

United States Congress, Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions: Introductory remarks

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Employment rates for all individuals with disabilities can range from 34% to 39% in comparison to the employment rate of 76% to 79% for individuals without disabilities (Erickson, Lee, & von Schrader, 2010, 2011, 2012; Siperstein, Parker, & Drascher, 2013). For individuals with intellectual disabilities, the rate of employment has declined over the past five years. In 2008, the rate of employment was reported at 28% (Erickson et al., 2010; Siperstein et al., 2013), while recent numbers show it is anywhere from 18% to 23% (Erickson et al., 2012, Siperstein et al., 2013). The downward employment trend in this population will not improve until new ways are found to meaningfully integrate these individuals into the labor force.

We know that higher education can lead to a variety of personal and financial benefits for all individuals seeking to learn new knowledge and skills. Advanced learning can lead to improved outcomes for all individuals; but the impact of higher education on individuals with disabilities is particularly evident. Individuals with intellectual disabilities who participate in any postsecondary education experience (not necessarily earning a degree or certificate) are employed at double the rate of those with just a high school diploma. Based on national data gathered by the Rehabilitation Services Administration, young adults with intellectual disabili-

ties who participated in postsecondary education were 26% more likely to exit their vocational rehabilitation program with employment and earned a 73% higher weekly income (Migliore & Butterworth, 2008).

In 2008, Congress created a new model demonstration program, the Transition and Postsecondary Education Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability (TPSIDs) and an accompanying National Coordinating Center. These programs began in 2010 and were awarded to institutes of higher education that sought to demonstrate and validate this emerging pathway to increased integrated competitive employment and lifelong learning. Prior to 2008, there was no guidance provided to the field of higher education and disability on programs for individuals with intellectual disabilities. The data collected from the 27 Transition and Postsecondary Education Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability (TPSID) by the National Coordinating Center provide the first national picture of how students with intellectual disabilities can attend college and derive the same benefits sought and achieved by other college students. Since its inception in 2010, the percentage of paid jobs held by TPSID participants while in college increased steadily from 30% to 36%, with the majority of these individuals earning minimum wage or higher (Grigal, Hart, Smith, Domin, & Sulewski, 2013). Close to half of these students with paid jobs had never worked prior to attending their TPSID program. When compared to the previously stated low employment rates, students with intellectual

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disabilities who attend college far exceed these rates, clearly demonstrating that postsecondary education is a viable pathway to employment (Grigal et al., 2013).

We know that all students with disabilities can benefit from participating in college with the right supports and accommodations, and students with intellectual disabilities are no different. We are at a critical juncture for the continuation of the Transition and Postsecondary Education Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability. These programs are about increasing the employment and the long-term earnings of students with intellectual disabilities. In the past three years, data from the 27 programs are showing increased access to paid employment, internships, and college coursework that can lead to better employment opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Continued funding is necessary to expand and sustain access to inclusive higher education in two and four year colleges, universities and technical schools. It is important that research is conducted to discern both the long term fiscal impact on higher education institutions, as well as the potential reduction in federal assistance program dependency as a result of these opportunities.

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