

# **Self-Advocate's Guide to Choosing a Post-Secondary Program: *Charting Your Course Through a New Landscape***



**RUTGERS HEALTH**

**The Boggs Center  
on Disability and Human Development**

Robert Wood Johnson Medical School

# Is this guide for you?

## This is a college guide for students with developmental disabilities and their families.

Post-secondary educational programs (referred to as “college” or as a “PSE program” in this guide), can be an ideal next choice after high school to best prepare all students for adult life.

This guide is written to help students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD) and their families in the search for opportunities for continued learning after high school. It will provide readers with a tool for evaluating schools and determining which program will be the best fit.



## A note before we begin...

There are students with IDD who desire a fully included, typical post-secondary experience at a college or university. These students must meet the general admissions requirements to the school, which may include having your high school diploma, taking standardized exams, etc. Successful graduation from such colleges and universities will happen after all class credit requirements are met. To meet these requirements, the students with IDD will need to possess the ability to pass the Accuplacer exam (in New Jersey), must understand the role of the college’s office of disability services, and demonstrate self-advocacy skills for disclosure to professors when needed.

This guide is designed to help students who would be best served by a program that provides an **alternative** to an enrolled, fully matriculated experience. These students will not be expected to accrue college credits nor be required to pass an entrance exam.

# Why is this guide needed?

When it comes to college programs for individuals with intellectual disabilities, there is a wide range of program models, so it can be difficult to meaningfully compare your options. This guide will explain what is likely to make a program most helpful to students with IDD.

## Where can I find a list of programs?

The most comprehensive list of post-secondary programs can be found on the [thinkcollege.net](https://thinkcollege.net) website. You can search by state as well as by specific preferences you may have for a program. The list describes over 250 programs, and is growing by the day!

## Did you know...?

There are many good resources already available to help students with IDD and their loved ones navigate successful paths to fully included, competitive higher education experiences.

Two places to try:

<https://thinkcollege.net/resource/transition-planning/get-ready-for-college-a-resource-for-teens-with-disabilities>

<http://www.edsmart.org/students-with-disabilities-college-guide/>



**Let's get started!**

# Is college right for you?

## CONGRATULATIONS!

If you're looking at this guide, then you are thinking about graduation, and you are considering a post-secondary education program! This is a very exciting time in your life. Hopefully you will find these tools helpful in your decision-making process.



## I have an intellectual and/or developmental disability. Is college right for me?

Only you can answer that! There are a lot of good reasons to attend college. You may gain more independence, self-esteem, and confidence through a college experience. You will keep learning academics, and you may get a big advantage in terms of your future career. Sometimes, people in your life may caution you against taking a big risk like attending a college program, but if this is something you want, you should absolutely explore your options.

On the other hand, post-secondary education isn't for everyone, and there are other choices for students who aren't interested in continuing their academic education. If you don't like the idea of more school, classes, or homework, or if you feel like you are ready to go right into the world of work, then that's okay too.

You may also decide that college is not the right choice for you *right now*, but it could be right for you in the future. If it is something you are thinking about, it always helps to explore your options. Just keep in mind that when it comes to college, it is not "now or never," nor is it ever too late.

Whatever you decide, just make sure this is truly **your** decision.



# THE FOUR GOLD MEDAL CATEGORIES



**Inclusion**



**Internships and Career Preparation**



**Meaningful Graduation Certificates and/or Vocational Credentials**



**Transition Services Upon Graduation**

## Using this Guide

This guide describes what will be called, **“Gold Medal Categories.”** A Gold Medal Category is a feature of the program that can make a big difference between a school that helps you a little bit versus one that helps you a lot.

Starting on page 14, you will find a list of questions to ask when you are getting to know the school or if you go for an interview. Getting the answers to these questions will tell you if the programs are doing well in each of the Gold Medal Categories.

Because a lot of these programs are so new, you may not find a program that scores “perfect marks” in all Gold Medal Categories. That doesn’t mean the program doesn’t have anything to offer. Ultimately, **you** have to decide what part of the college experience is most important to you based on your goals and dreams for the future.





# Gold Medal Category 1: Inclusion

When people say “inclusion,” they mean that there are a lot of chances for students with disabilities to live and learn with students who do not have disabilities. However, there is no rule about what makes a program truly inclusive. Two programs that call themselves “inclusive” might have a very different amount of inclusive opportunities for students. That’s why it’s really important to see for yourself what they have to offer.

There are two kinds of inclusion to look for:

## 1. Academic Inclusion

## 2. Social and Campus Life Inclusion

**Academic Inclusion** means being able to take classes that are open to all members of the college and/or local community. You may need additional supports to participate, and that’s okay! Or, maybe you audit the class - which means you go to the class for the experience of learning, rather than getting credits. This is also okay! What makes a program “academically inclusive” is that you have the chance to learn next to students who may or may not have intellectual disabilities.



Some programs will have the students with intellectual disabilities in the PSE program in one classroom for all of their academics, and these courses will not be open to the rest of the community. This is not academic inclusion, even if the class occurs on a college campus.

Some programs will offer a little bit of both opportunities - inclusive classes and classes just for students with intellectual disabilities in the PSE program.



# Gold Medal Category 1: Inclusion

**Social Inclusion** means being involved in the same social and recreational activities that are available to the whole college community.

For example, are the students in the PSE program able to go to the library, gym, student centers, etc.? Can they join any student activity that interests them, such as clubs, student government, and social events? Do students who enroll in the PSE program have opportunities to make friends with any college student on campus? It's okay if you need support to participate. The important thing is that there are no rules that say you can't participate if you want to.



**Social and Academic Inclusion** is a Gold Medal Category because the more inclusive a program is, the more it will help you achieve your goals. Just spending time on campus without being a recognized college student will not help you as much as true inclusion.<sup>1</sup> This makes sense, because if you are preparing for an included life as an adult, you want to be preparing alongside everyone else. Remember - it's okay to need support. But don't let that stop you from being a part of the action!

<sup>1</sup>Hart, D., Grigal, M., & Weir, C., (2010). Expanding the Paradigm: Postsecondary Education Options for Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Intellectual Disabilities. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 25(3), 113-150.



## Gold Medal Category 2: Internships and Career Preparation



The real reason why anyone goes to college is to improve their long-term career options. For students with developmental disabilities, this is no different! Going to college makes a big difference in your ability to get a job when you graduate as well as the amount of money you can earn.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, it is important that you look for a school that has a strong employment and career preparation program. What to look for:

### Positive Job Outlook for All Students

Are there any rules about who is able to work, and who isn't? Do all students enrolled in the PSE program have the same opportunities to develop work skills? The program should believe that everyone can work, and that everyone should get the chance to practice, learn, and grow. Be wary of programs who don't offer this chance to every single student.



<sup>2</sup>Gilmore, D., Bose J., & Hart, D., (2001). Research to Practice: Postsecondary Education as a Critical Step Towards Meaningful Employment: Vocational Rehabilitation's Role. *Research to Practice Series, Institute for Community Inclusion*. Paper 24.

Grigal, M., & Dwyre, A. (2010). Employment Activities and Outcomes of College-Based Transition Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities. *Insight: A Think College Brief on Policy, Research, & Practice, Issue No. 3*.

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## Gold Medal Category 2: Internships and Career Preparation

### Internships

An internship is an opportunity for a student to gain work experience by working directly at that job in the community. Internships may be paid or unpaid, on campus, or off-campus. You might get support, or you might go independently. What's most important is that the program is able to provide you with a wide range of experiences and that each opportunity will help train and prepare you for the world of work.



### Vocational Classes

Some programs will provide you with courses that can help prepare you for employment. Topics may include workplace vocabulary, social skills for the workplace, resume and cover letter development, and exploration of career clusters. These classes will be most helpful for you if they are paired with opportunities to practice all the vocational skills you learn in the community and/or on your internship sites.



## Gold Medal Category 3: Meaningful Graduation Certificates and/or Vocational Credentials

When you graduate from your PSE program, it is important that you graduate with a **meaningful certificate**. Most programs will provide you with a certificate upon graduation. A graduation certificate is a paper document that comes from your college or PSE program that states that you completed the required course work and are ready to graduate. A **meaningful certificate** will be of value not just to you, but also to employers outside of the program.



How can you tell if the certificate is meaningful? It has a lot to do with how the program decided what you had to do in order to earn it.



Some programs may ask local businesses/industry leaders for input. When this happens, the businesses explain what kinds of skills they look for when they are hiring employees, and in turn, the college makes sure that students learn those skills. That way, the business/industry leaders know that if they see a graduate with that certificate they will be interviewing someone who has been taught the skills that the business values.



## Gold Medal Category 3: Meaningful Graduation Certificates and/or Vocational Credentials

For example, let's say that the PSE program is located in a community with a hospital and several large corporate office complexes. The PSE program can consult with these employers to find out what they need. Perhaps they are told, "We need employees who are organized, can keep patient/client confidentiality, have excellent interpersonal skills, and can work in a formal work environment." Then, your school comes up with some work experiences and classes that will help you develop those skills. In this case, the major employers in your community will know that a graduate from that PSE program is likely to be an ideal employee for their business.



Some programs might offer pathways to get ***vocational credentials***, which are industry-approved credentials that show you have participated in the required study/field work that you need in order to perform a specific job.



For example, you might get a credential in customer service, culinary arts, child care, or building maintenance. Graduating with a credential like this is a big plus, because even if employers have never heard of your specific PSE program, they will see that you are prepared and ready for the workforce in that specific career. Depending on the credential, you may also have to pass a licensing test.



## Gold Medal Category 4: Transition Services Upon Graduation

When you graduate, it is very helpful to have hands-on support from your college program as you transition into employment. For example, in NJ, you may need help with employment and/or other supports through the Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD) or the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (DVRS). If you choose to go away to school, you'll want to make sure that the PSE program offers assistance to help you transition back to your home community.



A quality PSE program will provide you with the following assistance as you prepare to graduate:

### Person Centered Planning



With person centered planning (PCP), you are in charge of your vision. With the help of those closest to you, you will chart out how you'd like the next period of time in your life to proceed. PCP should be a component of any quality PSE program for students with intellectual disabilities to ensure that your supports stay with you as you graduate and move on to the next chapter of your life.<sup>3</sup>

There are lots of different methods for person centered planning. The important thing is that the program has a process to help you plan for your future and that you get the support you need to

be in charge of your next steps.

<sup>3</sup>Kelley, K., & Buchanan, S., (2016). College to Career Ready: Innovative Practices that Lead to Integrated Employment. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 46, 327-332.



# Gold Medal Category 4: Transition Services Upon Graduation

## Connections with State Agencies

Having a relationship with your DVRS counselor is a great way to make sure you graduate with a career goal and a plan to achieve it. You may also need supports from DDD and some referrals to specific agencies that can help you with your employment goals and any other personal and/or therapeutic needs you may have.



## Did you know...?

“Young adults with ID who took advantage of both (VR and PSE programs) were 26% more likely to exit with paid jobs than those who used only vocational rehabilitation services as their post-secondary experience, with an average 73% higher income than those who only received vocational rehabilitation services.”<sup>4</sup>

That's a really big difference!!

<sup>4</sup>Gilmore, D., Bose J., & Hart, D., (2001). Research to Practice: Postsecondary Education as a Critical Step Towards Meaningful Employment: Vocational Rehabilitation's Role. *Research to Practice Series, Institute for Community Inclusion*. Paper 24.



# Gold Medal Categories Checklist

Now that we have discussed the 4 Gold Medal Categories, below is a checklist of questions that you can use at open houses, interviews, or meetings with admissions counselors. Feel free to write your answers in the space below.

## Gold Medal Category 1 : Inclusion

### Area: Academic Inclusion

Will I be in classes only for students with disabilities?

Can I take any classes with the fully matriculated students? If yes, how many classes per semester?

Can you give me examples of the kinds of classes I could take that are open to the whole college and/or community?



# Gold Medal Categories Checklist

## Gold Medal Category 1 : Inclusion

### Area: Academic Inclusion

What kind of supports do you have to help me succeed in classes that are open to the whole college and/or community?

Are there classes that are just for students with disabilities enrolled in this program? If yes, how many classes per semester?

Can you give me examples of the kinds of classes I could take that are open only to students with disabilities in this program?



# Gold Medal Categories Checklist

## Gold Medal Category 1: Inclusion

### Area: Social Inclusion

Are students in this program welcome to join campus clubs and activities?

Are there opportunities to make friends from all over campus?

Are students in this program welcome to use the same facilities as the rest of the college community, including the library, the gym, and other common spaces?

Will I be participating in the college's or university's commencement ceremony when I graduate?

Are there supports available to help me engage in campus life?



# Gold Medal Categories Checklist

## Gold Medal Category 2: Internships and Career Preparation

### Area: Positive Work Values

Does the program have any rules or limits on who they consider “able to work” or “work ready?”

### Area: Employment Coursework

Are there classes that will help me prepare for the world of work?

If so, what is the basic curriculum for the vocational readiness course?

When/how will I have the opportunity to apply what we discuss in class in the community?



# Gold Medal Categories Checklist

## Gold Medal Category 2: Internships and Career Preparation

### Area: Internships

Is there an internship program?

If so, how many internships will I have the chance to try while I am a student?

Will I have the chance to work on-campus?

Will I have the chance to work off-campus?

How many internship/work sites do you currently partner with?

Are there any paid employment opportunities?



# Gold Medal Categories Checklist

## Gold Medal Category 3: Meaningful Graduation Certificates and/or Vocational credentials

### Area: Graduation Certificate

Do you provide a certificate for graduates?

Does it come from the college or university, or does it come directly from this post-secondary program?

What are the requirements that I must meet in order to get that certificate?

Have any local businesses or industries given you input or ideas on how to make sure this certificate helps me get a job?

### Area: Vocational Credential

Do you offer pathways to get any industry-approved vocational credentials?

If so, which credential(s) do you offer?



# Gold Medal Categories Checklist

## Gold Medal Category 4: Transition Services Upon Graduation

### Area: Connection to agencies and supports

When I graduate, what role does the program have with helping me find employment supports and opportunities in my home community?

Will the program help connect me with adult service providers in my community if I need those supports?

### Area: Person Centered Planning

Will I have support making and using a person-centered plan?

If so, what kind of person centered planning tool do you use?

# How Do I Choose?

If you met with admissions representatives for the post-secondary programs you are interested in, you should take time to review the responses you received. It can be helpful to discuss these with your family, friends, and others who are helping you plan for life after high school. Remember that college programs can be very competitive. You may not be accepted into every school you apply for, so it's a good idea to consider all of your options, and create a back-up plan. Use the questions below to help you decide.

**Which post-secondary education programs did you learn about?**

**Which post-secondary education program offers the opportunities you want for inclusion in academics and campus life?**

**Which post-secondary education program values employment and will best prepare you for the career you want?**



# How Do I Choose?

**Which post-secondary education program offers internships and work experiences that you are most interested in?**

**Which post-secondary education program offers meaningful credentials that employers in your chosen field will respect?**

**Which post-secondary education program will connect you with the supports you need in your community after graduating?**

**Which post-secondary education program will help you plan for your future?**

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