

Inclusive Higher Education is Reaping Benefits for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities: One Program's Story

By Kimberly D. Miller, M.S., Rebecca DiSandro, Lalenja Harrington, M.A., QDDP, Joan S. Johnson, B.A., QDDP, NC Public Manager

The number of individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) accessing inclusive postsecondary education is on the rise, along with the number of higher education programs designed to serve their needs (Grigal & Hart, 2013). Individuals with ID are seeking the same college experiences and opportunities as their peers have enjoyed, which until recently has been an elusive dream for most. Higher education programs designed to engage adult learners with varying abilities seek to narrow the significant post-school outcome gaps between individuals with ID and their peers without disabilities. And, while it is often assumed that individuals with intellectual disabilities will benefit from these inclusive postsecondary education experiences in academic, social, functional, and economic domains just as their peers without disabilities do, there is little empirical evidence to support these assumptions

Inclusive postsecondary education programs are beginning to amass important data to support program quality and document important student outcomes.

due to the newness of this growing phenomenon (Grigal, Hart, & Weir, 2013). That is beginning to change, though, as inclusive postsecondary education opportunities such as the Integrative Community Studies (ICS) program of study at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) begin to amass important data to support program quality and document important outcomes.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Integrative Community Studies is a four-year certificate program of study offered by the UNCG Office of the Provost and coordinated by the Office of Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary Education. Founded in 2007, ICS currently has 59 students enrolled, and 34 graduates. ICS students are fully included in campus life, including accessing courses supportive of career and life goals, academic resources, on- and off-campus student housing, and co-curricular activities such as campus clubs, campus ministries, campus activities boards, new student orientation and tours, intramural and club sports, sororities, the student recreation center, intercollegiate sporting events, and more. ICS students have become a part of the fabric of the campus community.

Individualized plans of study containing goals in the core areas of self-determination, career development, and life planning are developed and continually reassessed by each ICS student along with their advisor. Student plans include a variety of interdisciplinary college courses related to career goals and student interest; instruction in the areas of financial literacy, self-advocacy, self-determination, and adjustment to college life; career development and internship activities; and service learning opportunities. Students also enroll in a planning course each year that requires development of a person-centered plan using the PATH and CIRCLES person-centered planning methods.

Individualized plans of study also incorporate stages of customized employment (i.e., discovery, job search, job development, and post-employment support). A variety of methods are used to help identify students' personal interests and strengths, including career assessments available through

the Career Services Office. Strengths are used to inform their internship search and selection, UNCG course selection, and career research activities. With support through coursework, career instructors, and internships, students develop relationships with potential employers where there are strong career interests. Support is provided as needed to students who work while in college, and a Senior Capstone Project helps them to develop a customized employment plan to identify post-graduate steps for securing employment of their choice after graduation.

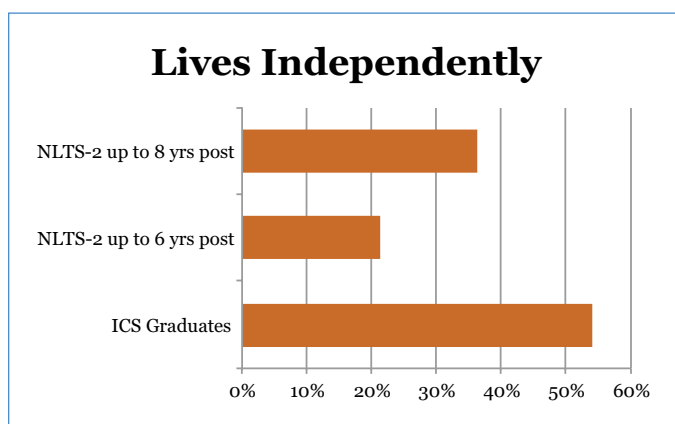
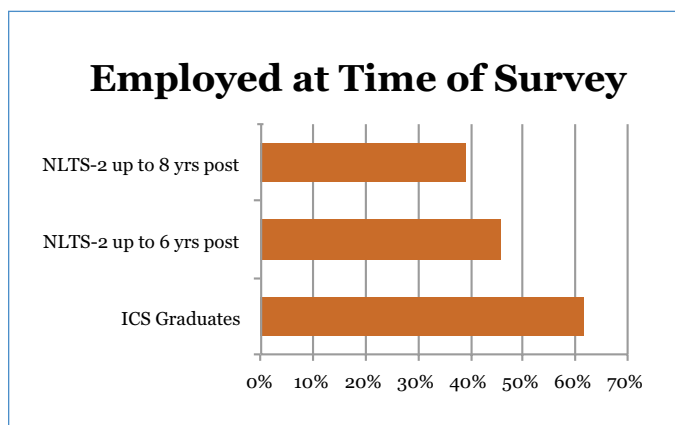
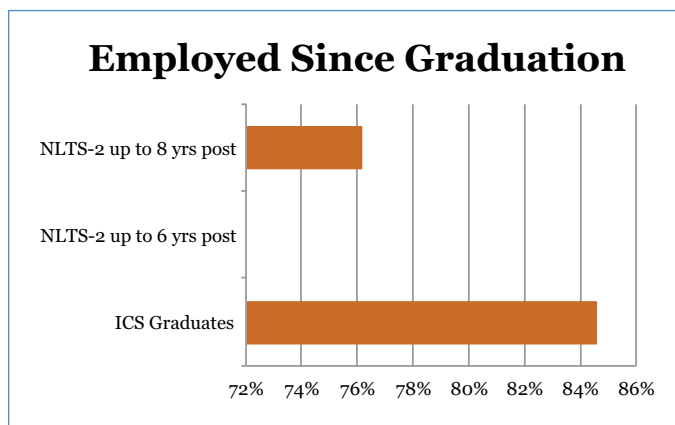
ICS students live among the general UNCG student body in either residential housing or in privately owned apartment complexes adjacent to the university campus that are for college students only. They are randomly assigned roommates from the general population, unless they have found specific college students with whom they wish to share housing. A combination of paid and non-paid supports assist ICS students in having a comprehensive university experience that prepares them for life after graduation, and encourages the development of natural supports. This living environment provides students opportunities to test out supports/independence in an environment with a safety net.

Students learn to problem-solve rather than have problems solved for them using the strategy of supported decision making, which teaches students how to manage their own lives, using supports agreements. They practice and take responsibility for their own decisions, and learn to communicate with their families as adults.

Individualized plans of study also identify goals related to topics such as campus safety, health and wellness, relationship building, budgeting, etc. UNCG's unique partnership with Beyond Academics, a nonprofit agency, is used as needed to support the attainment of those goals that are required to live independently in the college environment and beyond. The Senior Capstone Project then identifies progress with these goals, as well as post-graduate plans for living independently in the community.

MEASURING POST-GRADUATION OUTCOMES

A systematic approach to gathering post-graduation outcome information on graduates of ICS was implemented in the spring of 2014. Data are collected on employment, independent living, and community involvement outcomes of students who have graduated at 6-month, 12-month (1-year), 18-month, 2-year, 3-year, 4-year, and 5-year time intervals post-graduation.



PARTICIPANTS

As of the end of the 2013–2014 academic year, there were 23 graduates of ICS (6 in 2011, 4 in 2012, 4 in 2013, and 9 in 2014). Seventeen of these individuals provided informed consent, allowing the evaluator to contact their parents/guardians to collect post-graduation outcome data. One of these graduates, unfortunately, has since passed away, leaving a potential participant pool of 16.

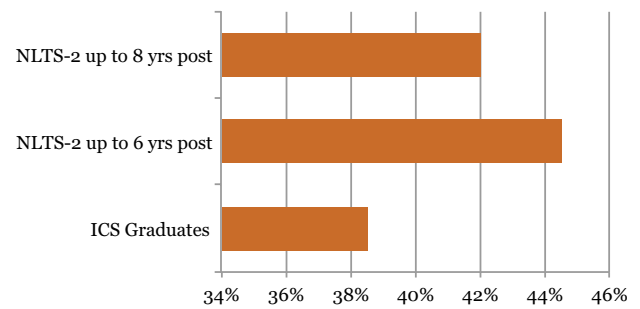
MEASURE

An online survey was developed to collect information regarding the graduates' employment, independent living, and community involvement. Survey questions were adapted from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS-2) related to the target variables of employment since graduation; current employment; graduate's living arrangement (e.g., alone or with a spouse or roommate, with a parent or legal guardian); whether the graduate had a savings account, a checking account and wrote their own checks, and/or had a debit or credit card in their own name; participation in community group activities (e.g., religious groups, sports teams, or dance or art lessons); performance of volunteer or community service; whether they were registered to vote; and whether they had a driver's license or learner's permit.

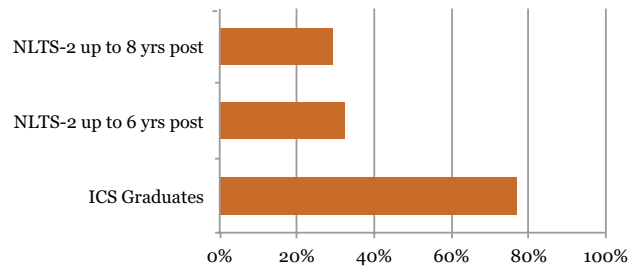
PROCEDURES

While it was our preference to collect post-graduation data directly from graduates, it was found to be difficult to maintain direct contact with all graduates. For logistic and consistency purposes, the decision was made to collect data from parents/guardians of the graduates, as they tended to have more stable contact information. Graduates of the ICS course of study were asked to complete an informed consent form that would grant the researcher permission to contact their parents/guardians for the purposes of this study. If the graduate granted consent, an email containing information about

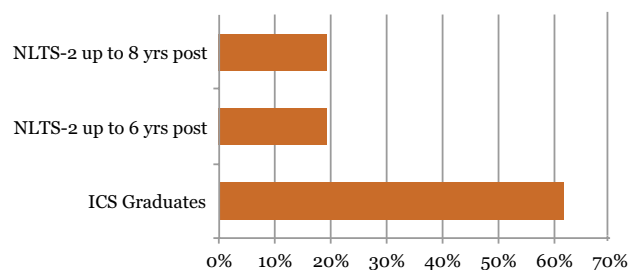
Has a Savings Account



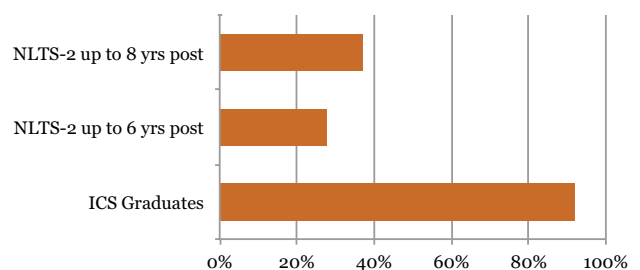
Has a Checking Account and Writes His/Her Own Checks



Has a Credit or Debit Card in His/Her Own Name



Participated in a Community Activity in the Last 12 Months



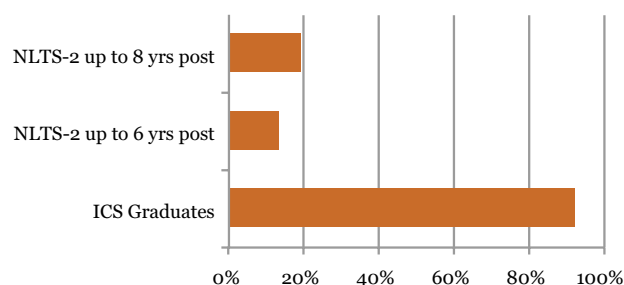
the research and a link to the online survey was sent to the graduate's parent/guardian. A reminder email was sent to all potential respondents approximately 7 days after the initial email. Data reported here was collected in May and December 2014. Data were aggregated so that the most recent information on each participating graduate is reported.

RESULTS

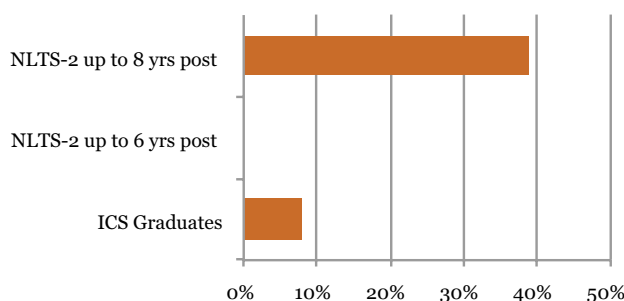
Across the two data collection points, 13 graduates were represented. Two were 3 years post-graduation, three were 2 years post-graduation, one was 18 months post-graduation, one was 12 months post-graduation, and six were 6 months post-graduation. Graduates represented in the aggregate data were comparable to all graduates of the program, with the exception of race where Caucasians were represented slightly more than among the full ICS graduating population. Primary diagnoses included intellectual disability (85.6%) and autism (15.4%), with an average IQ of 52.7 ($sd=7.96$). Fifty-four percent of the represented graduates were male, with 69.2% being Caucasian.

Regarding employment, 84.6% of the graduates had been employed at some time since graduating from UNCG. At the time of data collection, 61.5% were currently employed. Nearly 54% were living independently or semi-independently (i.e., not living with a parent or family member or guardian, in an institution, or in a group home). Nearly 77% had a checking account and were writing their own checks, 61.5% had a credit or debit card in their own name, and 38.5% had a savings account. Over 92% of the graduates had participated in a community group in the prior 12 months (or 6 months if only 6 months post-graduation), and 92.3% had completed volunteer or community service. While only 7.7% had a driver's license or a learner's permit, 100% were registered to vote. The ten figures compare these findings to those of the NLTS-2 findings.

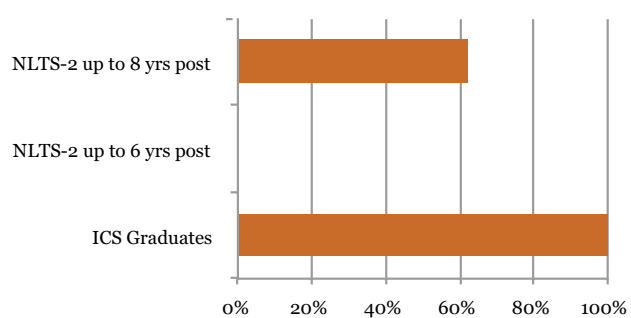
Completed Any Volunteer or Community Service in Last 12 Months



Has a Driver's License or Learner's Permit



Is Registered to Vote



IMPLICATIONS

While these findings are based on a small sample size and across a limited amount of time, they are an initial demonstration of the outcomes that may be reaped by individuals with ID engaging in inclusive higher education. Taken with other reported outcomes (e.g., Grigal, Hart, Smith, Domin, & Sulewski, 2015; Moore & Schelling, 2015; Ross, Marcell, Williams, & Carlson, 2013), there is now a growing body of evidence that individuals with ID have more to gain from inclusive higher education than just enjoying typical

college life among their peers. ICS credits the outcomes reported here to several essential elements of the program: individualized program of study, person-centered planning, stages of customized employment experiences, student housing in an independent living setting, supported decision making, and the unique partnership between the university and the nonprofit Beyond Academics for the development of strong independent living skills and strategies.

Reflecting on these outcome data can assist in refining the curriculum framework of the program to ensure that it supports positive outcomes for students in terms of working, living, and being actively engaged in the community. Sharing positive practices and challenges will strengthen the system of higher education for students with ID—that's a “win” for the community of educators associated with postsecondary education options for students with intellectual disabilities.

Graduate Rebecca DiSandro's Success Story

Personal goals: “To meet new friends, live independently, and to graduate.”

Outcomes:

- Employed by Apex Analytix in a data entry position before graduating from UNCG. “Having a college experience is important because I got to take classes and have internships that helped me make decisions about my career. Being on the computers is one of my hobbies, so I love my job!”
- Lives with a roommate (also a graduate of ICS) in a townhouse. “I got to learn how to live independently by learning independent skills thanks to Beyond Academics.”
- Friendship and community participation: “One of my best moments at UNCG was when I met my best friend from UNCG, Mary Kate, in the Peer Companion program. I got to go to her wedding and I am ‘Aunt Rebecca’ to her twin baby girls. . . I can literally walk to my job and go to the grocery store, other stores, and Starbucks whenever I want.” Rebecca also joined a church while at UNCG and continues to be actively involved there.

Rebecca's message to others:

“Going to UNCG was one of the best experiences that I have had in my entire life! College is an awesome and amazing experience to have in your life. You will meet a lot of new friends and you will feel accomplished and excited when you graduate from college!”



Rebecca and a college friend on campus at UNC Greensboro.

REFERENCES

Grigal, M., & Hart, D. (2013). *Transition and postsecondary education programs for students with intellectual disability: A pathway to employment*. Think College Fast Facts, Issue No. 4. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion.

Grigal, M., Hart, D., Smith, F. A., Domin, D., & Sulewski, J. (2015). *Think College National Coordinating Center: Annual Report on the Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (2013-2014)*. Retrieved from Boston, MA:

Grigal, M., Hart, D., & Weir, C. (2013). Postsecondary education for people with intellectual disability: Current issues and critical challenges. *Inclusion, 1*(1), 50–63. doi:10.1352/2326-6988-1.1.050

Moore, E. J., & Schelling, A. (2015). Postsecondary inclusion for individuals with an intellectual disability and its effects on employment. *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities, 19*(2), 130–148. doi:10.1177/1744629514564448

Newman, L., Wagner, M., Knokey, A. M., Marder, C., Nagle, K., Shaver, D., & Wei, X. (2011). *The post-high school outcomes of young adults with disabilities up to 8 years after high school. A report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NCSE 2011-3005)*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.

Ross, J., Marcell, J., Williams, P., & Carlson, D. (2013). Postsecondary education employment and independent living outcomes of persons with autism and intellectual disability. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, 26*(4), 337–351. Retrieved from <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1026890>

Sanford, C., Newman, L., Wagner, M., Cameto, R., Knokey, A. M., & Shaver, D. (2011). *The post-high school outcomes of young adults with disabilities up to 6 years after high school. Key findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NCSE 2011-3004)*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kimberly D. Miller, M.S.

AP Assistant Professor and Research Associate,
Department of Community and Therapeutic Recreation
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Rebecca DiSandro

Graduate, Integrative Community Studies
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Lalenja Harrington, M.A., QDDP

Director of Academics, Beyond Academics
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Joan S. Johnson, B.A., QDDP, NC Public Manager

Executive Director, Beyond Academics
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

INSIGHT, Issue No. 29, 2016

INSIGHT is a publication of Think College, a project of the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston, funded by the Office of Postsecondary Education (Grant No. P407B15002). The opinions contained in this document are those of the grantee and do not necessarily reflect those of the funders.

Recommended citation for this brief: Miller, K.D., DiSandro, R., Harrington, L., and Johnson, J.S. (2016). *Inclusive Higher Education is Reaping Benefits for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities: One Program's Story*. Think College Insight Brief, Issue No. 29. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion.

