles in particular, we tend to attach labels to people early on in school that can inadvertently serve to limit opportunities, highlight only the challenges, and

emphasize only the differences. Inadvertently, we may be stifling those dreams I talked about just a few moments ago. Those labels have staying power and we are inclined to bring them right into higher education.

When I watch what is happening on the Vanderbilt University campus through Next Steps and the things our students are accomplishing, contributing, learning, and experiencing—I just don’t see the language of deficits and discrepancies as fitting, as appropriate. We serve young people with deep passions, with incredible strengths, with gifts, with talents, with drives, with important perspectives, and with enviable qualities that make them assets within our learning communities.

And that is what leads me to ask whether we ought to change our introductions. To avoid inserting labels and diagnostic language that just doesn’t seem to tell faculty, staff, peers, and others what is most important to know about the young people they will soon be meeting. I wonder: What might that look like? How might we change our introductions? *How do we talk entirely differently about the young adults we are serving and supporting?*

### 4. Reflect on Our Growth

As I think about our own program’s growth on campus—and even observe what is happening elsewhere around the country—it strikes me that this journey we are taking is not a very linear one. And that while many of us share common goals for our campus, the paths we are taking to realize those goals is not nearly as predictable as we might hope, much more winding than we anticipated, and far more individualized than it is standardized. In other words, the pathway from here to there—from where we are to where we want to be—is not clearly laid out. There is no one-size-fits all road map.

So, how do we move forward in ways that ensure we will reach our destination? How will we know if we are making progress? Moving in the right directions? As you look at the national landscape, it is easy to find programs that have become self-contained or substantially separate—perhaps intentionally, but more likely accidentally or lack of intentionality. And then there other programs that are so deeply woven into the mission and fabric of their school. How can you discern whether you are moving in the right direction and in the right ways? I think it can be helpful to establish some landmarks or points of reference that can help keep you focused. Guideposts, for lack of a better word.

ThinkCollege.org has done some exceptional work in this area by establishing standards and quality indicators for programs who want to ensure what they do aligns with recommended practices and the very best of what we know works. I would also encourage you to invest some time establishing a set of local reference points that are really specific to your own program and your vision for your campus. Personalized guideposts that you return to regularly to gauge your progress and guide your movements.

About a year and a half ago, our team with Next Steps at Vanderbilt did just that. We began the process of articulating our own set of reflection points that we could use as markers for our growth on this campus. We essentially wanted to develop a set of questions we could ask of ourselves whenever we considered a particular area of expansion or thought about how we might approach a particular issue. And we wanted indicators that would keep us aimed toward excellence, toward inclusiveness, toward relevance, and toward sustainability.



So let me share those 14 indicators with you. For each of these, we can ask ourselves: What are we doing really well right now in relation to this question? And what ought we be doing better, or more of, or entirely differently? As I read through each one, I might encourage you to do ask these same questions:

- » Aligned Experiences—Are we designing experiences and processes that align with those of other Vanderbilt students?
- » Existing Offerings—Are we exploring existing learning and social opportunities before starting specialized ones?
- » Inclusive Contexts—Are we prioritizing experiences that involve students with and without disabilities in shared activities?
- » Existing Supports—Are we considering supports that would be available to any student and working to strengthen those supports?
- » Building Capacity—Are we developing the capacity of Vanderbilt and the broader community to support students enrolled in this program?
- » Individualized Approaches—Do our practices reflect a student-focused approach that is individually tailored to meet unique needs?
- » Authentic Learning—Do the experiences we provide have clear relevance for life after graduation and are they addressed in ways that will last?

- » Evidence-Based Practices—Is the instruction and support we provide marked by the highest quality and reflect research-based practices?
- » Developing Leaders—Are we supporting students in assuming valued roles across and beyond campus?
- » High Expectations—Do our efforts reflect and communicate high expectations for students and the Vanderbilt community?
- » Reciprocal Benefits—Are we involving other Vanderbilt students in ways that enable them to grow personally and professionally?
- » Forging Networks—Are we taking steps to grow strong connections with and among alumni, families, employers, and others?
- » Self-Sustaining—Are the movements we are making done in ways that ensure their sustainability over time and with scale?
- » Compelling Stories—Are we creating the stories we will be proud and eager to tell, and then telling those stories well?

In sharing these indicators with you, I am certainly not claiming we are doing all of them well. But it does give us something that calls us to do our work better. And so as you think about your own campuses and programs: *What will your reflection points be that keep you moving in the right direction?*

## 5. Capture the Impact

One of the arguments we often make around expanding higher education access is that it is the pathway to better outcomes for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. And this certainly seems to be true. For example, employment outcomes for students who complete TPSID programs are more than twice as high as national employment rates (and substantially higher for some programs). Enrollment in college tends to predict later employment outcomes. I am convinced that we have to be able to tell a strong

story about the impact of this investment. We have a good start on this, but I see more opportunities for us here:

First, we are going to have to find some way of showing the added value of the college experience for the students we enroll. In other words, many of the students and families who choose to pursue a TPSID program already have employment in mind and nearly half of entering students have had prior work experience before enrollment. And so it seems that we need to somehow show that our impact is not just on employment rates, but that we are substantially changing the nature of those employment outcomes. That graduates are finding better, more meaningful jobs as a result of their experiences. Or careers rather than jobs. I am certain this case can readily be made, but we need the data.

Second, we need to expand what we measure so that we are really capturing the difference this is making in the lives of students. As I already suggested, the main metric we turn to when addressing the impact of this movement has been post-graduation employment rates and earnings. This is certainly important, but it does not speak to the bigger impact of what we know is happening on our campuses. So I would challenge you to think deeply about the differences you are seeing:

- » Is it a student's vision for their own life?
- » Is it their experiences of belonging and relationships?
- » Is it their self-determination and self-worth?
- » Is it their independence and confidence?
- » Is it their community connections?
- » Is it their exposure to new ideas and pursuit of new pathways?

*Can we speak more clearly and comprehensively about the impact?*



## 6. Tell the Full Story

Let me go a bit further and ask you to think about this impact at an even bigger level. I say this, because we almost always miss the full story when we talk about who benefits from inclusion—and this is especially true when it comes to conversations about college. I am absolutely certain that students with disabilities benefit greatly from the time they spend on their campuses. From the courses they take, the jobs they hold, the relationships they form, the mentorship they receive, and the experiences they have. But that is just one piece of a much larger story. In my view, the more powerful portrait of inclusion is found in addressing how the entire community is strengthened by presence and participation of young people with disabilities. The full story has to address how everyone in a community benefits when inclusion becomes widespread. In other words, the proper unit of analysis in conversations about inclusion is the community.

Examples of this impact on our campus abound:

There are faculty on our campus who have had students enrolled in their classes and can readily share how the presence and participation of students with intellectual disability have enriched the conversations in their classes and have pushed

them to become better instructors. At Vanderbilt, more than 75 faculty have had this opportunity already. And some of them are becoming the very best advocates at inviting their colleagues to also get involved.

There are college students who will point to their direct involvement with our students (as peer mentors or as tutors) as the most formative part of their college experience. They are quick to share all they have gained personally from the relationships they formed. They talk about how their initial ideas about who had the most to gain from their involvement got overturned, and the roles of giver and receiver turned out to be much less static than they thought—more reciprocal, more mutual. We are in the midst of a collaborative study right now addressing this impact on peers across all five of our Tennessee campuses.

There are the hundreds of other undergraduate or graduate students on each of our campuses who will go on to become community leaders, civic leaders, congregational leaders, and corporate leaders across this country and around the world. And they will think differently about the communities they lead because of the lived and learned alongside our students in some way; they will now notice when important segments of their community is missing.

And there are employers across our campus and community (across yours as well) who are benefitting from the work ethic of our students, from the strengths they bring to their job, from their willingness to learn, and from the ways in which they breathe life into the culture of the workplace.

My point is that what we are working for in this movement is not just a better education for college students with intellectual and developmental

disabilities, but for a better education for all students on our campuses. We have to be prepared to tell the full story of this impact.

*What story can you tell?*

### 7. Launch More Programs

If this movement really is all we say it is—that it brings considerable benefits to students and to campuses alike—then my sense is that we have lots of work still to do to make sure it is an accessible option for many more young people across our country. How might we go about increasing access within our individual programs, as well as the collective opportunities available regionally and nationally?

There are about 9,000 students with an intellectual disability or autism in the state of Tennessee who are between the ages of 18-26. We are serving less than 200 of those students across our five programs this fall. Nationally, there about 1.1 million young adults with intellectual disability or autism between the ages of 18 and 26. And yet, collectively, only about 5,000 of these students are enrolled in some program across the country. College will not be the best pathway for every student—and so we need to create a range of meaningful options for life after high school. But it should be a pathway for many more students than it is at present.

Of course, our commitment to increasing access will inevitably lead us into new and sometimes challenging territory. For example, it will require us to work to spur new programs while we also continue to build our own and learn what it means to do this well. Just one of those tasks is enough to fill our plate. And I suspect we will have to collaborate in ways that might feel at first like we are creating more competition for our own programs.

I remember that first time I learned that a prospective student turned our offer of admission down because she had a better offer from another program. In fact, she had multiple offers. And I experienced these dueling emotions: aargh...and yeah!!! What was frustrating for us also served as a signpost for the incredible progress we are making in this field. What a statement it is that we are now competing to enroll students who not too long ago did not have the right to a free and appropriate public education. I hope we can all work together to get to a point where we have much more of this kind of frustration. *What will you do and with whom will you work to build more opportunities?*

### 8. Strengthen Pathways In

Thus far, most of what I have shared has been aimed toward higher education institutions. For those of you who work with students who are still in elementary and secondary school, I hope you already see the contributions you might make to increasing postsecondary enrollment. The work you are doing to educate and equip children and youth with disabilities for life after high school is such an essential piece of this puzzle.

Perhaps you already know that preparing your students to achieve their aspirations for adulthood is actually among the primary purposes of special education services. In fact, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act explains one of the goals of special education just a few pages in: "...to prepare [students] for further education, employment, and independent living...." Elsewhere, our work as special educators is anchored to a broader national commitment: "...equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities." In my view, both are just jargon-filled ways of saying that our primary charge is to help young people with disabilities to launch well to adulthood.



So what might it look like to do this well?

One of the most powerful forces in changing transition outcomes for students with disabilities turns out to be the expectations that educators, parents, and others hold. Why? Because expectations shape the experiences we offer. Helping students and families grasp a vision early on that college is a real possibility changes the trajectories of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, it changes what they are taught, it changes where they are taught, it changes with whom they are taught, and it changes the aim for their education. So expose students and families to these new possibilities early on in their schooling and perhaps connect them to others who have navigated this transition.

Likewise, remember that experiences can also shape expectations. Not every parent will see this as a possibility—in our state survey of more than 1000 parents of children with intellectual disability or autism, about 46% considered TPSID college programs as an important post-school outcome for their son or daughter. And so when you find ways to support students to have success in areas others might think it impossible or implausible—general education courses, integrated work experiences, and other inclusive community activities—it may help parents catch a first glimpse of what might be possible when their son or daughter is provided the right opportunities, supports, and encouragement.

Finally, make sure to equip families with the information and linkages they need to pursue this particular post-school pathway. In our work with parents, a recurring theme is their frustration with just how difficult it is to access resources and guidance on how to navigate this transition to adulthood, including the transition to college.

According to one recent national study, about one third (35%) of all high school students with an intellectual disability were reported to have a transition goal to attend some type of postsecondary educational institution (e.g., a community college, a university, a technical school). Those numbers should be even higher. The investments of secondary school teachers may just be what makes the difference. *What impact will you have?*

## 9. Build Bridges Out

To some extent, inclusive higher education programs emerged when parents and professionals who had worked so hard to create inclusive opportunities from kindergarten through twelfth grade started to ask, “What comes next?” While we have done a pretty good job of answering that question for high school students, we still have work to do for those students who are attending these new college programs. As you think about life after college graduation, what comes next?

For too long, the transition from high school to adulthood was the proverbial “bridge to nowhere.” We cannot let the same be true for life after college. And so as early cohorts have now graduated from so many of our programs, we are in a place where we have to think together about what comes next. About what it looks like to do

an exceptional job of transitioning students from college to adulthood.

This raises a host of questions: *What are the partnerships we should pursue that will enable that transition to be seamless and successful? What are the responsibilities and requirements of transition planning at the collegiate level? And what steps do we need to take to prepare and prime our communities to receive our graduates in workplaces, neighborhoods, community groups, congregations throughout our cities and states?*

### SOME RISKS WE RUN

What opportunities await us! However, I have watched enough movements over the years to see there can be a shadow side if we aren't focused and fixed in our goals. Only a few angles at which we can stay standing—and lots of angles at which we can fall down flat. So here are some risks I see for this movement. I share these not as inevitabilities, but more as areas in which we should be cautious.

We must be careful not to create parallel programs that are largely specialized and essentially separate (I would more strongly say segregated). Young people with disabilities consistently tell us they want to be in the center of their communities, not on the peripheries or at the margins. The very best educational opportunities already exist on our campuses. Our charge is to create access, not new programs. We must not create college experiences for students with intellectual disability that are functionally separate—sharing a campus in common, but intersecting in only superficial ways. This has only the veneer of inclusion and it does much more than shortchange students with disabilities. Our campuses also lose out when our lives do not weave together. Each year, more than 12,000 undergraduate and graduate students are enrolled in our campus alone. These stellar

students can't lead corporations or communities or congregations or civic groups well if they live and learn in communities that of which people with disabilities are not a part.

We ought not import special education into higher education. Although there is much we have learned through more than four decades of developing special education services, I see great danger in trying to replicate these practices at the college level. Be careful about uncritically adopting the assessment, planning, instructional, and support models that permeate our elementary and secondary schools. And instead remember that we have opportunities to innovate on our colleges campuses that provide us a blank slate. We are not starting in separate classrooms and trying to work our way in, we can start in a place of membership, belonging, and full participation.

We must lock in our focus so it always remains on persons over programs. I feel some reluctance when talking about launching new college “programs” for students with intellectual disability. Our goal really is to support students to access existing programs and experiences on our campuses. And that happens best when we think one person at a time. As enrollment grows larger on our campuses, we will have this tendency to group people with like labels together and to become more insulated and inward focused. We hire “our staff” to support “our students,” to teach “our courses,” and to host “our events.” And it leads colleges to replace “our” with “your.” But this inclination to think in terms of groups and programs can unintentionally place limits on our individualization. “Person-centered” is not just a word limited to describing a once-a-year planning meeting. It ought mark our whole posture in our campus movements.



## CONCLUSION

Let me conclude by returning briefly back to my awe at just how far we have come in such a short amount of time. In many ways, I have grown up professionally on the Vanderbilt University campus. I've watched the campus grow up as well. I arrived twenty years ago as an aspiring transition teacher when I entered the graduate special education program. There was no mention of inclusive college programs in my textbooks, and no reference to this possibility in any of my transition courses. We were still working so hard to get high school students into classes and clubs alongside their peers and into workplaces alongside other community members.

Fast forward to the present day...I now teach that same transition class I took myself so long ago. But I do so at a college that is now "all in" in this area. And even better, there are now students with intellectual disability who are enrolled in my transition course. And what a difference it makes

in what and how future transition teachers learn their craft.

Thank you for your investment in this incredible movement. Thank you for your deep commitment to supporting students with disabilities, their families, and our campus communities.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Erik Carter, Ph.D.**, is Cornelius Vanderbilt Chair and professor of Special Education at Vanderbilt University and a Vanderbilt Kennedy Center Investigator. His research and teaching focuses on strategies for supporting meaningful school inclusion and promoting valued roles in school, work, and community settings for children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. □

# ORIENTATION: STARTING THE SEMESTER OFF RIGHT

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JOHN CAYTON

## IMPORTANCE OF ORIENTATION

Orientation is common practice throughout higher education. It serves many purposes and benefits for incoming students—higher student retention (Glass & Garrett, 1995), greater sense of belonging (Hoffman et al., 2002), student achievement (Boudreau & Kromrey, 1994), and better understanding of college student expectations (Williams, 2007). While the Next Steps at Vanderbilt program staff collaborate with Vanderbilt University (VU) orientation staff to ensure successful inclusion with all incoming Vanderbilt students for Common VU Orientation and Visions Groups, there remains a need to create a complementary orientation structure for students enrolled in Next Steps.

## COMPONENTS OF NEXT STEPS ORIENTATION

New students in the Next Steps program participate in the university's orientation programming (Common VU) and are assigned to a Visions group. Visions groups are essentially a first-year experience (FYE) structure, with a blended focus on academics and introducing students to college resources. All students in Next Steps meet with their Lead Ambassadors (peer mentors) one-on-one and participate in various Next Steps specific orientation sessions.

**Lead Ambassadors:** Each Lead Ambassadors is paired with one student in Next Steps to serve as the primary peer support in the first month, meeting twice per week. Several of the student's Ambassadors are added to the student's schedule each week and serve as either daily planners, tutors, workout/lunch partners, or campus life Ambassadors. All of them report to the Lead Ambassadors. Spending one-on-one time together is essential so that the Lead and student have enough time to build a trusting relationship. One of the days each week will be either sharing lunch or a workout, while the other day will have a specific focus. In week 1, the Lead and the student get to know one another, and help each other create their personal profiles so others can get to know them. In week 2, the Lead reviews the student's Vanderbilt course syllabi with them and assists in creating an Independent Learning Agreement, a revised syllabus that the Vanderbilt course faculty must also approve of. Week 3 is dedicated to daily planning with the student—ensuring they develop their time and organizational skills. In week 4, they explore campus life opportunities—it is up to the student!



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**John Cayton, MEd**, is the Director of Student Supports and Campus Life for Next Steps at Vanderbilt. He oversees the 80+ peer mentors, called Ambassadors, and collaborates with the campus community to ensure mutually beneficial inclusive opportunities. John also directs the Next Steps Summer Institute, a weeklong residential experience for both incoming Next Steps students and prospective students considering inclusive higher education. Prior to joining Next Steps, John earned his Master's in Leadership in Higher Education, focusing on student development and various peer-led initiatives. He has also supervised direct-care staff who provided residential and community supports to adults in the disability community. □

## NEXT STEPS SPECIFIC SESSIONS

Next Steps facilitates orientation sessions specifically designed for all students in Next Steps. All sessions fall under one of the program strands: social, academics, career, and independence. Students determine with their advisor which orientation sessions they will attend. They must go to at least one session in all four strands through their senior year, which allows for student choice while also ensuring they receive meaningful information. Attendance requirements decline each semester unless the advisor determines the student needs to attend more sessions to aid in their college success. Junior and senior students in Next Steps can also fulfill these attendance requirements by serving as student leaders in the orientation sessions.

## FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

Next Steps will continue to explore pre-existing opportunities and resources offered to all of Vanderbilt's students. We will also maintain balance between student choice and ensuring students participate in the most helpful Next Steps orientation topics. We will decide on how to best disseminate this information to parents and potentially develop a more in-depth parent orientation while being mindful of student independence. Lastly, we will consider the most appropriate mode and timing of delivery (e.g., online vs. in-person, summer vs. fall) that suits the needs of our Next Steps students and family.

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# DEVELOPING AN ENGAGING AND SUSTAINABLE MENTORING PROGRAM

L. DANIELLE ROBERTS-DAHM

This article is based on the work of Project 10 STING RAY at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg (USFSP) regarding techniques and resources used to build a successful mentoring program. This is intended for individuals with inclusive higher education programs who are interested in starting a mentoring program or expanding their mentor presence. Mentor recruitment, training, responsibilities, and finances are discussed.

## RECRUITING MENTORS

Having a presence at featured student organization fairs and other campus events is an effective way to recruit mentors. Another strategy is to target certain student organizations based on students' interests. This is a great way to find mentors with interests similar to a specific student while also helping students join a student organization. Spreading the opportunity by word of mouth is another effective strategy. Current mentors, profes-

## PROJECT 10 STING RAY MENTORING FRAMEWORK

<b>HELP</b>	» THE STUDENT UNDERSTAND HIS/HER MOST EFFECTIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES
<b>ASSIST</b>	» THE STUDENT IN UNDERSTANDING AND EXPRESSING HIS/HER SUPPORT NEEDS.
<b>SUPPORT</b>	» THE STUDENT TO ADVOCATE FOR HIMSELF/HERSELF. » IDENTIFY NATURAL SUPPORTS.
<b>FADE</b>	» THE LEVEL, FREQUENCY, AND INTENSITY OF SUPPORT, MAKING STUDENT LESS DEPENDENT ON DIRECT ASSISTANCE.



sors, and college personnel will often recommend students for a mentoring position. The university human resources and/or student employment websites can also post open mentor positions.

### **MENTOR TRAINING**

Providing ongoing training for mentors is essential, as many will be new at supporting students with intellectual disabilities.

Sample outline of topics covered:

- » Introduction & overview of inclusive higher education, person-first language, and disability etiquette.
- » Roles & expectations.
- » Benefits & challenges.
- » Role-playing scenarios & problem-solving discussions.

### **STRATEGIES TO RETAIN MENTORS**

- » Provide ongoing training & support.
- » Provide positive reinforcement.
- » Offer creative incentives for positive mentorships.
- » Communicate regularly.
- » Facilitate mentor-to-mentor communication.

### **MENTORS' ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

It is imperative that mentors understand what their

roles are and maintain appropriate boundaries with the students. While some mentors may not complete all of their responsibilities, others may over-step their boundaries as a mentor. Some responsibilities include supporting students' development of self-advocacy and being punctual to meetings.

Project 10 STING RAY utilizes mentors in three specific roles:

#### **1. Social Capacity Mentors:**

- » Build quality, lasting relationships with the student.
- » Introduce them to friends.
- » Invite them to club meetings.
- » This is a voluntary position with a one to two hour weekly time commitment. Students often have more than one peer mentor.

#### **2. Academic Mentors:** Each student in our program audits a college level course and has a mentor in each class.

- » Review the course syllabus with the student.
- » Simplify course concepts.
- » Assist students to prepare for assignments and/or tests.
- » Academic mentors are paid up to 5hrs/week.

### 3. Community Mentors:

- » Assist with students' development of independent living skills through community lesson plans (e.g., opening a bank account, obtaining a driver's license).
- » Students choose two community sites to visit to practice these skills.
- » Attend and support student(s) at community site visits.
- » Community mentor is a paid position with a ten hour per week time commitment. One community mentor usually serves two students.

### FUNDING AND SUSTAINABILITY

Determine if your program has a budget to pay for mentors or if mentors will be volunteers. While some programs operate only using volunteers, paying mentors creates more accountability. Several students and mentors in STING RAY created a student organization on campus that focused on volunteerism, which allowed them to open a student organization bank account at the university. This has enabled the students and mentors to raise money for social events.

### EVIDENCE OF MENTOR EFFECTIVENESS

Students have experienced greater success in college because of mentorships and relationships established through their inclusive postsecondary experience. Recent research supports the use of college students as mentors for inclusive higher education programs.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**L. Danielle Roberts-Dahm, Ph.D.**, is the Co-Director for Project 10: Transition Education Network and the Director of the University of South Florida St. Petersburg (USFSP) partnership within the Florida Consortium on Inclusive Higher Education. She is the Past-President for the Florida Division on Career Development and Transition (FDCDT). Her experiences working with students in transition and inclusive higher education inspired her to continue her education in the field of Special Education and policy studies. □

**RESEARCHERS AT VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY** conducted a study to learn more about the experiences of peer mentors who support college students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The goals of the study were to investigate why peer mentors volunteer, what their experiences are like, and how involvement has had an impact.

The results revealed that peer mentors “became involved as a way of expressing their personal, humanitarian values and as a way to learn about, explore, and expand their worlds. As a secondary motivation, participants regarded their involvement as a way to gain valuable experience related to their future careers.”

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# PEER JOB COACHING: ESTABLISHING UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AS ON-THE-JOB SUPPORT

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JOANNA WAGNER, MEGHAN ANGLIM, AND  
MISTY VETTER PARSLEY

## **IMPORTANCE OF NATURAL SUPPORTS**

Students with disabilities sometimes need a model or extra support to be successful on the job. Natural supports provided by employers or coworkers are best, but may not always be available. It is well documented that students with disabilities benefit from peer mentors, but there is little research on using peers as one-on-one job coaches. This model, utilized at Lipscomb University's IDEAL program in Nashville, employs peer job coaches to support students with disabilities on the job so they receive individualized support to prepare them for meaningful employment after college.

## **USING UNDERGRADUATES AS PEER JOB COACHES**

Undergraduate students in relevant majors such as special education can be trained to be peer job coaches. The information these students are learning in their classes is an asset on how to work with students at the job site. Peers know what is more age-appropriate and can serve as a more natural

support in the workplace. Modeling appropriate workplace behavior is a big responsibility of the job coach. Data can be taken on a student's professionalism, task skills, social skills, and the job coach can provide immediate feedback to the student. Job coaches will be your eyes and ears on the job site, so they must be able to communicate with staff regularly. As the job coach becomes more familiar with the work environment, they can also provide feedback on any unmet business needs he or she sees within that particular work site.

## **SUPPORTS AND TRAINING STRATEGIES TO EMPLOY**

Training is critical as it reviews overall expectations, useful supports to help students in accessing information and/or adjusting to the environment, and strategies to use to foster students' independent skill development of soft and hard skills. Moreover, the common goal of student independence must be emphasized from the beginning of the training and used as rationale

across all training concepts, as during this time job coaches are made aware that they would ideally fade out of the workplace once a student can use skills independently or has adequate support from the naturally existing environment. Several types of visual supports (e.g., checklist, cue cards, schedules, social stories, self-monitoring sheets) are reviewed in how they can be beneficial in meeting a student's individual needs of understanding what to do, how to do it correctly, and/or when to do it. During this time, staff begin to empower job coaches to be thinking about their role in creating and implementing these visuals for student learning, making sure to establish an open line of communication for job coaches to be able to consult staff at any time on what works and does not work on site.

Job coaches are provided ideas to model, rehearse, and provide feedback to students before a difficult situation arises in which a skill must be used. Success with peer job coaches comes from choosing motivated, professional undergraduate students who understand the importance of building independence skills of students with disabilities.



## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Joanna Wagner** completed her Bachelor's degree in Public Relations and Sociology at Drake University in Des Moines, IA. Joanna has worked with Best Buddies Illinois, Camp PALS Chicago and GiGi's Playhouse. Her experience has ranged from program management to operations to supported employment for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. She served as Off-Campus Job Developer with Lipscomb's IDEAL program in Nashville, Tennessee.

**Meghan Anglim** obtained her 7-12 math teaching license and bachelor of science as a part of Lipscomb's graduating class of 2015. After serving as a peer mentor for the IDEAL Program and President of the Best Buddies' chapter, she enrolled to pursue a Master's in Special Education. She currently serves as Program Manager for On-Campus Job Development with Lipscomb's IDEAL program in Nashville, Tennessee.

**Misty Vetter Parsley, Ed.D.**, has dedicated her career to students with disabilities, previously serving as an autism consultant and special education coordinator in public schools. She also worked for 4 years in the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center's TRIAD program providing statewide consultation to schools and providing support to families and students with autism through social skills programs and home consultations. She has presented both locally and nationally on autism and postsecondary topics. Misty is an assistant professor and the Director of Special Education Programs at Lipscomb University where she teaches in the graduate and undergraduate special education programs. She started the IDEAL program, Igniting the Dream of Education and Access at Lipscomb, in January 2014. She currently serves as IDEAL's Faculty Advisor. □



## RECRUITMENT OF JOB COACHES

### CHOOSE FROM EXISTING PEER MENTORS

Qualities to look for:	Considerations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Timeliness</li> <li>» Organization</li> <li>» Patience</li> <li>» Reliability</li> <li>» Flexibility</li> <li>» Knowledge of professional etiquette</li> <li>» Discernment skills for involvement</li> <li>» Positive attitude towards learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» University Majors—Special/General Education, Social Work, and Psychology</li> <li>» General Skills—Background knowledge and experience level; Ability to set boundaries between peer mentor role and potential job coach role</li> <li>» Job Interview—Evidence of readiness level and skills</li> </ul>

# STUDENT PERSPECTIVE: LIVING AND LEARNING WITH AUTISM

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KENNETH KELTY



As a disability rights and social justice advocate there are two quotes that I live by and like to share when telling my story. The first quote, by Drew Barrymore, is “I don’t want to sit around and hope amazing things will happen. I want to make them happen and be in control of

my own destiny.” My other favorite quote is “I am different, not less,” by Dr. Temple Grandin. I use these two quotes in my speeches because I believe that people with disabilities should be valued by their abilities in their community, school, colleges, and in their jobs. When people with disabilities are isolated from their typically developing peers, they are missing out on opportunities for personal growth and self-determination. There needs to be more inclusive opportunities for all, and valuing people’s individual abilities rather than just labeling people.

To make the campus more inclusive for students with disabilities, I took part in a participatory social inclusion research project. Using my photos from hanging out with friends at campus activities, I was able to persuade the program staff at Western Carolina University to make the schedule system more flexible. Before I made the suggestion, the program was so structured that everything had to be planned two weeks in advance; nobody plans his or her social schedule that early, especially not college students.

Another example of advocacy to make programs more inclusive is when I became an official brother of the Delta Sigma Phi Fraternity. The local fraternity brothers challenged their national chapter bylaws in order for me to become an official fraternity member. To become a member there is usually a minimum GPA requirement. I didn’t have a GPA because I audited courses in my inclusive Post-Secondary Education Program. The brothers made it happen for me and I became an official brother before I graduated. My fraternity brothers are friends for life, and I am proud to be a part of a wonderful fraternity.



I currently work for The Arc of The Triangle where I have continued to keep friendships going with my college buddies and have gone to two different weddings. I was a student self-advocate at the Carolina Institute for Developmental Disabilities at UNC Chapel Hill where I was part of the LEND (Leadership Education in Neuro-Developmental Disabilities and Related Disorders), a graduate program for students in the allied healthcare professions. Always pushing my limits has taken me far in my life, and I am just getting started!

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Kenneth Kelty** is a resident of Raleigh NC and originally from South Florida. He is a graduate of the Western Carolina University Participants Program, class of 2014. While he was a student, he took classes in criminal justice and political science. He was also a LEND Trainee at the Carolina Institute for Developmental Disabilities. Currently he is working with The Arc of The Triangle and is a self-advocate, as well as a motivational public speaker and author on his experiences with autism and inclusion on a college campus. ☐

PLANNING FOR COLLEGE AND TRANSITION
» Do volunteer work and take early college courses or some type of higher education
» Experience a week on your college campus if invited to.
» Go to ThinkCollege.net if you want to look at Post-Secondary College education programs across the state.
» Know what you want to study.

# ENSURING HIGHER EDUCATION IS AFFORDABLE FOR ALL

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ELISE MCMILLAN, SUSANNA MILLER-RAINES, AND TAMMY DAY

Undoubtedly, college is the right choice for many students—with and without disabilities. However, if college is not affordable, it is not possible. Funding options for students pursuing inclusive higher education are growing at the federal, state, campus, and community levels. The following is an overview of some of those options in Tennessee and Georgia. Similar opportunities are available in other states in the Southeast and across the country, but it is always important to check with programs in your area to learn about differences by region, state, and community.

## FEDERAL TUITION ASSISTANCE

A growing number of programs across the country have received designation from the U.S. Department of Education as a Comprehensive Transition Program (CTP). Eligible students who attend federally approved CTP programs can apply for federal tuition assistance, including Pell Grants and the Federal Work-Study Program, by completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid or FAFSA. The Think College website (<https://thinkcollege.net/>) has comprehensive tools to assist with this application.

Additionally, the federal ABLE Act now makes possible investment accounts for individuals with disabilities. The federal Act and programs enacted in many states across the country allow individuals with disabilities to save and invest money without losing eligibility for public benefit programs. The accounts are similar to 529 college savings accounts. Check in your state for ABLE accounts. However, even if your state has not enacted ABLE legislation, you are able to create an account with programs in other states.

## STATE TUITION ASSISTANCE

Several state sources of funding are available in many states. In Tennessee and Georgia, the Department of Rehabilitation Services (Vocational Rehabilitation) provides financial support for students attending inclusive higher education programs. The students must be eligible for vocational rehabilitation (VR) services and have inclusive higher education as one of their goals on their Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE). Contact your local VR agency to find out the steps to receive support for college education.



Some states are also providing tuition funding in addition to VR funds. In Tennessee, eligible students receive the Tennessee STEP UP Scholarship, which provides assistance to students with intellectual disabilities enrolling in higher education. In Georgia, the state legislature has designated funds to be distributed by state agencies.

## CAMPUS AND COMMUNITY TUITION ASSISTANCE

Vanderbilt University faculty and staff may be eligible for the Dependent Tuition Assistance benefit. This benefit may also be applied to a dependent's tuition at other CTP programs throughout the country. A number of state colleges and universities provide faculty and staff with significant discounts on tuition for beneficiaries. It's important to check to see what may be available.

Finally, there are an increasing number of community scholarships available for students. Examples of scholarships in Tennessee and Georgia include local chapters of The Arc, local chapters of the Down syndrome associations, Autism Speaks, the Community Foundation of Middle Tennessee and the Rich Foundation of Georgia.

In other cases, individuals and families have reached out to their own network of friends, faith communities, and local businesses for financial support. Examples include the Nashville Sounds Baseball Club, various church groups, Hispanic immigrant groups, Forsyth Cumming Optimist Club and the University of Georgia Student Organization Disability Advocates in Action.

Acceptance to an inclusive higher education program is only the beginning. For students who can benefit from financial assistance there is a growing number of options. Be sure to check in your state, campus, and community for financial aid options specific to your location.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Elise McMillan, JD**, is Co-Director of the Vanderbilt Kennedy University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities and is a Senior Associate in the VUMC Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Science. She was a founding member of the Tennessee Alliance for Inclusive Higher Education and is a faculty member with Next Steps at Vanderbilt.

**Susanna Miller-Raines, MSW** is the Statewide Coordinator for the Georgia Inclusive Postsecondary Education Consortium and Community Support Specialist at the Center for Leadership in Disability at Georgia State University. Miller-Raines serves as a chair of the Southeastern Postsecondary Education Alliance.

**Tammy Day** is the program director for Next Steps at Vanderbilt in Nashville, Tennessee. Prior to joining Vanderbilt, she worked for Rutherford County Schools as a special education teacher and then the high school liaison and transition specialist, where she developed many new initiatives. Day has worked to expand inclusive higher education opportunities across Tennessee and currently serves as the Chairperson of the Tennessee Alliance for Inclusive Higher Education. □

# UNIFYING INCLUSIVE HIGHER EDUCATION AND POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION PROGRAMS: MAKING STRONG CONNECTIONS

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LAUREN BETHUNE-DIX AND JOHN CAYTON

Departments in higher education sometimes function in silos, so how can postsecondary education transition programs merge with the greater university? Being intentional about aligning with pre-existing offices, mission statements, or other initiatives can go a long way in making your program a successful endeavor. Below are some considerations and suggestions that will be helpful as programs are getting started.

## COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS: GETTING THE CONVERSATION STARTED!

A community conversation is a powerful method of identifying how diverse members of a community might work together to solve an important challenge. They can be an excellent way to start the conversation about inclusive higher education programs on university campuses.

How to host a community conversation:

1. Form a diverse planning team.
2. Recruit people to attend the conversation.
3. Keep record of who attends for follow-up and to see whose voices are represented.

4. Provide food and let everyone get settled in.
5. Set the stage - What is at stake?
6. Provide an outline.
  - » Each table should be exploring the same foundational questions.
  - » Each table should have a facilitator and note taker.
7. Each table shares their best ideas.
8. Follow up on ideas created.

## ALIGN MISSION STATEMENTS

When creating your program's mission statement, first look to the university mission statement to align as much as possible and to use the same language. Here is a portion of the Next Steps at Vanderbilt mission statement as an example. The bolded words were pulled from Vanderbilt's mission statement.

"...committed to providing students with intellectual disabilities inclusive, transformational postsecondary education in academics, social and career development, and independent living, while honoring **equality, compassion, and excellence in all endeavors.**"

## TAKEAWAY TIPS TO UNIFY YOUR POSTSECONDARY PROGRAM WITH YOUR INSTITUTION

- » Get the conversation started early; host a community conversation.
- » Align your program's mission statement with that of the university's.
- » Ask yourself "What do we bring to the university? How can we be a benefit?"
- » Get familiar with your institution's diversity initiative statement and join in those initiatives.
- » Share your ultimate vision in all planning meetings.
- » Form relationships with faculty early and share the reciprocal benefits of the process.
- » Partner with various departmental programs to strengthen academic curricula.
- » Hold high expectations for all involved.
- » Integrate with pre-existing student life opportunities.
- » Be patient and persistent with the process.

This common language also serves as a reminder that the program contributes to the university by being successful and by making the university more inclusive. A university that is not inclusive cannot be excellent in all endeavors!

### THE CALL FOR DIVERSITY INITIATIVES

Diversity initiatives across universities and colleges continue to remain a topic of conversation as more institutions of higher education are charged with adopting a welcoming environment for all individuals with learning differences and needs. To begin the discussion of truly assimilating into a university's campus, it is critical to examine your university's diversity initiatives and what they may or may not say regarding the disability community. If there is not much about the

disability community, that can be an opportunity to complement the initiative.

### INTEGRATE WITH PRE-EXISTING SUPPORTS

Next Steps at Vanderbilt's peer support structure (called Ambassadors) framework came after several conversations with Vanderbilt senior administration. It became apparent through these discussions that it was critical to become an official student organization and to gain the support that all student organizations benefit from. Providing peer support simultaneously ensured that students enrolled in the Next Steps program would be embraced by Vanderbilt's student body and campus culture.

## FORM RELATIONSHIPS WITH FACULTY EARLY

It is critical to start conversations with faculty months before the following semester's courses to gain buy-in. Faculty that have not yet had a student in his or her class will likely have questions about expectations. Be sure to highlight the benefits for everyone involved. For example, by doing group work with a student from your program, classmates will gain greater comprehension of the material. Faculty will get to further develop their teaching skills, such as implementing Universal Design. There is also a "hidden curriculum" that program students will experience, developing soft skills (e.g., working in a group, study skills, time management) that they will need for an independent adult life.

In addition, collaborate with your university's Registrar's Office to construct a course selection process with your team and share with relevant allies. The more you connect and share in the process, the more this opportunity will spread to other faculty members and academic departments, leading to more academic inclusion.

## HOLD HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR ALL

Students enrolled in Next Steps at Vanderbilt are viewed as true Vanderbilt Commodores. The purpose of the program is to provide the same opportunities to transition to adulthood as any other college student. By unifying inclusive higher education and postsecondary education's viewpoints, it makes for a more seamless partnership where inclusivity is at the forefront of conversations.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Lauren Bethune-Dix, Ph.D.**, oversees the program

of study and all academics support initiatives at Next Steps at Vanderbilt. She works closely with a growing number of faculty and academic support services to expand academic course participation and progress. She earned her Doctorate of Philosophy in special education from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte in 2015. During her doctoral studies, she worked with the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT) as a graduate researcher focusing on synthesizing research on evidence-based practices in academic skills, transition policy, Common Core State Standards, and 21st century skills. Prior to doctoral pursuits, she served as a coordinator for the Arc Jacksonville's Academy- On Campus Transition program, an 18-22 year old transition program dedicated to providing an authentic college experience for students with intellectual and developmental disability.

**John Cayton, MEd**, serves as the Director of Student Supports and Campus Life for Next Steps at Vanderbilt. He oversees the 80+ peer mentors, called Ambassadors, and collaborates with the campus community to ensure mutually beneficial inclusive opportunities. John also directs the Next Steps Summer Institute, a weeklong residential experience for both incoming Next Steps students and prospective students considering inclusive higher education. Prior to joining Next Steps, John earned his Master's in Leadership in Higher Education, focusing on student development and various peer-led initiatives. He has also supervised direct-care staff who provided residential and community supports to adults in the disability community. □

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# STUDENT PERSPECTIVE: EVERY VOICE COUNTS

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JAMAL UNDERWOOD AND LAUREN MCCABE

Building and maintaining relationships with legislators is important. If you are passionate about an issue you want to see changed, be the voice and share your story with legislators and policymakers. Personal testimonies on issues like funding for college, housing, or employment are very powerful. Legislators want to hear about what is important to you, like your dreams and plans. They want to help, but they can only do so when they are informed.

## HERE ARE OUR TIPS FOR CONTACTING AND EDUCATING YOUR LEGISLATORS.

First, decide on the best way to contact your legislator

- » Decide if contacting by email, phone, or in-person is most appropriate

If you decide that email is the best form of correspondence, do the following:

- » Make sure the email is written formally and in your own words
- » Show an understanding of the issue
- » Stay on topic and be brief
- » Send a follow-up email to thank the legislator for taking the time to read the email

If you decide a phone call is most appropriate, do the following:

- » Make a plan and know what message you want to convey
- » Be patient
- » Make sure to state your name and mention you are one of the legislator's constituents
- » Stay on topic
- » Send a follow-up email to thank the legislator for taking the phone call

If you decide a face-to-face meeting is best, do the following:

- » Keep in mind, face-to-face meetings are more meaningful
- » First, schedule a time to meet the legislator by contacting your legislator by email or phone correspondence
- » Practice and/or role-play how you are going to state the issue; remember, personal testimonies make the difference!
- » Keep the speech short and leave time for questions
- » Make sure you leave a brochure and/or business card with the legislator; make your mark!



- » Lastly, always follow-up with a phone call and/or email to thank the legislator for his/her time

Now that you have learned how to contact your legislators go out and share your story! Make an impact on your community, state, and country by causing actionable change. Every voice counts!

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Jamal Underwood** graduated from Next Steps at Vanderbilt in 2017. He is a frequently requested speaker and advocate. In 2016, he travelled to the State of the Art Conference in Washington, D.C. to co-present on the topic of the Next Steps peer mentor student organization. His employment experience has included internships at the Vanderbilt Divinity School Library, the Vanderbilt Hill Center IT Department, the Tennessee District Attorney's Office, and the Davidson County Clerk's Office. He currently has a permanent position at the Davidson County Clerk's Office.

### WRITE YOUR OWN PITCH

- » Know Your Audience: Who are you speaking to?
- » Make it Interesting: Why should they care?
- » Know the Problem: What is wrong?
- » Know the Solution: How can it be fixed?
- » Suggest an Action: How can your listener help?

**Lauren McCabe** is a senior at Vanderbilt University majoring in Special Education. Lauren's passion for special education and transition services began when she became a peer mentor with Next Steps at Vanderbilt during her freshmen year and has since also served on the Executive Board. She has held internships at both Advocates for Children of New York in New York City, as well as the Special Education Advocacy Center in Nashville. Besides Lauren's community work, she enjoys her campus involvement in the Ingram Scholarship Program, Best Buddies, and serves as Vanderbilt's Peabody College student government Vice President. □

# THE IMPORTANCE OF GUIDANCE FROM UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATORS

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TAMMY DAY, SANDY STAHL, DAWN TURTON, G.L. BLACK,  
AND SHARON SHIELDS

There are lessons to be learned from top administrators of universities that have inclusive higher education programs on their campuses. At Next Steps at Vanderbilt, we are fortunate to have university administrators on our steering committee. The administrators have a 360-degree view that only they can share, perspectives that are invaluable to involve in this field of study.

In the conversation that follows, I speak with now retired Vanderbilt University administrators Sandy Stahl (Assistant Provost for Learning and Residential Affairs) and Dawn Turton (Senior Assistant Provost for Faculty & Strategic Affairs) about their involvement on the Next Steps at Vanderbilt Steering Committee.

**Tammy Day:** Thank you in advance for sharing your time and insight. Please tell us why you joined the Next Steps at Vanderbilt Steering Committee, and why do you stay with it year after year?

**Sandy Stahl:** I joined the steering committee in order to provide information on student life and

student activities to the Next Steps program staff. This would help assure integration of the students into campus life.

**Dawn Turton:** I have a daughter who has autism, and I became interested in the program because of her. I stay involved as I have a personal and professional interest. The Committee is focused on setting meaningful goals and it is easy to be part of the team. I'm passionate about inclusion in higher education because of my daughter, but I am a very pragmatic administrator and see this as an important function of my role.

**Day:** How do you see the steering committee's guidance benefitting both Next Steps and Vanderbilt?

**Stahl:** At the inception of this program, the students needed advocates who could communicate with campus administrators and faculty members, in order to consider adaptations of existing policies, programs, and activities that would involve Next Steps students. These students

could not be thrown into either the classroom or campus activities without support systems and adaptations that provided them with opportunities to succeed.

**Turton:** I think we all bring an area of expertise and a range of experiences to the table. Everyone offers their opinion and our meetings are truly collaborative brainstorming sessions.

**Day:** How would you advise other program staff to approach administrators about serving in an advisory capacity that holds regularly scheduled meetings?

**Stahl:** A strong steering committee with representatives from across campus is necessary support for the director of the program and its students. There are many challenges and issues to address when integrating students with special needs into a traditional 4-year residential campus environment.

**Turton:** I oversee accreditation and federal policy compliance as part of my responsibilities at Vanderbilt University. This expertise was helpful as we worked on the CTP [Certified Transition Program] application and gainful employment regulations. Overseeing accreditation and compliance means that I am familiar with most areas on campus from general counsel to HR to financial aid, etc. I think this helps me bring a big picture view to some of the issues.

**Stahl:** Meetings should be meaningful and people need to feel that they are contributing. All administrators attend too many meetings. Many of them are unnecessary. Make your meetings count and use the expertise in the room.

**Turton:** Stay passionate, but not emotional. You have to bring rigor to proposals and requests and make your case for resources. Supporting



programs such as Next Steps may be the right thing to do, but that is true of many programs on campus. You need to demonstrate the value added to your institution and connect yourself to your institution's strategic plan. To do this it is important to get outside your bubble. Find out what is going on across your campus and what the priorities are. Figure out ways to connect yourself to those priorities.

**Day:** Tell us an example of a perceived challenge or barrier and how it was, or is, being handled better because of the steering committee's guidance.

**Turton:** This example is more focused on the importance of involving administrators beyond the steering committee. Vanderbilt has a tuition benefit policy that covers tuition for dependents earning an undergraduate degree. This tuition benefit did not apply to the Next Steps program. Over the course of 2 years, we worked with the faculty senate, division of administration, finance and HR to extend the benefit. This was successful as the proposal was based on financial projections, an analysis of government regulations, and input from legal counsel on tax issues. Having the right people at the table at the right time was key in this effort.

## THREE KEY PIECES OF ADVICE FROM VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATORS

### G.L. Black, Associate Dean of Community Standards & Student Support

- » Provide opportunities for key administrators to interact with the program in a meaningful but convenient way as the experiences and relationships are more effective in building support than theoretical/abstract discussions
- » When pitching ideas and submitting proposals to relevant administrators, ensure that you have done due diligence so that you can effectively anticipate issues/questions and respond with answers/solutions that demonstrate an understanding of the campus and the administrator's role and responsibilities
- » Garner a network of faculty and student/student organization support to add other campus perspectives and advocacy to the conversation, which can ultimately help push initiatives through and effect change.

### Sharon Shields, Associate Dean for Professional Education and Professor of the Practice, Dept. of Human & Organizational Development

- » Make sure you have identified the key allies and key stakeholders in the administration that help you to both frame your mission and vision and to support you in the execution of that mission and programming.
- » Utilize the appropriate administrators to help you understand and form policy that is in line with the university but also serves your program needs.
- » Educate and update administrators on the achievements, challenges, and program progression/future visioning so that they may be advocates and promoters of your program.

**Day:** What advice do you have for the parameters of these meetings?

**Stahl:** Meetings scheduled every 4 weeks for 1 to 1.5 hours during the school year are not onerous. Rather, they are essential; for despite the best planning, unanticipated issues always arise when dealing with students and their parents.

**Turton:** The steering committee should give advice and help connect you to people and resources that are helpful. Make your meetings about that. Also, make your meetings confidential. Administrators may know information before it becomes public and can help guide your way around politically charged situations. Respect their confidence and keep things off the record if you are asked to do so.



**Day:** Thank you so much for sharing your insights with us today.

I would like to conclude this article with three key pieces of advice from a program perspective on how to work with administrators on a committee. First, listen, listen, and listen deeply and carefully to the historical, philosophical, cultural, procedural, and political advice and guidance offered. The administrators' collective knowledge will keep your program's visions moving forward and keep you out of hot water.

Second, after you listen deeply, honor their suggestions by working to take their advice. When they know that you are going to respect their suggestions, ideas, and time, they will want to continue working as your mentors, administrators, and champions.

Third, make sure to keep these key stakeholders up to date with the good, the bad, and the ugly.

They do not want to be taken by surprise, or asked about something in connection with your program if they are unaware.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Tammy Day** is the program director for Next Steps at Vanderbilt in Nashville, Tennessee. Prior to joining Vanderbilt, she worked for Rutherford County Schools as a special education teacher and then the high school liaison and transition specialist, where she developed many new initiatives. Day has worked to expand inclusive higher education opportunities across Tennessee and currently serves as the Chairperson of the Tennessee Alliance for Inclusive Higher Education. □

# STUDENT PERSPECTIVE: LEARNING FOR UNIVERSAL SUCCESS

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EDDY MALDONADO

My name is Eddy Maldonado and I am a second year student in the Project Panther PLUS program at Florida International University (FIU). Throughout the week, I meet with my faculty advisor, a great mentor that helps me understand how to be a successful student in college. I have sessions with the Program Coordinator a few times a week to talk about my schedule and see how I'm doing in my classes. Twice a week, I also meet with my Student Support Specialist to talk about problems that I have in my classes and she helps me with my coursework.

As a college student, I get to participate in campus life activities such as Homecoming and Panther Camp. Panther Camp is a three-day trip in Lake Placid, Florida where I got to meet with new people and work on my social skills, learn details about FIU, and participate in group activities. At Panther Camp, I met some of my best friends. I was also able to reunite with my best friend at the Panther Camp Formal.

In the past two years at FIU, I have participated in many social events, like Summerfest. I have gone to football, basketball, and softball games. I have

also presented at professional conferences, like the Hartwick Symposium and VISIONS Conference. The program also gave me an opportunity to complete an internship on campus at the FIU Student Health Center. Every day, I would check in with my supervisor to see what needed to get done. Some duties I was responsible for included restocking the office, refilling the aromatherapy supplies, tabling which helped me work on my social skills and recruit FIU students to participate in events.

I am grateful that I got accepted as a Panther PLUS student at FIU. I have developed skills on how to be independent and get a job.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Eddy Maldonado** is a student in the Panther PLUS program at Florida International University where he has a focus on Health & Wellness. He has participated in Special Olympics with FIU and has presented on behalf of Project Panther PLUS to prospective students. Upon graduation, he wants to secure a job in a gym as a receptionist and live independently. □

# PARENT PERSPECTIVE: FROM AN IQ OF 63 TO A GPA OF 3.1: NAVIGATING TRANSITION TO HIGHER EDUCATION

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DENA GASSNER

When considering transition goals, the most important goal is for the student to achieve their own unique, personal best. This was my son Patrick's target and it continues to be the obligation for us, as his family, to set a long trajectory of opportunity. If we had listened to the diagnosticians, Patrick would have been tragically limited. Call it intuition; call it naiveté, but we pressed for inclusion, support, and opportunity inside and outside of the classroom.

Patrick was diagnosed with autism and intellectual disability. Because of the challenges associated with assessments (strange settings, limited time to build rapport, and often young and inexperienced evaluators) his IQ scores were consistently at the borderline range. At home, and in school, glimmers of capacity kept revealing themselves in accidental ways. Finally, in the 7th grade a highly-experienced evaluator reassessed him. He took the time to build rapport around common interests and his IQ was finally assessed over midrange in the 90's.

He not only graduated high school, but worked as the "hydration consultant" for the ice hockey team, learning socialization skills, and graduated with a Tennessee Honors Diploma. Our next focus would be looking at university.

Due to the competitive demand at Marshall University, we had never considered it an option. With an adapted interview, he was able to demonstrate his ability and he was accepted. Through help from Vocational Rehabilitation, he receives tuition, the college program, his Irlen lenses for visual distortion, tutoring costs, a laptop, Kurzweil reading software, books and fees.

The university is able to support his success with accommodations from the campus Disability Services (notetaking and notification of disability to his professors) and supports from the Marshall College Autism Program (organizational support, communication support, navigation training, and attention to his ongoing status in courses). He is



also provided with an essential one-to-one support person, who works with him for 8 hours a week.

Patrick's college experience has also influenced his social life. For the first two years, he lived in the dorms and took weekend trips home. Later, he moved off campus into his own apartment. He uses a one meal a day meal plan through the campus to ensure he's not isolated. He will graduate with a Bachelor's Degree (possibly again, with honors). He enjoys a self-initiated, long-term friendship with one of the football coaches who survived the Marshall University plane crash in 1970. He has also established friendships with an older group of tailgating students. "The guys" join him for lunch regularly and love him unconditionally.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Dena Gassner** is a PhD Candidate in Social Welfare at Adelphi University and has a MSW from the University of Kentucky. She is on the

Board of Directors for The Arc US and provides articles to many publications nationwide. She has contributed chapters to *Scholars With Autism: Achieving Dreams* and *College for Students with Disabilities*. She is an award winning advocate for autism related issues, has presented at multiple national conferences, and has expanded her outreach internationally to include the United Nations in Geneva, University of Birmingham (UK) and the team of researchers at Cambridge working with Dr. Simon Baron-Cohen. □

# RESOURCES

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## **THINK COLLEGE, [thinkcollege.net](http://thinkcollege.net)**

Think College is a national organization dedicated to developing, expanding, and improving inclusive higher education options for people with intellectual disability. A searchable database of programs across the country makes the college search convenient for students and families. Think College supports evidence-based and student-centered research and practice by generating and sharing knowledge, guiding institutional change, informing public policy, and engaging with students, professionals and families.

## **SOUTHEASTERN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION ALLIANCE (SEPSEA) [sepsea.org](http://sepsea.org)**

SEPSEA promotes resources, collaboration, education, and access to quality inclusive postsecondary education opportunities in Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina & beyond! The website maintains a list of inclusive higher education programs in the Southeast.

## **TENNESSEE INCLUSIVE HIGHER EDUCATION ALLIANCE, [tnihealliance.org](http://tnihealliance.org)**

The mission of the Tennessee Inclusive Higher Education Alliance is to increase the postsecondary educational opportunities for students on two and four-year college campuses and Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology. It is comprised of representatives from state and local agencies, self-advocates and family members, representatives from colleges and universities in Tennessee, and business owners. The Alliance receives administrative support from the Vanderbilt Kennedy University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities.