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Advancing Higher Education & Employment Opportunities for Individuals with Disabilities

SUMMARY

- Students with disabilities, their families and educators need additional support as they prepare for and transition to college and career opportunities.
- Individuals with disabilities have the highest rate of unemployment of any group, and more than two-thirds do not participate in the workforce at all.
- Enrollment of students with disabilities has grown to 11% of the post-secondary student population, but more must be done to provide additional opportunities.
- The *Higher Education Opportunity Act* must include essential programs to increase participation of students with disabilities in college and support them once there.
- The *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act* includes key provisions to emphasize competitive integrated employment for individuals with disabilities and ease the transition between high-school and employment.

Preparing students with disabilities to maximize their potential by embarking on postsecondary opportunities and/or pursuing a fulfilling career is the ultimate goal. To accomplish this, students with disabilities must have strong support and adequate opportunities as they transition from high school. Both the *Higher Education Opportunity Act* and the *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act* address critical provisions to support students with disabilities through this process.

Currently, the unemployment rate for individuals with disabilities is 12.5%, more than twice that of individuals without disabilities at 5.6%. Preparing individuals with disabilities to participate in the labor force requires a comprehensive, wraparound approach that spans PK-12 education, higher education and workforce systems.

Strengthening Provisions in PK-12 Education

Preparing students with disabilities for experiences after high school must begin no later than age 14 and include building comprehensive youth development systems designed to strengthen relationships between PK-12 education systems, post secondary systems and workforce systems. Without this concentrated, early effort we may continue to see students with disabilities drop out of school at twice the rate of students without disabilities. Furthermore, transition services for students with disabilities must reflect the underlying belief of high-expectations for all youth, reinforce self-determination, equality of opportunity, inclusion and integration into society.

Expanding Access and Success in Higher Education

Far too few students with disabilities are enrolling and graduating from higher-education. In fact, only 29% of students with disabilities actually complete their program or graduate with a diploma, according to the U.S. Department of Education's NSLT2 study.

Unlike in elementary/secondary school, when students with disabilities transition to a higher education setting it is incumbent upon them to identify themselves as having a disability and arrange for their own accommodations.

Promoting Workforce Opportunities

Supporting youth and adults with disabilities is a core purpose of the Workforce Investment Act, now called the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. To accomplish this goal, the reauthorization must address both the critical transition of students with disabilities from secondary to post-secondary education, and their meaningful participation in the workforce. Addressing these needs early on will create a solid foundation for building lifelong skills, finding and maintaining employment.

Higher Education Opportunity Act Reauthorization: Key Provisions for Students with Disabilities

- ✓ National Center for Information and Technical Support for Postsecondary Students with Disabilities which can provide critical information for students and families as they transition into higher-education (sec. 777).
- ✓ Provisions providing financial aid, model demonstration programs, and the National Coordinating Center for students with intellectual disabilities which have supported the creation or expansion of programs at 45 colleges/universities serving 1,379 students, who then are twice as likely to be employed as compared to the rate of other transitioning youth. (Sec. 485, 760, 766, 767, 777, 778).

Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA): Provisions Impacting Individuals with Disabilities

- ✓ Limiting the use of subminimum wage for individuals with disabilities by ensuring that before an individual receives subminimum wage they first (1) receive pre-employment transition services; (2) applied for vocational rehabilitation services, and if eligible, made a serious attempt at competitive integrated employment; (3) receive counseling, information and referral about alternatives to subminimum wage employment.
- ✓ Individuals with disabilities currently employed at subminimum wage must be provided on going career counseling, information and referrals, and notification of local training opportunities to move into competitive integrated employment, as appropriate.
- ✓ Emphasizes State vocational rehabilitation agencies make “pre-employment transition services” available to all students with disabilities and to coordinate those services with IDEA’s transition services.
- ✓ State vocational rehabilitation programs will set aside 15% of their Federal funding to help young people with disabilities transition from secondary school to post secondary education programs and employment.