



## **EPISODE 45: THINK COLLEGE: INCLUSIVE HIGHER EDUCATION FOR PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY**

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**Presenter:** Meg Grigal, Ph.D., Co-Director, Think College Senior Research Fellow, Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston

**Host:** Barry Whaley - Project Director, Southeast ADA Center

**VOICE-OVER ANNOUNCER:** Blog Talk Radio. (Music) Welcome to WADA ADA Live! Talk radio. Brought to you by the Southeast ADA Center, your leader for information, training and guidance on the Americans with Disabilities Act. And here's your host.

**BARRY WHALEY:** Good afternoon and welcome to WADA ADA Live!

On behalf of the Southeast ADA Center, the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University and the ADA National Network, I want to welcome you to the 45th episode of ADALive!

My name is Barry Whaley, I'm the project director for the Southeast ADA Center and our topic for today's show is Think College, inclusive higher education for people with intellectual disability.

As a reminder, ADALive! listening audience, you can submit your questions about inclusive higher education at any time at [ADALive.org](http://ADALive.org).

Now it's my pleasure to introduce today's speaker, my friend and colleague, Dr. Meg Grigal. Meg is a co-director of Think College and senior research fellow at Institute for community inclusion at University of Massachusetts Boston. She's a national expert on inclusive higher education and with people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Meg spent the past 15 years of trying to advance the field of inclusive higher education, working with colleges, schools, families and students to develop and expand and include higher education options for people with intellectual disability.

At Think College, she serves as the principal investigator on a variety of research grants and she's coauthored, along with Deb Hart, the ground-breaking book *Think College: Post-Secondary Options For Students With Intellectual Disabilities*, as well as many other book chapters, journal articles, and research to practice briefs. She's also produced a short documentary on inclusive higher education.

So, Meg, welcome to our show!

**MEG GRIGAL:** Hi, Barry, thanks for having me.

**BARRY WHALEY:** It's great for you to be here. Today we're talking about students with intellectual and developmental disabilities and Meg I would like you to explain what is meant by inclusive higher education.

**MEG GRIGAL:** Sure, Barry. So, inclusive higher education is a relatively new field and has developed in the past probably 15 18 years, and what it is providing access to college experiences for students with intellectual disability.

These programs really started as students began to age out of high school and they looked at their peers to see what they were doing, and many, if not most of them, were having some kind of experience in college.

And people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families wanted to forge a path towards college as well.

That really became more formalized than the Higher Education Act that was authorized in 2008. The Higher Education Opportunities Act as it was called and the reauthorization provided new guidelines and new access points to higher education for people with intellectual disability. Exceeded models and various projects, creating new programs, it created a coordinating center which the college has served in the past seven years to collect data from the program and to provide assistance to those programs.

And another exciting feature of the Higher Ed Act is that it created a new access point to our federal student aid for students with intellectual disability, which I think we can talk about a little bit later.

So, these three things really changed significantly.

The amount of programs that were available to people with intellectual disabilities and it began to change the conversation about how people with intellectual and developmental disabilities should plan to go to college.

**BARRY WHALEY:** Meg, perhaps you could explain, what are some of the benefits that students receive being involved in an inclusive higher education program?

**MEG GRIGAL:** Well, when you think about college and what it offers to all people in terms of growing up and exploring the potential future you'd like to have, those same benefits are seen by people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, so college offers a variety of academic and social growth experiences, just like it does for people with other disabilities or without disabilities.

**BARRY WHALEY:** In addition to the benefit to students, I would imagine that there are benefits to those institutions of higher education as well

**MEG GRIGAL:** Yeah, it's really a dynamic topic and most colleges are looking out for people in their community and with people with diverse populations and when colleges are serving students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, they're really learning how to be responsive to a wider array of diverse learners, both in terms of their access to course work and helping students access credentials that will help them either go on to further higher education or get a good job and make a decent living.

So, we've seen benefits to the colleges both in terms of being able to use universal design principles but also in how the faculty think about and respond to the legitimacy of a student who may look a little different than some of the other students they've taught in the past, both in terms of the goals they have for education and how they're going to use that education in the future.

**BARRY WHALEY:** Just kind of as a follow up, Meg, you mentioned universal design principles and sometimes it's hard to understand, especially from an ADA or from an ADA background how that applies in the educational environment.

Could you talk a little bit about universal design?

**MEG GRIGAL:** Yeah. In the higher education community, using universal design becomes really impactful, not just for people with disability or intellectual disability, but it can really help all college students access some of the material.

If you think about the typical format of maybe your traditional college class, you go into a room and a professor is standing at the front of the room and they have a chalkboard where they're jotting notes all over the place and students are furiously trying to scribble those notes into their notebook and, you know, this is just one example of one technique.

But with something as simple as making the content accessible by providing a copy of the notes beforehand to all the students in the classroom, not simply to a student whose requested it, but the format is those notes are available on a course website and those notes are also created in an accessible pdf format so a student for whom

reading is a challenge, the computer could then read those notes to the student to help them study.

It supports all different types of learning modes, whether an auditory learner or a visual learner, it provides access to the same material and instead of it being in somewhat of a disorganized way, all the students have access to the same content and in a way is accessible to their learning style.

**BARRY WHALEY:** So, that's good to know. So there's benefit to all students, not only the students with intellectual disability in the classroom.

I'm wondering, inclusive higher education is obviously still in its infancy, it's a new concept and just developing.

I'm sure that there must be some barriers that your students have encountered that perhaps have prevented them from going to college.

Can you talk a little about that?

**MEG GRIGAL:** Sure. Yeah, you're right in saying that the field is in its infancy. And I'm very hopeful, because I've seen a great deal of change, even in the past 10 15 years, and in particular since the Higher Education Opportunities Act was passed in 2008, we've seen a tremendous growth in not only interest for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to go to college, but we've also seen a growth in the number of colleges and universities who are beginning to explore creating access claims.

But you're also right that [chuckles] there's still a bit of an uphill climb when it comes to people's understanding of what inclusive higher education options are, what the goals are, and how students can access them and use those experiences in their future.

I think the greatest barrier is expectation. And the default expectation for people with intellectual disabilities at this point in our country is not that they will have access to higher education once they leave high school, but a typical pattern right now is students go through a high school program, if they stay between the ages of 18 21, possibly they might have access to community based transition services in those final two or three years in their experience.

But often those experiences have much of what they've had in the first four years of high school and then transitioning into possibly a sheltered work experience, possibly a supported employment experience.

But it's not optimal. And it absolutely isn't providing students with their best chance of a better future.

So, I think the expectation piece both in terms of working with families and helping them realize that these options are beginning to be put on the table, but also the professionals who help guide parents' expectations, it's really important for them to get this message early and often that all of the best options are on the table. Which one is the best option for their child? That's to be determined.

But having a child and going to college should be on the table and should be the goal for every student, regardless of their disability.

And the order [chuckles] that those things happen is part of the art of doing good transition planning.

**BARRY WHALEY:** I would think also, just in terms of the development of the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act and those pre ETS mandates that voc rehab have include counseling in inclusive higher education, that's just another way of raising those expectations and getting that information out; wouldn't you say?

**MEG GRIGAL:** Yeah. I'm very excited about the changes from WIOA and the pre-employment transition service focus, I think in particular related to inclusive higher education, those connections can be really impactful for transition aged youth who are being served as part of a dual or concurrent enrollment program, and those types of programs are typically run in partnership between an institution of higher education, so a two or four year college that's working with a local education agency, and they collaborate to create a course of study for a student who is still being served as a special education student, to ask those transition services, academic and employment experiences, in the college, and bringing in that partnership with vocational rehabilitation personnel and expertise to really enhance how you can focus the course work, focus the job experiences on really assuring a student will then leave their special education experience with paid employment, integrated paid employment, is really critical.

The nice part of having those experiences implemented in a college setting is that it also plants the seed that learning, accessing desired learning, can have a direct impact on students' employment outcome, both in the short term right out of high school, but also in the long term.

Because very few of us leave high school with the job that they want to keep for the rest of our lives

So, we need to help students understand that working and learning are iterative skills that you may want to come back to at different points in your life, so you may want to leave high school and get a paid job, and then decide you want a better job, or a job in a different field.

But that may require training. So then you're going to go back into what do I want to learn? Where can I learn it? How can I apply it?

And then you get a better job.

So, that iterative cycle of working and learning that I think many people, as they go through their professional life, between their early 20's and [laughs] whenever they're lucky enough to stop working, that same pattern I don't think was really set with people with intellectual disabilities and their family and support systems to often think about it.

Instead, we're often focusing so much on that first job, making sure he or she leaves school with a job.

And then thinking somehow magically that job is just going to work out forever [chuckles], you know, or when it falls apart, which may do for lots of different reasons; it could be that the student doesn't want to keep that job, it could be that it's a mismatch with management or skills.

But in early career jobs, we know that job change is normal and we should plan for it, we should expect it, and we should give students and their families the skills to help navigate those job transitions. And part of that process is incorporating further training and learning in higher ed.

**BARRY WHALEY:** That's just a very powerful message. Thank you for that, Meg. That's very important information for I'm sure families to hear and for students thinking about higher education as an option

You know, speaking of higher education, you know I have college aged children and I can tell you that college is expensive.

So, can students with intellectual disability and developmental disability, can they get financial aid?

**MEG GRIGAL:** In some cases, yes. Part of the changes that happened in the Higher Education Opportunities Act in 2008 is that the Department of Ed created a new access point to Title IV aid and that's federal student aid, so for students where intellectual disabilities who previously couldn't get access to federal student aid because they couldn't many of them weren't able to get a high school diploma, they weren't able to pass an ability to benefit test, and they weren't seeking to matriculate towards a degree and those were the elements of financial aid.

The Secretary in the last Higher Ed Act reauthorization waived those three requirements, so now students who are not going to get a high school diploma, could not pass an ability to benefit test, and are not matriculating toward a degree but want to

attend a program that has been approved by financial aid to offer aid to students with intellectual disability can get three forms of student aid.

They can get Pell grants, they can get supplemental educational opportunity grants, and access to work study funds.

Now, this isn't automatic, though.

The college has to apply to be approved as a comprehensive transition program. So they have to meet certain requirements; having a course of study for students with intellectual disability, it can be credit or noncredit.

The college's financial aid office has to apply to be approved as a comprehensive transition program, CTP sorry for the acronym and then they can offer the aid to the students with intellectual disability.

Students with intellectual disability are not able to apply for or receive federal student loans.

**BARRY WHALEY:** Just so I understand, not every inclusive higher education program, then, would be one of these comprehensive transition programs that you mentioned, right?

**MEG GRIGAL:** There is not, no. There is a list on the Federal Student Aid website and we have on thinkcollege.net, our website have information that will help students and other professionals on what is available. We have a database that we know of all the programs in the country serving students with intellectual disability and if they have been approved as a comprehensive transition program, we have that indicated in the program listing.

We also have an online module for colleges that want to become approved CTPs and walks them through the process of how to put together an application, what the components look like and sample documents, so that colleges can look at what is entailed in that application process.

Now, we're not involved, just to be clear, Think College is not involved in determining who becomes an approved CTP but we worked with federal aid in guiding resources to help more colleges engage in that process.

**BARRY WHALEY:** Thank you, Meg. ADALive! listening audience, if you have questions about inclusive higher education, please submit it at any time on our online forum at ADALive.org.

Now let's pause for a word from our sponsor? When I was younger, I never thought about going to college.

**VOICE-OVER ANNOUNCER:** I never was told to think big. I was never told I would go to college like my sister. But I made it. I'm a student at Bridgewater State university. In Boston. To make your dreams come true. And Think College. Visit [thinkcollege.net](http://thinkcollege.net).

**BARRY WHALEY:** Welcome back to our show, we're talking to Meg Grigal from Think College at the University of Massachusetts in Boston on students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Meg are all colleges with students with intellectual and developmental disabilities the same?

**MEG GRIGAL:** No, no, they're not. And I think that's a good thing.

I think what we want to see as inclusive higher education progresses as a field is that there is increased diversity in the type of colleges, whether it's two year colleges, four year colleges, technical or trade colleges, I think as we expand the options for students with intellectual disability, they will become clearer and clearer which colleges are a good match for students based on their interests and needs

In addition to the types of colleges that are enrolling students, there's also the length of program, because some programs are one year, some are two, some are three or four year programs.

So knowing the length of program, whether or not the program provides access to a residential experience, either on campus or off campus; whether the program has a strong background in supporting students who have meaningful internships while they're in the program or supports them to engage in paid employment while they're taking courses

And then a piece that I think is really integral because these are higher education programs is the access students have to existing college course work.

There is a great array of access. Some programs provide very strong acts and comprise most of students' course of study to include courses and these are typical college courses attended by other students both with or without disability.

Students might access them for a credit. Students may access them just as an audit option or a caitail and that's really determined by the institution that's creating the program of study

But there are also programs that have created specialized courses that are directed specifically to people with intellectual disability and attended only by people with intellectual disability

And these courses may focus particularly on study skills, campus navigation, social skills support, executive functioning skills, or it may focus on a particular academic skill with a college staff creating a program, don't have confidence that the student will be able to navigate the typical options in a successful way.

So as the field is progressing, I hope to see more access to existing courses, because I think that helps not only the students have a greater array of learning options, but it also helps the institutions of higher education make sure their content is accessible and their instructional styles are also responsive to students who have a diverse array of learning styles and goals.

**BARRY WHALEY:** Meg, a couple of times earlier you've mentioned, you know, employment and job outcomes for students who are involved in inclusive higher education.

And I know that Think College now, what, you're seven years into, you know, developing these models of inclusive higher education.

Can you talk a little bit about what some of the life outcomes have been for students who have participated?

**MEG GRIGAL:** Yeah, I can. And we do have some data on students who access programs that were funded through Modeled Administration Project that was funded in 2010 and what we've seen is over the course of the five years of that program funding is that student employment outcomes increased with students while they were in the program and leaving the program, having much better employment outcomes than we've seen in the national averages.

So, unfortunately the national average for employment rate for people, transitioning youth or young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities can be between 14 18%, depending on the data source you look at, but very, very low employment rate indicated in the grade of employment.

The students who access the various projects known as transitioning post secondary programs for students with intellectual disabilities or the acronym that's typically used that is so long and hard to say [chuckles] is that students who went to a college or a university that was hosting a federally funded program, these students were employed at 40%.

And I truly believe that as we move forward with this, that that 40% is going to continue to grow, because in many cases, more than half of the students who were employed in the program had never had a paid job before in their life.

So, when you think about this, this is the first time anybody had actually tried to support them through engaging.

And so as I think as we grow this field, the employment outcomes are going to continue to grow.

But I think it's also I would caution listeners to think about higher ed as only a path to employment. I truly believe it is a path to employment and to better employment.

But the other piece of growth in your life that you get out of a college experience aren't necessarily easily measured as employment, but the maturity we see in the students after they've had a year or two in college, the social connections and social networks that they have, if they've had a chance to live on campus or use public transportation to get to and from courses for their job, their ability to engage with their friends and family, as most adults do, changes after going through a college experience.

And what they think is possible, I think this is really the critical piece, the trajectory of their hopes changes, because what they now have been exposed to in terms of what other people do and what other people's hopes are has broaden what they think they can do.

And I think that's really important for us to remember, this is not just about placement, just check a box off, you got a job, you're done, this is really about accessing desired learning to achieve the life that you want and knowing that that conversation doesn't end just because you've left a program.

**BARRY WHALEY:** That's well said. Thank you, Meg.

I'm curious if you could talk a little bit about these IHE programs, these inclusive higher ed programs. What are some of the challenges that they face?

**MEG GRIGAL:** Um.... sure. So, I think sometimes the challenge for inclusive higher ed is if you've heard of it but there isn't one in your back yard or in your state or even in your region, you may not really know what that means.

And kind of this culture is low expectation for people with intellectual disability, it can be challenging for people to understand what an inclusive higher education program looks like until they've seen it with their own eyes.

So we've tried to explain that to some extent, like what we talked about in the beginning, rethinking college which is available for free on our website.

And part of the reason we created those resources is because we filmed students all over the country accessing classes, we filmed their peers, we filmed their instructors and colleges and people in leadership and for them to see themselves in these

programs. Right now there's too few of them. I think that's another real barrier, that there's only a handful of programs.

Now, that handful has grown by leaps and bounds in the past 5 10 years, but we're still only looking at about 260 programs.

And if you compare that to the over 7,000 programs at two and four year colleges around the country, we have about 3% of the options that everybody else with other disabilities or without disabilities have in terms of higher ed options.

So, I think that's a challenge we're still facing

Another barrier is funding, because in order to get these programs started, it does take some fiscal resources. And how you keep them sustainable isn't the same in every state.

So, some states have dedicated state lottery funds to support scholarships for students, other states have put some money into their state budget for program development or program evaluation.

And I think as we're moving forward, state policymakers and state legislators are beginning to see that this is a part of the conversation if we're going to help the students who have not gone through transition services in their high school in order to optimize their outcomes, they need to have a second chapter to their learning. Their learning can't stop once they leave secondary special education.

So, I think those are some of the barriers that we're starting to see

**BARRY WHALEY:** So, yeah, that state buy in is very important just for the State Legislature to value the work that you're doing and understanding that in transition, this is the recognizable next step and a natural step for students to consider college.

**MEG GRIGAL:** Yeah. And I believe it's getting started I think we still have some work to do. And I believe as we continue to get good and even better data, not only on students' activities and outcomes right at exit, but the long term follow up data we're just starting to wrap our arms around, I think that will help us make the case for continued investment in this.

But those types of conversations should be long term conversations, just like the impact of vocational rehabilitation and unemployment when you see the greatest impact, it's sometimes 6 10 years down the road and I think we have to remember that the impact of higher education [chuckles] is a long term impact conversation.

**BARRY WHALEY:** So gazing into your crystal ball

**MEG GRIGAL:** [Laughs].

**BARRY WHALEY:** What does the future of inclusive higher education look like, Meg?

**MEG GRIGAL:** You know, I think it's becoming clear and clear that in order for Miss Programs to have the most impact on students' lives is we have to ensure that when they leave the program, they are attaining a credential and that that credential is meaningful and provided by the institution of higher education that hosted the student and that that credential is meaningful to other institutions of higher education and to employers in specific industries.

And credentialed development is a very complicated issue. There's a lot that goes into higher education, there's a lot of potential to partner with employment or employers and business networks

So, I feel like in five years, we'll have a better sense over different types of credentials, but programs have created a path to.

And ideally, these are listing credentials that other students without intellectual disability are available for institutions with higher ed.

I think another piece coming down the road and colleges have been working on this for about five years is accreditation. Currently there is no accreditation process for these programs. If they are receiving if students in these programs are receiving federal student aid at an approved comprehensive inclusive program, which I know is a mouthful, but those programs, the program is accredited at being housed in an accredited university, so the issue of accreditation is really about quality. Quality and assurance.

This program offers a meaningful path of significant learning to document what students are going to learn and we're going to hold ourselves accountable to make sure those students actually achieve our anticipated outcome. Just like other programs around the country that have varied focuses are accredited

Accreditation for programs that serve students with intellectual disability would give students and their families who may be getting significant time and resources [chuckles] to attend these programs to assure that when the students leave, what they leave with is room for learning and a credential that they can take to whatever their next step is.

**BARRY WHALEY:** Meg, thank you so much for being with us today. Meg is the co-director of Think College And this episode and all previous ADA episodes are on our website on ADALive.org and I want to thank you for our ADALive! listening audience for listening today. We are thankful for your great support and listening in the series for

this ADALive! broadcast. Reminder, you can submit any questions on any of these topics by going to [ADALive.org](http://ADALive.org).

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