

## ASTEP: Postsecondary Education Opportunities for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

### Introduction

Many individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) desire to live independently, attend college, and obtain paid employment within their communities. Recent changes in the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (HEOA), have redefined postsecondary education opportunities for individuals with ID. Now, individuals with ID have more opportunities to gain college and career experience through the development and advancement of certified postsecondary transition programs, and availability of disability resources. Disability awareness campaigns, advocacy, and changes in disability law, demonstrate the need to provide equal opportunities for individuals with ID to obtain a college education, and paid employment, as a means to live productive, fulfilling, and independent lives.

### Purpose

Inclusive, individual support models of education, such as the Advancing Students Toward Education Program (ASTEP) at the North Dakota Center for Persons with Disabilities (NDCPD), located at Minot State University, provides two pathways for students with ID to obtain a college education. Students have the option of auditing regular classes, or taking classes for credit to earn a College-to-Career certificate in a variety of fields such as paraprofessional, bookkeeping, or reception services. Person-centered learning is used to develop individualized learning plans for each student based on their career and

employment goals, and is tracked the entire time the student is enrolled in the program. Students with ID who attend inclusive support transition programs are provided with academic and natural supports to help them successfully navigate college life and employment, alongside their peers. Many inclusive transition programs teach students with ID to develop social, independent living, self-determination, and self-advocacy skills in addition to their college coursework. ASTEP is an example of an inclusive postsecondary transition program currently funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. ASTEP is offered for individuals between the ages of 18 and 26 who have ID as their primary or secondary disability.

ASTEP is a two to three-year, inclusive transition program that provides students with ID, the academic and natural supports needed to gain a College-to-Career certificate, independent living and self-determination skills, and career skills through a paid employment internship. Person-centered plans are developed according to the individual's needs and goals, which create individualized, natural, and supportive learning environments. Students enrolled in the ASTEP program learn to navigate college life and employment with the support of peer mentors, and will develop social and independent living skills by attending campus social events, community events, participating in residence hall activities, employment, and attending class.



Students also learn independent living skills such as cooking, using the transportation system, time and money management, and living independently with or without a roommate in the residence halls on the MSU campus. Students have the choice of living off-campus. Students enrolled in ASTEP also learn to develop self-advocacy and self-determination skills by communicating their needs throughout the course of their program, and working with peer mentors to help them make their own choices in regards to daily living and academic life.

ASTEP is currently the only inclusive transition program for individuals with ID in the state of North Dakota. ASTEP continues to develop and evolve to meet the needs of individuals with ID who want to achieve college and career experiences. ASTEP outreach coordinators work with schools and disability service agencies throughout North Dakota and surrounding states to help build successful transition plans for individuals with ID who want to attend college. ASTEP staff also attend IEP meetings; meet with parents, teachers and school administrative staff to provide ASTEP transition training, and help advocate for students with ID by attending state legislative events, and providing testimony on disability awareness in the state of North Dakota.

## Conclusion

In the last decade, there has been additions to the transition processes for students and individuals with ID. Traditionally, Vocational Rehabilitative (VR) services and adult work programs, or residential programs would prepare students with ID for the transition from high school directly into a work or employment program, or Independent Living program. While such programs maintain a current and active role in helping individuals transition from high school environments to the workforce,

individuals now have the opportunity to gain a college education through the development of postsecondary transition programs.

## References

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