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Promoting Equity in Education: Understanding the Secondary Lived Experiences that  
Propelled Intellectually Disabled Students to Continue Their Education in College

A Dissertation by

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Brandman University

Irvine, California

School of Education

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

February 2018

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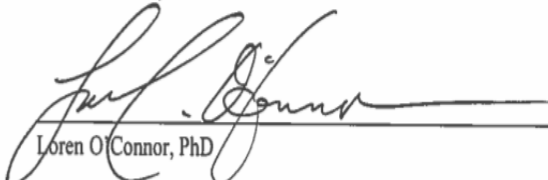
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February 2018

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Propelled Intellectually Disabled Students to Continue Their Education in College

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This study was completed because of my love for special education and the impact I hope to leave on this field. Every student deserves to be supported, loved, and encouraged.

## ABSTRACT

Promoting Equity in Education: Understanding the Secondary Lived Experiences that Propelled Intellectually Disabled Students to Continue Their Education in College

by Britta Davidson

**Purpose.** The purpose of this ethnographic study was to investigate and describe the secondary school supports, experiences, and exposures of students with intellectual disabilities participating in post-secondary education settings in southern California, that were designed based on the Think College Standards-Based Conceptual Framework for Inclusive Higher Education.

**Methodology.** This qualitative, ethnographic study investigated and described the secondary lived experiences of students with ID who currently attend or have attended one of the 263 PSE programs for students with ID that are included in the Think College Framework for Inclusive Higher Education. Convenience sampling was used because it reflected the available group of subjects that were accessible to the researcher within a reasonable distance for data collection procedures. The data collected included interviews, observations, and artifacts.

**Findings.** Examination of this qualitative, ethnographic study indicated a variety of findings: first, the involvement and use of ongoing community resources and their connections to PSE; second, routinely developed and practiced self-determination and vocational skills in secondary school; third, consistent participation and experiences that occurred in inclusive academic settings in secondary school; fourth, the family played an instrumental role in the transition process; and, lastly, a relationship with a mentor who was deeply vested in the success of their future propelled students with ID to attend PSE.

**Conclusions.** The study supported the findings and it was determined that students benefit from receiving information, practicing essential skills, engagement in decision-making, participation in rigorous settings, positive learning environments, collaborative efforts, increased services, and relevant college-like experiences to succeed in transitioning into PSE.

**Recommendations.** Further research is recommended to examine secondary programs, supports, inclusion models, legal components, vocational programs, and special education and teacher staff roles related to supporting students with ID.



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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The transition into post-secondary life includes a variety of opportunities such as college, vocational school, or employment. Inevitably, every senior faces the difficult decision to attend a college, potentially move out of their home, and begin a process of independence. Factors include college applications, tuition fees or financial aid, room and board, and every day decision making that is vastly differently from what was known in secondary school. The impact of the transition from secondary school to post-secondary school is significant, but exponentially more significant for a student with intellectual disabilities. In a study conducted by Mercier (2017), a research participant shared:

When you think about individuals growing up without disabilities, you think about them planning their own weddings, getting jobs, living on their own as a couple and being successful; it's not something you think about when you have a disabled child. But our students all have the same drives, desires, and abilities. It's just [that] there are different paths to achieve those goals. (p. 125)

Unfortunately, the opportunities lessen considerably when considering what is available for students with special needs, and virtually diminish in some areas of the United States when considering the options for students with intellectual disabilities or other severe cognitive delays (Grigal, Neubert, & Moon, 2001). Approximately 2.5 million people in the United States have an intellectual disability, formerly known as mental retardation (Harris, 2010). This unique population of individuals is characterized by low intellectual ability and poor life skills (Schalock, Luckasson, & Shogren, 2007).

Due to the deficits in life skills and cognitive ability, students with intellectual disabilities are often faced with bias and extensive obstacles (Benito, 2012; Duff, 2013). The transition from secondary to post-secondary life includes a phase of confusion, lack of support, and increased concern to many students with intellectual disabilities and their families (Duff, 2013; Roller, 2016). The navigation process from secondary to post-secondary life is often unclear (Grigal & Hart, 2010).

Literature suggests that there is an urgent need to understand what propels some students with ID to attend college when the majority do not (Mercier, 2017). Various factors, programs, and opportunities are present at every secondary school however, it is unknown if there is a common denominator amongst those who follow the college path. It is important to understand the factors and supports present in the lives of secondary students with ID that allowed them to conquer such a difficult transition period of their lives (Grigal, Hart, & Migliore, 2011). Although multiple research studies describe post-secondary education opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities, only a few exciting new research studies have emerged regarding secondary experiences of students with ID.

## **Background**

### **History of Special Education**

Views of special education and related needs of individuals with disabilities became prevalent in the 1950s (Warnes, 2013). Despite the need for federal government intervention, it was not until 1965 that Congress passed a succession of laws relating to education, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Although ESEA created opportunities for low income individuals, it was not until a year later that

components addressing individuals with disabilities were added (Warnes, 2013). The need for quality programs, clear processes, and fair access for students was still in issue.

The implementation of Public Law (PL) 93-112 in 1973, known as The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, brought forth the first of many federal civil rights laws to protect the rights of individuals with disabilities. Although the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was transformational, numerous reauthorizations and additional civil rights laws were added to further strengthen the rights of individuals with disabilities over time, such as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) in 1975. The key focus of the EHA was to provide fair access to education and was designed for individuals with mental or physical disabilities.

Nearly 15 years later, the Americans with Disabilities Act, PL 101-336, in 1990, provided full civil rights to all individuals with disabilities. In the same year, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), with subsequent modifications in 1997 and 2004, was enacted into federal law. IDEA transformed the prior legislation, implementation of programs, early intervention protocol, and special education as a field (Trohanis, 2008). Equally important, the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) further solidified elements of IDEA and the emphasis on supporting students with disabilities. More specifically, IDEA contributed to the inclusion of students with Intellectual Disability (ID) into the general school settings, which increased their overall opportunities and potential for growth significantly.

### **Students with Intellectual Disabilities**

Students with intellectual disabilities have vastly different experiences than that of their general education counterparts. Intellectual disability, formerly known as mental



retardation, is characterized by low cognitive ability or IQ and lacking in the area of overall life skills (Schalock et al., 2007). Historically, the practice of including students with ID in secondary school settings was mainly for non-academic or recreational activities. Although the law emphasized the need for special education students to be placed in the least restrictive environment (LRE), many schools operate with inconsistency as to what that encompasses. On another side of the spectrum, factors affecting policies and procedures of LRE exist, such as State legislation, litigious cases, the Office for Civil Rights (OCR), and advocacy groups (Bienenstock, 1992).

The various difficulties these individuals face is heightened by the assumption of inability, low expectations, and presumed inadequacies by those around them (Love, 2013). Development of life skills, real-world experiences, and career awareness are all critical elements for students with ID. Creating rich opportunities, social and academic, for students with ID is necessary for mastery of skills and quality of life. Equally important are family involvement, student-teacher relationships, peer relationships, and self-determination (Carter, Lane, Pierson, & Stang, 2008; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). Research suggests that quality of life and self-determination are linked and especially relevant to students with ID. Self-determination consists of behavior, empowerment, self-regulation, and self-realization, along with satisfaction, productivity, independence, and social participation (Lachapelle et al., 2005).

### **Secondary School and Intellectual Disabilities**

In the United States, secondary school refers to middle or high school. Students with intellectual disabilities represent a wide variety of school-age children however, intellectually disabled students represent a smaller percentage served when compared to

other disabilities such as specific learning disabilities, speech and language impairments, and autism. Moreover, students with intellectual disabilities are often excluded from the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process due to a perceived lack of understanding or voice, which prevents them from having a contribution to their post-secondary endeavors (Fekete, 2013; Grigal & Hart, 2010).

The number of individuals with intellectual disabilities in secondary schools may not be as significant as those with specific learning disabilities, but the need to create equal access to education, social interactions, life skills, and post-secondary opportunities during those critical years is significant (Grigal & Hart, 2010.) Secondary students with intellectual disabilities often get shuffled into fully-contained classrooms, or non-inclusive settings, with little access to the general population of students or general education curriculum due to the increased demands of secondary schools (Carter & Hughes, 2006; Fekete, 2013).

Secondary schools are amongst the largest settings students with ID have experienced. Furthermore, students are experiencing new routines like changing classes, working with counselors, increased school staff, and a potentially more diverse community of people. Numerous classes, programs, clubs, and extra-curricular opportunities are available as well. And yet, students with ID are often considered for the same classes year after year due to their cognitive ability, often excluded from programs, and rarely urged to participate in extra-curricular activities (Cooney, Jahoda, Gumley, & Knott, 2006).

## **Programs and Accommodations**

Although participation in various programs and receiving accommodations or modifications is the law, many offerings or processes directly reflect the individual district or school site practice (Duff, 2013). This very common practice contributes to inconsistency across the various districts in the state of California, which ultimately contributes to unfair access for students with disabilities. The experiences of a secondary school students with intellectual disabilities can vary drastically based on their secondary school of attendance. This factor creates urgency in creating quality programs across all districts to promote equity in education for students with intellectual disabilities.

A myriad of programs exists to address students with special needs on secondary school campuses. Once again, the programs vary based on each district and sometimes vary based on schools in a district. Programs range from inclusion, or mainstream, models, fully-contained special education classes, and separate school settings, or fully excluded. A push for greater inclusion of students with ID began and the need for accommodations and modifications to the general education curriculum become more common (Carter & Hughes, 2006). Students have the right to a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) up until the age of twenty-two years old if need be. After the age of eighteen, students are placed in programs that are community based, life-skills focused, and teach them skills related to workability and real-world experience.

With the inception of IDEA and the common term of LRE, schools were required to address the needs of all individuals with disabilities more than ever before. The demands of case carriers, special education teachers, and general education teachers became greater. Careful implementation of accommodations and modifications was

required for students with ID to have the opportunity to access the general education curriculum (Hawpe, 2013). According to Petersen (2016), academic access for students with ID and other significant cognitive disabilities requires students to gain experience with knowledge and skills that are integrated with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and their own Individualized Education Plans. Combining the past practices of students with ID, such as life skills and community-based instruction, with the current rigorous standards in general education curriculum in secondary school requires training, consistency, and successful implementation of accommodations or modifications for students to be successful. For that reason, IEP team members must be completely aware of and constantly monitoring all areas of the IEP, implementation, and any needed changes over time.

### **Transition Skills and Planning**

Perhaps one of the most challenging, yet important, aspects of secondary school for those with intellectual disabilities is gaining appropriate transition skills and planning for their post-secondary education or employment lives (Grigal & Hart, 2010; Pallisera, Vila, & Fullana, 2014). Understanding what factors or experiences contribute positively to the transition of students with ID can be difficult because each individual student has their own set of diverse needs.

Transition skills often coincide with self-determination and include goal setting, self-awareness, independence, and the ability to express ones' own needs, amongst others (Durlak, Rose, & Bursuck, 1994; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). The support of family and strong special education teachers, or case carriers, can help to develop and hone these skills. On the other hand, not all students with ID are capable of or have the necessary

support to develop the skills needed for successful transition. Inclusion in social opportunities and general education curriculum is not the only form of inclusion to take place. Transition planning requires an IEP team and should include the student throughout the process.

Facilitating a students' involvement in the transition planning process is essential to the process. In a research study by Benito (2012), individual's that worked with students with ID felt worried about the transition process, the lack of knowledge and awareness by the students, and the weakened life skill sets. It is for that reason, combined with the legal obligation, that students with ID be fully included throughout every step of the transition planning process (Roller, 2016).

Although post-secondary education opportunities for students with ID may not be vast, research in the field suggests that programs exist to support students with ID (Grigal & Hart, 2010). The Think College Standards-Based Framework for Higher Education provides information for college students with intellectual disabilities and post-secondary options. The collaboration between secondary schools and post-secondary schools must exist for program knowledge and awareness of opportunities to be present (Roller, 2016). The IEP team must work in accordance with the student and family to work through any supports and challenges during the process of transition.

**Think College standards-based framework.** Think College is a national organization stemming from the University of Massachusetts Boston's Institute for Community Inclusion dedicated to the development, improvement, and implementation of inclusive higher education opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities (Grigal & Hart, 2010). Think College is based on eight key standards, all with sub-

standards, which focus on academic access, career development, campus membership, self-determination, alignment with college systems and practices, coordination and collaboration, sustainability, and ongoing evaluation (Grigal, Hart, & Weir, 2012).

### **Supports and Challenges**

The Think College Standards were developed, along with the eighty-eight benchmarks, to focus on supports for students with ID to ease challenges during the transition phase into post-secondary education settings, to provide appropriate access, and to coordinate and collaborate (Grigal, Hart, & Migliore, 2011; Grigal et al., 2012). Typically faced with little knowledge of IEP's and transition processes, families must navigate the complicated language, limited means, and often lack of support to make serious decisions regarding their child and future (Roller, 2016). The need to convey information related to post-secondary opportunities is urgent.

In addition to the typical challenges parents face, families with ID also face the challenge of the bias that accompanies ID (Grigal & Hart, 2010). Supporting and encouraging a student with ID to continue to post-secondary education is seemingly rare, which is why research points to self-determination as aiding in improving quality of life for students with ID (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). Self-determination is a key standard in Think College and is essential both in secondary school and post-secondary school as it consists of goal setting, self-advocacy skills, and the ability to learn new information independently (Grigal et al., 2012). In contrast, well-developed programs through the Think College system support students with ID in all aspects of need, including independent living, learning, skill-building, and employment.

Students with ID in secondary school are at a critical period in their life in which they experience life, explore opportunities, and develop their mastery of skills. The support of an IEP team, including family involvement, and self-determination is key to effective development of skills for transition planning and transition to post-secondary education. To both understand the supports available and face the many challenges in their lives, students with ID need to be included in their educational processes in secondary school (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). Coordination and collaboration is a key standard in Think College and addresses the ongoing need of partnerships in communities, collaboration with stakeholders, and the processes of transitioning (Grigal et al., 2012).

Supports exist, both in secondary and post-secondary schools, however, the knowledge of the supports by school districts and IEP teams is often lacking (Benito, 2012; Roller, 2016). Occasionally, there are families who are fortunate and have completed research for their child's future, but that is not common practice. The lack of awareness about opportunities is prevalent amongst most families (Benito, 2012). In addition, how districts organize their special education departments, programs, and processes all varies drastically. For students with ID to receive fair and equal opportunities, it is essential that students with ID receive similar opportunities, especially during their transition years.

Although challenges for students with ID will always be present, many can be alleviated by working together as a team through the transition process, taking the time to understand their goals and experiences, and eliminating the bias that follows their diagnosis. Students with ID should be recognized for their rich potential and possible

contributions to the world in their post-secondary lives (Benito, 2012; Eckes & Ochoa, 2005; Grigal & Hart, 2010). The need to understand what experiences, supports, and exposures can support and encourage a successful transition and attendance of a PSE program is crucial to encouraging and promoting a successful adult life.

### **Statement of the Research Problem**

Students with ID have not been provided the same fair access in educational opportunities and continue to struggle through transitions from secondary to their post-secondary lives (Cooney et al., 2006). The life of a student with ID consists of many obstacles, especially during the transition phases of their lives, including transition between school and work, such as secondary school to post-secondary school and post-secondary school to employment. With the rate of employment for students with ID at only 9%, and approximately only 15% of special needs students, not just students with ID, attending post-secondary school (Shah, 2011), there is an urgent need to understand students with ID and provide them the opportunities to master skills necessary to be successful in life. The limited amount of involvement in post-secondary education is staggering.

Fair access for students with intellectual disabilities, including program offerings, services, and collaboration, is inconsistent across the nation, the state, and even individual school districts (Duff, 2013). Although including students with ID in the least restrictive environment (LRE) is the law, perceptions and follow through of what LRE is depends on the special education professionals at each school site. To elaborate, IDEA (2004) clearly stated that individuals with severe cognitive disabilities could access the LRE to gain skills, including emotional and social growth, to become productive,



contributing citizens. Subsequently, fair access also directly links to transitioning, information about program options, and supports.

Students with intellectual disabilities in secondary school settings require consistent program structures (Carter & Hughes, 2006), greater transition supports, mentorship, and knowledge of post-secondary options (Winter, Martinez, & Queener, 2010). Changes in federal law, such as the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, have made improvements to availability in post-secondary programs offered to students with ID. Shah (2011) and Winter et al. (2010) identified a significant problem. According to Shah (2011) and Winter et al. (2010), it is still unclear how much information is available to students, their families, and the secondary schools they attend. Seldom are IEP teams and transition processes monitored closely and virtually no accountability exists as to what information is provided to families and students in terms of support, both in secondary school and post-secondary school (Shah, 2011). For students with ID to become functional members of society, they must be afforded the support, time, and knowledge base of what is available to them, including their families, both in secondary school and when considering post-secondary education.

Various crucial factors contribute to students with ID's successes in advancing to college, such as self-determination, fair accessibility in education, support in the school and family life environment, and overall knowledge of what is available to them. These factors are especially true when considering individuals with significant cognitive disabilities (Carter et al., 2008; Roller, 2016). Understanding the lived experiences of students with ID in the secondary setting is crucial to determining what factors contribute or inhibit their post-secondary life choices, specifically in education (Duff, 2013).

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to investigate and describe the secondary school lived experiences of students with intellectual disabilities that propelled them to participate in post-secondary education settings in southern California, that were designed based on the Think College Standards-Based Conceptual Framework for Inclusive Higher Education.

### **Research Questions**

What were the secondary school lived experiences of students with intellectual disabilities that propelled them to participate in post-secondary education in southern California that were aligned to the Think College Standards-Based Conceptual Framework for Inclusive Higher Education?

### **Significance of the Problem**

The significance of this study lies in the various factors that contribute or inhibit students with intellectual disabilities' successes in their post-secondary lives. First, factors include obstacles students with ID face in secondary school such as, fair access and knowledge of post-secondary school options. On a personal scale, contributing factors that can affect positive outcomes include self-determination, family support, and environmental components. Insight into the secondary school lives of students with ID is rare. Research provides extensive information on family perceptions, special education staff perceptions, and post-secondary education information (Grigal & Hart, 2010), but little exists to highlight the successes and challenges that students with ID face each day that affect their paths into their post-secondary lives (Benito, 2012; Carter & Hughes, 2006).

Second, providing students with ID the same fair access to programs, transition supports, and post-secondary school options will contribute to the potential improvement upon their quality of life (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). Although significant improvements in the law have helped provide opportunities over the last few decades, the inconsistency with the perception of the law within each school, district, and state is drastic (Duff, 2013). It is proposed by Pallisera et al. (2014) that consistency in programs and transition supports is necessary for this specialized population of students.

Third, the fourteen to twenty-two-year-old range is a critical period of transition for every student with ID and providing students the knowledge base, support, and consistency they need to transition can contribute to their success in post-secondary education and life. Fekete (2013) and Grigal et al. (2011) agreed students with ID who participate in post-secondary education settings have greater mastery of skills, are better equipped for real world opportunities, and have an increased likelihood of employment and security. Gaining knowledge in the field of intellectual disabilities at the secondary level can provide practitioners with insight that will aide them in program planning, streamlining transition processes, and creating exceptional experiences for their students.

Exciting new research that delves into the lived experiences of students with ID in the secondary settings can provide a comprehensive understanding and remains a significant need. This study is significant because the examination of students with intellectual disabilities' lived experiences at Taft College and UCLA will provide a deeper understanding of what propelled them to attend post-secondary education and enhance their skills and eventually contribute to their community as employable adults. Additionally, the Think College Standards Based Framework for Inclusive Higher

Education provides a basis of standards, quality indicators, and benchmarks specifically targeted for students with ID in post-secondary settings (Grigal et al., 2012).

Equally important, the Think College Standards Based Framework for Inclusive Higher Education serves as a foundation of the study as its population consists of students with ID who have pursued post-secondary education. Ultimately, understanding what exposures, experiences, and supports were present in secondary school for students with ID who attended post-secondary education increases the likelihood of stakeholders to potentially duplicate the successful measures or experiences and increase the number of students with ID who attend post-secondary schools.

### **Definitions**

Definitions for key terms are significant to provide clarity to terms that are unknown, uncommon, or subject specific. Providing definitions of key terms used throughout the study ensured that the information presented in the study was clear and understandable. Special education terminology is specific to disabilities, laws, programs, and other topic-specific references that are relevant to students with ID.

#### **Theoretical Definitions**

**Lived experiences.** In this research study, lived experiences refers to the lived experiences of students with ID in secondary school and includes supports, experiences, and exposures that occurred in secondary school and throughout the transition phase.

#### **Operational Definitions**

**Inclusion.** Inclusion, or inclusive education, is the process by which students with disabilities are placed in a school setting, educated in the same setting as non-disabled peers, and provided opportunities to improve upon important skills such as

social skills, academics, and behavior, so that they may become productive individuals in their postsecondary lives (IDEA, 2004).

**Individual education plan (IEP).** The individual education plan, or program, refers to a legal document that is developed in public schools for students who require special needs. An IEP is created by an IEP team, which is made up of a general education teacher, special education teacher, service provider, parents or guardians, and administrator. Other members can be added as necessary per the students' IEP. An IEP clearly outlines student strengths and needs and defines objectives that are individualized to the student who has previously been determined to have an eligible disability, which is defined by federal regulations.

**IEP team.** The IEP team includes the case carrier, family, administrator, general education teacher, school psychologist, and any related services provider that the student has qualified to receive services from. As students reach secondary school (middle school or high school), they are also included as members of the IEP team.

**Individual transition plan (ITP).** An ITP is a clearly defined plan that addresses how students with ID will work, live, and socialize as adults after they transition from secondary school. ITPs should be developed approximately 4-6 years prior to completion of secondary school. All IEP team members, including the student, are involved in the development of the ITP.

**Intellectual disability (ID).** According to the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD; 2017), an intellectual disability is characterized by severe limitations in the areas of cognitive functioning and adaptive

behavior. These limitations affect areas relating to executive functioning, social skills, practicality and, of course, learning.

**Least restrictive environment (LRE).** Providing students with ID the opportunity to learn in the LRE, with nondisabled peers, and learn with peers who are of the same age is the law according to IDEA (2004). All students with disabilities should be educated to the maximum extent possible and provided the proper accommodations or modifications necessary to access the learning environment.

**Mental retardation (MR).** In 2010, to eliminate any negative connotation or perception (Yell, 2012), Rosa's law was signed into effect, which required the federal government to officially eliminate the term "mental retardation" and, instead, use the term "intellectual disability" when referring to students with severe cognitive impairments.

**Post-secondary education (PSE).** Postsecondary education, or PSE, is the term used to describe education programs that follow the completion of secondary school. PSE programs can consist of two-year, four-year, and vocational learning programs. For this study, PSE references the programs that support the education for students with ID who have completed secondary school.

**Public law.** Public laws are laws that reflect relationships between individuals and the government for addressing direct concerns related to society.

**Related services.** To make progress on their goals and continue to develop, students may qualify for related services. Related services consist of services such as transportation, speech and language pathology, occupational therapy, adaptive physical education, audiology, physical therapy, and counseling.

**Secondary school.** Secondary school refers to middle school and high school levels of education. Secondary school typically refers to sixth grade through twelfth grade, or 22 years of age (extended programs) for many students with ID.

**Think College.** Think College is a national organization stemming from the University of Massachusetts Boston's Institute for Community Inclusion dedicated to the development, improvement, and implementation of inclusive higher education opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities (Grigal & Hart, 2010).

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations are decisions that were made by the researcher that set up and describe the overall boundaries of the research study (Patton, 2015). This research study was bounded by multiple factors, including the following: the overall number of PSE programs located in southern California, participants including PSE faculty, peers (non-disabled), administrators, families, and students with ID between the ages of 18-28 who are non-conserved and who attend PSE programs, location and distance of the two PSE programs utilized in the study to the researcher, and, lastly, the Think College Standards-Based Conceptual Framework for Inclusive Higher Education. A delimitation of the study was how many available PSE programs were in southern California. Of the seven PSE programs currently in southern California, the researcher chose to study two of the seven PSE programs to better understand the lived experiences of students with ID had in secondary school that successfully led them to participation in PSE programs.

### **Organization of the Study**

This study consists of five chapters, which include an introduction, summary of essential literature, methodology, data presentation and information, and a summary of

findings. Chapter I provides the purpose of the ethnographic study, includes a brief history of key variables related to students with ID, and introduces the Think College Standards-Based Framework for Inclusive Higher Education. Gaps in the research were identified and the problem, purpose, research question, and significance of the study were shared. Chapter II provides a detailed, in-depth review of literature related to the history of special education law, PSE programs, students with ID in secondary school, and emphasizes the process by which students with ID transition from secondary school into PSE programs, which was the purpose of the research study. Chapter III purposefully describes the processes taken by the researcher to conduct research. The methodology in Chapter III includes the research design, an analysis of qualitative research, population, sample, instrumentation, and strategies that the researcher used to ensure validity and reliability. Chapter IV is focused on the triangulation of data that were collected and formulated the comprehensive picture of how students with ID experienced secondary school and the transition process. Lastly, Chapter V concludes with findings, conclusions that were drawn from the data, recommendations and implications for future research, and a summary of the study by the researcher.



## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Over the course of the past five decades, many improvements were made regarding legislation and opportunities for students with disabilities. Although significant improvements were made, it was still unclear how much support and information are provided to students with intellectual disabilities (ID) and their families with regards to education, life skills, and transition, particularly at the secondary level. Students with ID at the secondary level have inconsistent experiences, opportunities, transition processes, and inclusion across the nation, state, and even individual school districts (Duff, 2013; Winter et al., 2010). Recognition and need of this group of people began to be emphasized during the Civil Rights era however, actual legislation supporting intellectually disabled individuals did not come to fruition until the middle of the nineteen seventies. Legislation such as the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Education for All Handicap Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975 prompted further support and recognition of individuals with intellectual disabilities and their rights as contributing citizens and students.

This literature review serves as a basis for understanding the history of special education law as it relates to students with ID, the least restrictive environment (LRE), individual education plan (IEP) processes, post-secondary education (PSE), the Think College Framework for Inclusive Higher Education, secondary education as it relates to students with ID, self-determination, and transition processes. Included in this review of literature is information regarding students with ID over the last 60 years. Furthermore, seminal studies related to students with ID were explored to further support and

substantiate the need for this study and provide a thorough history and background regarding students with ID, their education, and the transition into PSE programs.

### **History of Special Education Law for Students with ID**

Views of special education and the overall recognition of individuals with disabilities became prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s during the Civil Rights era (Warnes, 2013). Legislation began to address discrimination based on race, sex, and origin, but nothing specifically addressed individuals with physical or mental disabilities and their need for support and progress. Despite the need for federal government intervention, it was not until 1965 that Congress passed a succession of laws relating to education, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). It was necessary for a meticulous, exhaustive review of literature surrounding the history of special education law as it relates to students with ID, which portrays the evolution from complete exclusion and lack of recognition as a group of people who need support to the enactment of major legislation supporting students with special needs.

#### **Education Legislation Before 1980**

The inception of Public Law (P.L.) 89-10, which consisted of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), had significant impact by which some of the earliest special education legislation was written due to the emphasis of addressing equality and opportunity in education. Amendments, P.L. 89-313, to the ESEA of 1965 occurred shortly after P.L. 89-10 and mandated the first federal grant program that was solely intended to address children with disabilities. The emphasis of creating access to students with intellectual disabilities (ID), formerly known as mental retardation (MR), was evident with further amendments to the ESEA of 1965, which included P.L. 89-750,

P.L. 90-247, P.L. 91-230, and P.L. 93-280. In summary, those additional amendments included the establishment of the Bureau of Education of the Handicapped (BEH) and the National Council on Disability, both of which played significant roles in aiding students with ID in future years. The early 1970s brought forth the first mention of addressing the need to provide an appropriate education for all children who have disabilities. P.L. 93-280, specifically, played a major role in the establishment of the Education of the Handicapped Act and the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act, which both aided students with disabilities and their families.

The 1960s and 1970s had an abundance of change with regards to special education, in large part due to the emphasis on civil rights, parents speaking out, and advocacy groups for students with disabilities (Grigal, Hart, & Weir, 2013). The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EAHCA), or P.L. 94-142, formally assured that all children with disabilities had the right to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). With the EAHCA came more assurances, such as the requirement that all children with disabilities be taught in the least restrictive environment (LRE) with the opportunity to learn and engage with similarly-aged, non-disabled peers. That same year, the Individual Education Plan (IEP) came to fruition and provided eligible students with learning or physical disabilities the right and opportunity to access their environment and education along with non-disabled peers.

**Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.** With a heightened focus on civil rights, 1973 brought forth Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, which was created to protect individuals with disabilities from discrimination (S. Res. 93-112, 1973). Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act was the first law related to individuals with disabilities to be

enacted in the United States. Due to the lack of consistency with the act (Fekete, 2013), the Education Amendments Act served as a revision of Section 504, which emphasized clearer regulations and additional protections for individuals with disabilities. In 1974, in addition to the Education Amendments Act, civil rights were emphasized, and individuals were included in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (S. Res. 88-352, 1964), which had previously left individuals with disabilities out.

The significance of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was also seen within the educational community. One of the major components of the act prohibited discrimination of individuals with disabilities in all educational settings that received federal funding, which also meant that they would have full access to all activities, facilities, accommodation or modifications, and any aids or services they may need to fully access their education (S. Res. 93-112, 1973). The improvements in law supporting students with disabilities also brought forth a change or need for change of overall perception. While 1973 and 1974 brought forth major progress, an immense amount of work still needed to be done with regards to supporting individuals with disabilities in various settings (Fekete, 2013), altering the mindset to one of inclusion, and providing educational opportunities.

**Education for All Handicapped Children Act.** A major turning point occurred in 1975 when President Ford officially signed into action the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), also known as P.L. 94-142, which was created to address the severe need of educational equality for students with disabilities (Yell, 2012). The significance of this act was evident through the required accountability factor. States who wished to receive federal funding were required to provide clearly outlined plans of

how they intended to educate students with disabilities according to the policies and procedures outlined by the EAHCA (Yell, 2012). The profound implications of this act left students with disabilities, their families, and advocates feeling a small sense of victory after years of being disregarded as a group of individuals in need of support and equality. The federal regulations, according to the EAHCA, were officially enacted in 1977, at which point school districts were required to adhere to rules regarding educating students with disabilities.

### **Education Legislation 1981-2000**

The ending of the civil rights era and quick-paced progression of the 1970s left the 1980s quiet in terms of special education legislation. In 1986, an amendment to the EAHCA identified the need for students with disabilities and their parents to have rights regarding education (Yell, 2012). An elaborate, substantive set of procedural safeguards for parents, or parent rights, were created and required to be given to the parents of students with disabilities. The momentum of the 1970s reemerged in 1990 when the EAHCA was officially renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Students with disabilities, their families, and advocates continued to raise expectations, require equality, and demand inclusive practices (Carter & Hughes, 2006).

The purpose of IDEA was to provide equal opportunity for students with disabilities to have improved educational opportunities, equal opportunity in the school setting, and to encourage independence in daily living skills (Yell, 2012). Additionally, the demand for school districts across the nation to provide FAPE, related services, and address the unique needs of students began to transform the mindset, expectation, and process related to education. As a result of increased expectations for the general

education population to shift their mindset (Grigal et al., 2012), greater emphasis was placed on increasing supports in the regular school classrooms. IDEA was effectively establishing standards by which school districts educate students with disabilities and provide FAPE in the LRE.

In addition to amendments to the IDEA, 1990 also ushered in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which was closely developed after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (S. Res. P.L. 101-336, 1990). Although the ADA was not solely after the Civil Rights Movement, it prohibited the discrimination and exclusion of students with disabilities, which paved the way for students with ID to seek out educational opportunities after secondary school. Emphasized by the ADA were the requirements of schools and higher education institutions to provide services in various settings to meet the needs of the individual student, to provide appropriate accommodations to access the school and curriculum, and to provide equal opportunity in enrollment. As clarified in Public Law 101-336, the ADA ensures that institutions of education provide opportunities for accommodations in all areas of the school, including curriculum, physical access, policies, and practices, which are not to be altered in such a way that it changes the essence of the opportunity or learning environment. The goal of the ADA was to limit discrimination and provide individuals with disabilities an equal opportunity to thrive socially, economically, and educationally (Yell, 2012). Both the ADA and the IDEA began to change the mindset and expectations by focusing on what individuals can do, instead of what they cannot do.

In 1997, the IDEA amendments (P.L. 105-17) were passed for making improvements and additions to the IDEA. The IDEA amendments of 1997 were

prompted by the low expectations (Yell, 2012) of services providers, teachers, and schools and thus, the success of the IDEA was not as significant. With an emphasis on improved student performance, the reauthorizations demanded educational institutions to offer and implement curriculum that was both rigorous and implemented in the LRE. The connection between expectations and student success prompted IEP teams to consider LRE first, make appropriate placements, and provide accommodations for students to engage in rigorous curriculum along with their non-disabled peers. Another important component to the reauthorizations of 1997 was that general education teachers were officially named as required members of the IEP team. This was significant because IEP teams work closely with one another to determine steps for transitioning from secondary school to PSE. According to the IDEA amendments of 1997, if a student was unable to fulfill the requirements of a high school diploma with accommodations and modifications in place, the IEP team can elect, with parent approval, to support the student with special education services until they reach 22 years of age (S. Res. 105-17, 1997). The additional four years of special education services helps individuals with disabilities, including students with ID, to gain additional skills related to social skills, community access, living skills, job skills, and education. Yell (2012), emphasizes the need for IEP teams to take into consideration a students' interests, strengths, and opinions about their transition from secondary school into adulthood.

### **Education Legislation 2001-2017**

Additional improvements, or reauthorizations, to IDEA occurred in 2004 and called for a significant increase in accountability at both the state and local level. Requiring school districts to align IDEA with the ESEA placed pressure on school

districts to prove student improvement regarding performance (Yell, 2012). IEP teams were required to provide data to support their decision making, drive transition processes, and to provide adequate instruction to meet the needs of students with disabilities. In addition to increased accountability, school districts were mandated to implement intervention and instruction that supported students efficiently and helped prevent students from needing special education services. To further emphasize the intention of the reauthorization of 2004, IDEA was renamed to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA).

With the implementation of IDEA, further significance was placed on providing high-quality instruction, increased expectations, and the opportunity to access the general education curriculum to prepare students with disabilities to lead independent and productive lives after completion of secondary school (Yell, 2012). With the increased accountability factor in place, the need for collaboration amongst schools, especially during transition processes, was made evident (Pallisera et al., 2014). With regards to students with ID, the emphasis placed on collaboration with IDEA between secondary schools and PSE programs was especially important due to the transition skills required to be independent and productive after secondary school.

In 2008, to further extend the reach of Section 504, the Amendment Act for ADA expanded the definition of disability to protect more individuals under the law (Yell, 2012). Not only was the ADA Amendment Act (ADAAA) of 2008 important because of the expanded protection of individuals with disabilities, the ADAAA ensured proper supports and access to education, including higher education, and employment. The ADAAA made it possible for students with ID to transition from secondary school to



PSE programs (S. Res. P.L. 110-325, 2008). The ADA of 2008 reflected the importance of self-advocacy, independence, and access, which is notable when considering unique populations such as students with ID.

**Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) of 2008.** In August of 2008, the Higher Education Opportunity Act, or P.L. 110-315, was enacted to reauthorize the Higher Education Act of 1965. Love (2013) described the limited amount of participation in PSE programs after students with ID finished secondary school. Due to minimal attendance in PSE programs, the HEOA of 2008 sought to address and improve access for students with ID to attend higher education and create opportunities, support, and an inclusive environment. Part of creating an inclusive environment required schools to adopt the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, which helps create an environment that is flexible, vigorous, and accessible. The goal of the HEOA of 2008 was to provide opportunities for students with disabilities, including students with ID, to access PSE programs that will assist them in acquiring skills they need to lead productive, independent, and meaningful lives (S. Res. P.L. 110-325, 2008).

By utilizing the newest developments in brain research, the UDL framework created access to a learning environment (Adams, 2013), which created increased opportunities for students with ID to successfully attend PSE programs. The architecture of UDL forced programs to reinvent thinking and courses to adjust to the new paradigm (Adams, 2013). Creating purposeful learning environments to motivate students, encouraging an open and positive environment, having teachers and staff act as facilitators, and ensuring a barrier free (Adams, 2013) environment are all core principles of UDL. According to the Think College Framework for Inclusive Higher Education,

PSE programs that are structured for students with ID utilize UDL principles. In summary, although improvements to laws in support of students with ID occurred and programs were created, attendance to specialized PSE programs remains low for students with ID and the connection between secondary school and PSE programs needs to be investigated (Mercier, 2017).

**Mental retardation becomes intellectual disability.** In recent years, an increased emphasis on expectations, acceptance, and perception began to emerge regarding students with disabilities (Gallinger, 2013). In 2010, to eliminate any negative connotation or perception (Yell, 2012), Rosa’s law was signed into effect, which required the federal government to officially eliminate the term “mental retardation” and, instead, use the term “intellectual disability” when referring to students with severe cognitive impairments. Prior to 2010, students with ID were subject to discrimination and a stigma associated with the term “mental retardation.” Although students with ID are still categorized as individuals with social difficulties or impairments, significant cognitive deficits, and difficulty with life skills, eliminating the label of being “retarded” helped individuals recognize students with ID as contributing members of society despite their disabilities (Plotkin, 2012).

**Intellectual disability.** According to the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD; 2017), an intellectual disability is characterized by severe limitations in the areas of cognitive functioning and adaptive behavior. These limitations affect areas relating to executive functioning, social skills, practicality and, of course, learning. An intellectual disability is typically noted before a student enters middle school when rigor significantly increases, and social opportunities are presented

more frequently. According to the AAIDD (2017), an intellectual disability always originates prior to the age of eighteen. Due to the expansive need associated with an intellectual disability, strategic, consistent implementation of supports are required for students with ID to function appropriately alongside their non-disabled counterparts (S. Res. 110-315, 2008).

Due to the various components of an intellectual disability, it is exceedingly important that school teams, families, and other stakeholders work collaboratively to ensure that a well-balanced learning process occurs. According to Mercier (2017), in honor of students with ID who attend PSE programs, it was imperative to understand what supports, exposures, and experiences occurred in the secondary setting that contributed to students with ID attending PSE programs. Fekete (2013) describes the transition from high school to postsecondary education as being a time of great change, which involves unique challenges, and many difficulties. Students with ID require consistent support and collaboration to successfully transition from secondary school to their postsecondary lives.

**Least restrictive environment.** Providing students with ID the opportunity to learn in the LRE, with nondisabled peers, and learn with peers who are of the same age is the current law according to IDEA (2004). The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EAHCA), or P.L. 94-142, formally assured that all children with disabilities had the right to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). All students with disabilities should be educated to the maximum extent possible and provided the proper accommodations or modifications necessary to access the learning environment. While providing the opportunity to learn in the LRE, educators adjust pace, provide

accommodations, and increase opportunity for students with ID to make progress on their IEP goals. Students with ID deserve to be offered equal access to education that will contribute to their success in their postsecondary lives. According to Grigal, Hart, and Migliore (2011), students with ID have an increased chance of successful adult lives when they are given an inclusive education alongside peers without disabilities who can model behaviors and skills.

### **ID and PSE**

As students with ID prepare to exit secondary school and transition into their post-secondary lives, IEP teams are legally required to write transition plans that address student needs as they exit secondary school (IDEA, 1990). In the United States, when planning the transition for students with ID, the law requires IEP teams to consider student strengths, needs, job skills, independent living, career awareness, and education. Providing additional opportunities for education is essential for students with ID to further expand on the important life skills, learning skills, and job skills they need to be successful in their adult lives (Grigal & Hart, 2010). To better understand what supports, programs, and variables affect students with ID in PSE, a review of both international and United States options and information were investigated.

### **Background of United States History of ID and PSE**

To function and thrive in a diverse society (Mercier, 2017), students are expected to transition from secondary school into PSE programs to develop skills and learn. To gain a thorough understanding of students with ID in PSE, an in-depth review of PSE options and the evolution of education for students with ID was conducted. Over the course of the past four decades, the various PSE options have changed drastically. To

best make connections between factors that support growth and advancement for students with ID from secondary school to PSE, it was necessary to provide an understanding of the evolution of PSE options and transition processes.

With the 1970s came a rash of movement in support of students with ID. Fekete (2013) and Mercier (2017) both alluded to the increased social movement, legislation, and advocacy toward supporting the needs of students with ID, particularly, the education of students with ID alongside non-disabled peers. To ensure that colleges and universities were creating and implementing programs with fidelity, activists remained extremely involved, continuously questioned, and provided clarity to families in need. Although programs specifically targeted students with ID were few, the legislation and social movements paved the way for transformational change to occur.

In the 1980s, opportunities in education for students with ID began to increase, yet there was still a severe disconnect about employment. With employment rates for individuals with ID severely low, it was important to prove the correlation between PSE opportunities and job opportunities (Grigal et al., 2011). Vocational schools, supported employment, and life skills training began to increase however, gainful employment for individuals with ID remained low. Advocacy groups continued to fight for equality and appropriate supports for students with ID, while legislation continued to be amended to better support the needs of students with disabilities. If it were not for the diligent work of advocacy groups and families, the growth in supports and changes in legislation may not have progressed as it did (Mercier, 2017).

With increased demands, continued presences of advocacy groups, and newly minted IDEA regulations, the 1990s ushered in more change related to necessary

supports for students with ID, including the addition of required transition plans (IDEA, 1997). The creation and implementation of required transition plans was monumental for supporting students with ID as they navigate the difficult transition from secondary school into PSE programs. In 1994, the School-to-Work Opportunities Act came to fruition and clarified the demand for states to implement transition plans to support students with ID toward education and job skills-based PSE program settings (Farnham, 2011). By the mid-1990s, PSE options in the United States grew to thirteen (Grigal & Hart, 2010) and momentum for creating quality, inclusive programs in the post-secondary setting was well under way.

In the 2000s, UDL strategies became increasingly popular (Adams, 2013; Mercier, 2017) and schools that belonged to the Think College Standards-Based Framework for Inclusive Higher Education utilized those strategies. UDL strategies leveled the playing field for students with ID and created an environment that was accessible, equal, and full of opportunity. After reviewing the literature about PSE and students with ID, it was determined that notable growth in programs, program quality, and overall options for students with ID had improved. What was once 13 PSE programs available to students with ID in the 1990s soon became 263 PSE programs for students with ID. Overwhelmingly, improvements, increased opportunity, and change had occurred however, these quality programs remain unknown to many students with ID and their family's due to inconsistent collaboration amongst PSE programs and secondary school (Grigal, Hart, & Weir, 2011) and lack of space to admit students to programs.

## **Think College Framework for Inclusive Higher Education**

Think College is a national organization stemming from the University of Massachusetts Boston's Institute for Community Inclusion dedicated to the development, improvement, and implementation of inclusive higher education opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities (Grigal & Hart, 2010). Think College is based on eight key standards, all with sub-standards, which focus on academic access, career development, campus membership, self-determination, alignment with college systems and practices, coordination and collaboration, sustainability, and ongoing evaluation (Grigal et al., 2012). The Think College Standards were developed, along with the eighty-eight benchmarks, to focus on supports for students with ID to ease challenges during the transition phase into post-secondary education settings, to provide appropriate access, and to coordinate and collaborate (Grigal, Hart & Weir, 2011; Grigal et al., 2012). The standards, quality indicators, and benchmarks aligned with the Think College person-centered approach and served as a foundation by which students with ID would depart from their PSE equipped to successfully navigate the work force. Figure 1 represents the eight key standards that address inclusive higher education.



*Figure 1.* A representation of the Think College Conceptual Framework for Inclusive Higher Education. From “Framing the Future: A Standards, Based Conceptual Framework for Research and Practice in Inclusive Higher Education,” by Grigal, Hart, & Weir, 2011, p. 6.

**Standard 1: Academic Access**

The first standard was included to concentrate on the need for higher education inclusive practices that allow for students with ID to have access to various courses, participate alongside non-disabled peers, and participate in courses that are related to their goals (Grigal et al., 2012). In addition to purposeful inclusive practices, the first standard addresses any issues that may arise and impact their potential to participate. Lastly, the first standard provides students with ID the opportunity to further practice skills necessary for their adult lives.



## **Standard 2: Career Development**

To secure gainful employment, students with ID need to have strong job skills and appropriate social skills. The second standard emphasizes the need to provide support and experience to students with ID through person-centered planning, job coaches, internships, increased participation opportunities, community rehabilitation, and employment (Grigal et al., 2012).

## **Standard 3: Campus Membership**

Inclusion opportunities refer to more than just academics. The third standard addressed the need for campus membership, which is inclusion for all things aside from academics. Grigal et al. (2012) ensured that the third standard addressed students' perceptions of their development in PSE, their involvement in extracurricular activities, and overall supported learning.

## **Standard 4: Self-Determination**

Self-determination is an extremely important concept as it reflects the idea that all students with ID could take part in goal-setting and directing their own lives. The fourth standard addressed self-determination to validate the need for students with ID to learn to set goals, advocate for themselves, and become independent citizens (Grigal et al., 2012).

## **Standard 5: Alignment with College Systems and Practices**

To address the need for alignment amongst PSE programs, the fifth standard purposefully addressed the accountability factor in ensuring that outcomes were documented, academic guidance occurred, access to resources was available, and collaboration and communication had clear guidelines (Grigal et al., 2012).

### **Standard 6: Coordination and Collaboration**

The success of the Think College Standards-Based Framework for Inclusive Higher Education relied heavily on coordination and collaboration with relevant stakeholders to develop relationships, interconnect, and coordinate PSE programs, which served as the sixth standard (Grigal et al., 2012).

### **Standard 7: Sustainability**

The seventh standard focused on the need for funding, advisory boards, communication, and collaboration, which has contributed to sustainability thus far. Data was an essential piece to the seventh standard (Grigal et al., 2012).

### **Standard 8: Ongoing Evaluation**

The eighth standard addressed the importance of conducting ongoing evaluations to determine what worked well and what could be improved, provide information about effectiveness, improve practices and collaboration, increase capacity, and aide future planning (Grigal et al., 2012).

## **ID and Secondary Education**

Students with ID have not been afforded equal opportunities (Mercier, 2017) in secondary school, which inhibits them from opportunities and contributes to a difficult transition process (Grigal et al., 2011). The number of students with ID in secondary schools may not be as significant as those with specific learning disabilities, but the need to create equal access to education, social interactions, life skills, and post-secondary opportunities during those critical years is significant (Grigal & Hart, 2010.) Secondary students with ID often get shuffled into fully-contained classrooms, or non-inclusive settings, with little access to the general population of students or general education

curriculum due to the increased demands of secondary schools (Carter & Hughes, 2006; Fekete, 2013). To determine beneficial supports, experiences, and exposures for students with ID in secondary school, a thorough review of literature pertaining to the history of secondary school was essential.

### **International History**

Improvements to education and the significant role it plays on society and economic stability are present in much of the world, however, statistics continue to show a staggering disparity between equal education access and opportunity in many parts of the world (Hernandez, 2007). Although inclusion in secondary school for students with ID and transition to PSE options in the United States have increased (Grigal et al., 2012), a serious lack of growth toward inclusive opportunities maintains in other parts of the world (Alshemari, 2016). Growth for students with ID in terms of supports, options, and legislation has changed drastically over the course of the past four decades leaving countries in need of adapting and creating more inclusive opportunities. In developing and developed countries across the world, including and educating students with ID in secondary school has been a consistent topic (Alshemari, 2016). Although cultural differences are certainly present, all countries, including the United States, must be aware of the need and be ever-present on the journey toward inclusive opportunities.

**Difficulties, barriers, discrimination.** Alshemari (2016) studied the readiness for inclusion in Kuwait. It was largely evident, based on his research, that teachers' attitudes and beliefs about including students with ID played a significant role. Additionally, Alshemari (2016) emphasized the severe lack of research and knowledge in developing countries, specifically, the Middle East. Like many countries, Kuwait does

not have a clearly identified plan for including students with ID in secondary school (Alshemari, 2016), nor do they have clearly aligned goals for effectively transitioning students with ID into adulthood. For students with ID to progress and learn, they must be afforded equal opportunities to access education and their communities (Adams, 2013; Agran, Cavin, Wehmeyer, & Palmer, 2006; Alshemari, 2016; Carter et al., 2016). Unfortunately, in civilizations around the world, education is limited to certain groups of individuals, and too often, students with ID are excluded.

Another significant factor in understanding how students with ID function in secondary school and transition into adulthood is understanding the level of discrimination that has occurred due to socio-cultural factors, policy, and government regimes. According to Apanel (2013), in Poland, discrimination toward students with ID not only existed, it was the norm. Non-disabled peers grew up in a world in which there was zero knowledge of a disabled population. The intentional segregation of students with ID has occurred for decades and continues to occur to a partial degree even today (Apanel, 2013). Although programs exist for secondary students with ID to some degree, in Poland and other parts of the world, the lack of resources, slow-changing social acceptance, and overall lack of desire to acknowledge the needs of these students prevails (Alshemari, 2016; Apanel, 2013).

**Programs, schools, and opportunities.** Although it remains true that many countries throughout the world are behind in terms of providing effective, appropriate services for students with ID, some countries actively addressed this need, created programs, and built systematic procedures for transitioning students into adulthood. For example, Saudi Arabia evolved tremendously over the last 15 years in terms of providing

programs, addressing transition needs, and increasing teacher effectiveness (Alnahdi, 2013). The goal for Saudi Arabia regarding students with ID was to transition students appropriately and provide meaningful outcomes however, this has not yet been achieved successfully (Alnahdi, 2013). The family involvement, teacher effectiveness, and openness to providing supports for students with ID will assist the country in continuing development for programs for students with ID.

Continuous assessment and collaboration regarding increased opportunities for students with ID in nations around the world is a frequently discussed topic. In a study conducted by Hernandez (2007), it was found that El Salvador had the desire to extend services, support students with ID, and provide inclusive education, however, the lack of resources, policy implementation, and inconsistent collaboration impeded the success of the endeavors. In many cases, the willingness and desire to assist students with ID in gaining meaningful education, peer relationships, and skills to transition is there, but the magnitude of hurdles to cross are seemingly impossible at times. The continued assessment, capacity-building, and legislation surrounding the education of secondary students with ID will assist in the transformation of individuals from consumers to contributors in our communities and economy.

### **United States History**

The United States and other western countries have made great strides in supporting students with disabilities in recent years (Hernandez, 2007; Upshaw, 2013). The transition from complete segregation prior to the 1970s to complete inclusion opportunities is transformational in its own right; however, the process for students, families, and advocates has been and continues to be difficult in many ways.

Furthermore, inconsistencies in delivery of services, program options, and collaboration continue to plague the progression of supporting students with ID in secondary school and encouraging a successful transition. With extreme measures and a truly collaborative effort, families, students, and advocates demanded change and prompted transformational change in the field of special education services.

Prior to the 1970s, Upshaw (2013) explained that only one in five students with disabilities were receiving public education and many states had laws excluding students with ID from accessing certain educational opportunities. The civil rights push of the 1960s and 1970s required a massive overhaul on special education legislation and called for equal access to education in the least restrictive environment. The push demanded that federal legislation and state laws adjust to protect students with ID, remove individuals from segregated private institutions, and provide opportunities to be integrated into learning and community environments.

Transformational change was, indeed, occurring, but more needed to be done regarding creating quality programs, creating inclusive opportunities, and determining the effectiveness of skills taught that would follow students with ID out into the real world. The 1980s was largely focused on educating teaching staff and establishing a foundation for which to serve students with ID in secondary school. Most significantly, in 1984, the first initiative addressing transition services needs was authored (Upshaw, 2013). With support of advocacy and federal examination, the civil rights of students with ID began to be a priority (Yell, 2012). The focus of providing students with skills to successfully transition from school to work was evident. Due to the efforts of the transition initiative, funding became available to provide program models, assessments, research, and

findings to help improve the education and transition needs of secondary students with ID.

In 1990, IDEA sought to reaffirm the need for mandated transition skills and services for students with ID in secondary school. The reauthorization included transition processes that were aimed at bettering the quality of life for students with ID through policy and practice (Upshaw, 2013; Yell, 2012). Transition skills, plans, and processes became an integral part of the IEP process, by law, and began to alter the way IEP teams taught, provided services, wrote goals, and implemented accommodations and modifications. Although progress and change were leading toward a positive path, so much change happened so fast that schools and teams were not collaborating effectively (Mercier, 2017), providing consistent service models, and providing students with equal opportunities as well as they should have been.

For many students with ID, the majority of their social interactions and learning opportunities were had in the secondary setting as they prepared for adulthood. The 2000s brought with it IDEA, which further defined the provisions regarding free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment, which helped to address the unique needs of students with ID (Upshaw, 2013). Fortunately for teachers, students, advocates, and families, a remarkable amount of research surrounding students with ID exists. Strong connections can be made regarding the need for greater collaboration amongst IEP teams, families, and PSE programs during the transition phases of students' lives. In addition to the obvious need for increased collaboration and training to support the growth with legislation, positive improvements occurred with movements to address mainstreaming and inclusion opportunities.

## **ID Students in Secondary School**

The various difficulties students with ID face while in secondary school is amplified by the assumption of inability, low expectations, and presumed inadequacies by those around them (Love, 2013). Development of life skills, real-world experiences, and career awareness are all critical elements for students with ID. According to Grigal, Hart, and Weir (2011), providing students with multiple, purposeful opportunities to learn and refine essential life skills will foster self-determination and lead to greater success in their post-secondary lives. Creating rich opportunities, social and academic, for students with ID is necessary for mastery of skills and quality of life. Equally important to life skills are career awareness, family involvement, student-teacher relationships, peer relationships, and self-determination (Carter et al., 2008; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). To determine what supports, experiences, and exposures propelled students with ID to successfully transition and attend PSE programs, an examination of the most common relationships was necessary.

### **Relationships and Collaboration**

Carter et al. (2016) stated that the post-secondary landscape for students with ID has not changed in substantial ways leading researchers to point to the importance of community, family, IEP team, and PSE collaboration. Fostering relationships and creating a solid foundation around students with ID will guide them to positive post-secondary outcomes. Carter et al. (2016) and Pickens (2015) agreed collaboration between all stakeholders creates more successful opportunities in secondary school and post-secondary school. Students with ID who form relationships with stakeholders, peers, and families early on in their educational career are more likely to connect with the



skills taught and goals developed. Family plays a critical role in providing input, knowledge, and participation for students with ID to successfully transition (Pickens, 2015) to post-secondary employment or PSE programs (Moon, Simonsen, & Neubert, 2011). Research proved parents who were knowledgeable and actively engaged in the successful outcomes of their children were more likely to productively navigate post-secondary life.

The relationship and collaboration between the student, IEP team, family, and PSE program is certainly valuable (Moon et al., 2011; Pickens, 2015; Roller, 2016) however, it is also essential to consider the value of relationships and effects between students with ID and non-disabled peers. Research has long since proven that education students alongside their non-disabled peers can increase positive behaviors and social opportunities. Quality relationships between non-disabled peers and students with ID in secondary school plays a major role in decreasing bullying and building self-esteem (Pendleton, 2008). Quality peer relationships also increase the likelihood of successful school adjustment, social opportunities, and long-term skill attainment. Notably, Pendleton (2008) affirmed quality relationships with stakeholders could determine a students' future successes. Based on a review of literature about relationships and collaboration regarding students with ID, relationships and collaboration amongst stakeholders, both in secondary school and post-secondary school, made an impact on the students' outcomes (Moon et al., 2011; Pendleton, 2008; Pickens, 2015; Roller, 2016).

### **Self-Determination**

According to Lachapelle et al. (2005), and later confirmed by Carter et al. (2016), self-determination enhances the quality of life for students with ID. The definition of

self-determination can fluctuate depending on the expert, but ultimately, self-determination refers to a set of skills and abilities such as problem solving, goal setting, self-advocacy, leadership, self-management, self-regulation, self-awareness, self-knowledge, creativity, and pride. The belief that all students with ID can participate in directing their own lives, contribute to their communities, and make decisions for their future is grounded in self-determination (Mercier, 2017). Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1998) and Grigal, Neubert, Moon, and Graham (2003) confirmed that higher levels of self-determination skills contribute to higher employment rates in post-secondary life. Research proves that students with ID who have self-determination skills are more likely to be successful in the transition from secondary school into their post-secondary adult lives (Carter et al., 2016; Grigal et al., 2003; Lachapelle et al., 2005; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998).

### **Problem Solving**

For students with ID in secondary school, problem solving is an essential skill, yet difficult to initiate with the ever-changing dynamic of a secondary school setting (Cote, 2009). As stated by Wehmeyer, Agran, and Hughes (2000), both teachers and parents deemed problem-solving skills as one of the most important self-determination skills that lead to success for students with ID. When presented with a problem, secondary students with ID have extreme difficulty with determining multiple outcomes or actions (Agran & Wehmeyer, 2005), which can lead to poor decision-making and confusion. Students with ID tend to make decisions based on certainties or familiarities rather than solving a problem the most appropriate way (Agran & Wehmeyer, 2005; Wehmeyer et al., 2000).

Carter et al. (2011) explained that paraprofessionals and teachers play a prominent role in educating students with ID about self-determination and the associated skills such as problem solving. Unfortunately, based on a thorough study conducted by Carter et al. (2016), paraprofessionals and teachers felt that they lacked training in teaching self-determination skills such as problem solving and were inconsistent in teaching the skill. Students with ID grasp new concepts like problem solving depending on how the information is presented, how much importance is perceived, and the context in which it is presented (Cote, 2009). To prepare students with ID to successfully integrate in inclusion settings in secondary school, paraprofessionals and teachers must develop problem-solving competencies to tackle everyday life issues (Agran & Alper, 2000).

### **Goal Setting and Attainment**

Goal setting and attainment are major components of self-determination; however, for students with ID to succeed in inclusive environments they need to be able to acquire problem-solving skills (Agran et al., 2006). Goal setting and problem solving are both distinctive, significant components of self-determination. Students with ID can make decisions to navigate their own lives (Mercier, 2017) and should be taught to set goals, take responsibility for their learning and future, and make changes or adjustments as needed to stay on the right path. Students with ID typically have deficits in executive functioning, which causes them to struggle with planning for their futures, monitoring their behaviors, and staying organized. Subsequently, while students with ID may struggle with executive functioning deficits, research shows that students with ID can have a greater quality of life by taking ownership in their futures (Mercier, 2017; Wehmeyer et al., 2000).

Goal setting and making progress toward goals are part of the IEP and ITP process, not just great self-determination skills. By law, IEP teams work with students to write goals that address their strengths, needs, and areas of interest. With that, solutions, ways to achieve the goals, and strategies should all be included as well. Creating a plan by which students with ID can make progress independently, by utilizing their embedded supports and strategies, will foster self-determination and create a positive, successful path as they transition from secondary school into their post-secondary lives. Agran et al. (2006) suggested that by providing problem solving and goal setting instruction and support, students with ID would make progress toward their goals and behaviors.

### **Self-advocacy and Leadership**

Research indicates that explicitly teaching students with ID choice-making skills leads to the development of self-advocacy and leadership skills (Lee, Palmer, Turnbull, & Wehmeyer, 2006). Self-advocacy and leadership skills can be difficult for secondary students with ID however, Mercier (2017) suggested that when taught and given the opportunity, students with ID are able to make progress and become more independent. Self-advocacy and leadership are of great significance in the overall development of self-determination for students with ID because ultimately, those skills lead to students with ID being self-determined (Schelling, 2010; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). Self-advocacy skills are essential for students with ID because those skills involve higher level communication, conveying wants and needs, the ability to negotiate, to express interests, and to stand up for themselves in times of need.

According to results from the NLTS-2 survey and Vinoski, Graybill, and Roach (2016), providing students with ID inclusive extracurricular opportunities with non-

disabled peers enhances self-determination skills and specifically builds leadership and communication skills. Vinoski et al. (2016) stated that characteristics related to self-determination may be further developed through extracurricular activities, in addition to academic inclusion opportunities, and lead to enhanced self-advocacy and leadership skills for students with ID. Encouraging and providing opportunities for secondary students with ID to take on leadership roles will contribute to their confidence and independence as they transition into their post-secondary lives.

### **Self-management and Self-regulation**

Goal setting and attainment directly connects to improved self-management and self-regulation for students with ID (Lee et al., 2006; Schelling, 2010). Substantial significance is placed on the transition of students with ID and the importance of self-management and self-regulation in the process (Carter et al., 2008). Self-management and self-regulation are important life skills related to self-determination and directly relate to the success of living independently in adulthood. Grigal et al. (2003) investigated general education high school teachers and found that many felt less informed and less competent with the idea of self-determination when compared to their special education counterparts. Although inconsistencies exist with knowledge and delivery in secondary school, secondary school teachers agreed self-management and self-regulation skills were important for students with ID (Carter et al., 2008; Grigal et al., 2003).

Along with goal setting in an IEP and ITP, self-management and self-regulation skills should be addressed when considering a student with ID and their transition needs. Educating students with ID about self-management and self-regulation and providing

systematic interventions to support them as they transition leads to their active participation in self-monitoring and decision making (Agran et al., 2006; Lee et al., 2006). The overall goal of an IEP and ITP in secondary school is to provide a plan of action that will contribute and foster independence. Students with ID who have a solid foundation of self-management and self-regulation skills are more likely to make progress on their goals and transition successfully from secondary school (Grigal et al., 2003; Schelling, 2010).

### **Self-awareness and Self-knowledge**

Self-awareness and self-knowledge refer to one's ability to better understand themselves, see themselves as unique human beings, and build on strengths to make improvements for the future (Agran & Wehmeyer, 2005; Lee et al., 2006). A relatively common best practice to improvement of student outcomes (Cantley, 2011), self-awareness and self-knowledge play a critical role in assisting students with ID to recognize their strengths and needs as they advance into their post-secondary lives. Students with ID must learn to advocate for themselves, thus it is essential that students with ID understand their disability and needs associated with it (Lachapelle et al., 2005). Cantley (2011) suggested self-aware students with ID offset the impact of their disability and diminish the possibility of it controlling their entire life.

Students with ID accomplished success in their transition into post-secondary life; however, they had to develop a strong set of self-determination skills. Self-awareness and self-knowledge also contribute to the ability of a student to self-advocate, which is of great significance for students with ID (Cantley, 2011; Grigal et. al., 2003; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). Teachers can measure a students' self-awareness or self-knowledge

through assessments to address the strength or need in IEP and ITP but admit that there is minimal opportunity practice and develop the self-determination behaviors (Cantley, 2011) outside of an IEP or ITP meeting. Developing a plan for students with ID to learn about their disability, work on strategies associated with it, and practice self-advocacy skills will aide students with ID in secondary school as they transition.

### **Creativity and Pride**

Problem solving, and other self-determination skills are directly related to creativity and innovation (Cote, 2009) and are associated with positivity and independence. Purposeful implementation of problem-based learning can contribute to increased success with creativity (Cote, 2009) and pride for students with ID. In addition, pride stems from positive self-awareness and self-knowledge. The ability for a student with ID to recognize their strengths, differences, and unique qualities will contribute to their ability to problem solve and take pride in who they are and what they do. Providing students with ID the opportunity to learn and do things they are not comfortable with will allow for the practice of creativity and will lead to pride. Consistent encouragement, positivity, and support for students with ID can contribute to a solid foundation in which to build upon self-determination skills.

### **Transition**

One of the most challenging, yet significant, aspects of secondary school for those with intellectual disabilities is gaining appropriate transition skills and planning for their post-secondary education or employment lives (Grigal & Hart, 2010; Pallisera et al., 2014). Understanding what factors or experiences contribute positively to the transition of students with ID can be difficult because each individual student has their own set of

diverse needs. In addition, students with ID typically have multiple areas of need, such as social skills, job skills, community-based learning needs, academics, physical, and sometimes psychological. IEP teams were required to address every area of need and incorporate a plan or goal to improve upon it.

Transition skills often coincide with self-determination and include goal setting, self-awareness, independence, and the ability to express ones' own needs, amongst others (Durlak et al., 1994; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). The support of family and strong special education teachers, or case carriers, can help to develop and hone these skills. The family role is crucial to the IEP process and inclusion in IEP meetings is mandated by law. On the other hand, not all students with ID are capable of or have the necessary support to develop the skills needed for successful transition. Inclusion in social opportunities and general education curriculum is not the only form of inclusion to take place. Transition planning requires an IEP team and should include the student and family throughout the process. It is essential to allow the student the opportunity to share their 'voice' (Mercier, 2017) throughout the process as transition planning includes addressing areas of interest, strengths, and needs.

Facilitating a students' involvement in the transition planning process is essential to the process. In a research study by Benito (2012), individual's that worked with students with ID felt worried about the transition process, the lack of knowledge and awareness by the students, and the weakened life skill sets. Unfortunately, the perception that students with ID are unable or less likely to be qualified to contribute to the transition process is yet another form of discrimination and is completely inaccurate (Benito, 2012; Duff, 2013). Research affirms that the active participation and inclusion of students with



ID and their families in the transition planning process significantly increases their likelihood of post-secondary success (Grigal et al., 2011). It is for that reason, combined with the legal obligation, that students with ID be fully included throughout every step of the transition planning process (Roller, 2016). The collaboration between secondary schools and post-secondary schools must exist for program knowledge and awareness of opportunities to be present (Roller, 2016). The IEP team must work in accordance with the student and family to work through any supports and challenges during the process of transition.

### **Planning and Process**

Federal law related to special education requires school districts to provide transition planning services for students with disabilities as part of their IEP. By the age of 16, perhaps earlier if student need exists, students with ID should participate in IEP and individual transition plan (ITP) meetings (IDEA, 2004). In addition to student participation, the IEP and ITP should include any related agencies that provide services and the students' parents or guardians. As students with ID plan the difficult transition from secondary school, IEPs and ITPs are of critical importance and should address employment, training and education, compliance, guideposts for success, independent living, and student interests (Grigal & Hart, 2010; Mercier, 2017). The purpose of the IEP and ITP is to provide relevant, appropriate, and measurable goals the student wished to achieve while advancing to post-secondary life. To accurately build goals to support the student through transitioning, the IEP team conducts a series of transition-based assessments which are given to the student and their families.

A well-written, thoughtful, and purposeful ITP communicates the strengths, needs, and desires of the student. According to IDEA (2004), with the intent of a successful transition into adulthood in mind, the ITP also serves as continued support, aides with placement in public or private agencies, addresses vocational training, independence, social, and recreational goals. For many students with ID in secondary school, looking beyond into the challenging world of post-secondary life can cause stress, fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. The need for a supportive team and collaborative effort is essential for students with ID to attend PSE.

### **Life Skills**

AAID defines an intellectual disability as having significant limitations in intellectual functioning, adaptive behavior, and limited development of life skills. To determine how students with ID are best supported in secondary school, it was relevant to investigate life skills as it relates to students with ID who are going through the transition from secondary school to PSE or post-secondary life. For students with ID, life skills are of severe importance as they enable students with ID to function and thrive, develop socially responsible behaviors, and to develop healthy relationships. In consideration of post-secondary outcomes, life skills are of critical importance to success for students with ID (Bouck, 2010). Sadly, according to the NLTS-2 and Bouck (2010), students with ID reported little emphasis, support, or teaching surrounding life skills in secondary school and post-secondary life. Life skills encompass a variety of needed skills such as academic, independent living, occupational, daily living skills, and interpersonal skills. To provide a clear indication of how important life skills are to students with ID, according to the Council for Exceptional Children, it is necessary to understand that

nearly 75% of people with disabilities are unemployed, more than one-third of individuals living in poverty are people with disabilities, and over 50% of people with disabilities make less than five thousand dollars per year in the four years post-secondary school. Life skills education and practice are detrimental to a student with ID as they transition into post-secondary life.

**Independent living skills.** Independent living skills are skills that contribute to meeting individual needs and wants, self-esteem, meal planning, financial responsibility, housing, transportation, and anything else as it relates to growth toward independence. Transitioning from secondary school into adulthood is scary and concerning for parents, students, and teachers, which is why it is more important than ever to ensure that students with ID are prepared with basic independent living skills (Cote, 2009; Kim, 2010) as they exit secondary school. The ADA played a critical role in supporting independent living skills by requiring public and private agencies to promote equal access and services for students with ID (Kim, 2010). The continuum of independent living skills is vast and students with ID should be taught in an order that is most appropriate to their individual needs. Throughout the process of learning and maintaining independent living skills, students with ID should have some level of support to encourage accuracy, appropriateness, and consistency to master the skills and apply them to real life experiences.

Self-determination skills allow students with ID to express their strengths, preferences, interests, and choice-making, which are all related to and essential for independent living in their post-secondary lives. Disappointingly, Blackorby and Wagner (1996) and Kim (2010) shared that only 4% of students with ID lived on their own after

secondary school and only 24% of them lived on their own independently after approximately five years. Considerable research pointed to the increased need for students with ID to gain independent living skills (Agran et. al., 2006; Cote, 2009; Kim, 2010), the inconsistencies with teaching, establishing, and mastering these skills is high.

**Functional academics and curriculum.** In addition to traditional academics, students with ID can also receive what is called functional academics, which refers to real-life application such as practicing math with a menu from a local restaurant or creating grocery lists to follow certain recipes. According to Bouck (2013), functional academics is life skills based and encompasses age-appropriate skills that students with ID need to function in their everyday life. The more opportunity students with ID have to practice real-life application to problem solving, the better their independent living skills become. Functional academics refers to a curriculum that addresses the following: (a) vocational education, (b) access to the community, (c) functional academics, (d) independent living skills, (e) daily living skills, (f) navigation and transportation skills, (g) financial skills, (h) social skills, and (i) self-determination skills.

When examining the literature surrounding functional academics and curriculum, it was clear that there was a disparity between the need for functional academics and curriculum with an intellectually disabled population (Bouck, 2010, 2013; Cantley, 2011) and the actual receipt of functional academics and curriculum (Bouck, 2013). After a thorough examination of over 800,000 students with disabilities, it was found that nearly 67% secondary students with moderate to severe ID reported receipt of functional curriculum and 34% non-functional curriculum. Additionally, secondary students with mild ID reported receiving functional curriculum 15% of the time and non-functional

curriculum nearly 86% of the time (Bouck, 2013). Surprisingly, Bouck's (2013) study confirmed that students with ID received functional curriculum inconsistently and based on level of intensity of their ID. Functional academics and curriculum have been proven to provide students with ID support and growth in skills they will need to transition into post-secondary life however, factors such as teacher influence, knowledge, and context can impede the implementation of functional curriculum for some students with ID.

**Communication and social skills.** Communication and social skills promote independence for students with ID and therefore contribute to the overall success and quality of life of the students when skills are practiced and achieved (Carter et al., 2011; Lachapelle et al., 2005). Brunello-Prudencio (2001) found teaching students with ID communication skills increased their ability to advocate for themselves in times of need. Additionally, Holmes (2011) and Brunello-Prudencio (2001) attested students with ID had extreme difficulty understanding the roles and responsibilities of a conversation, sustaining a conversation and turn-taking, and comprehending another's views on something. Explicitly teaching students with ID social skills, allowing for role-playing, real-life experiences, and speech and language services, can all aid in positive peer relations, self-advocacy, and positive perception.

Communication and social skills continue to gain significance throughout the course of education and students are expected to have manners, interact appropriately with peers and adults, and maintain friendly interactions, especially as students transition into adulthood. Encapsulated by bias, obstacles, and negative perceptions (Benito, 2012; Duff, 2013), students with ID need to be able to advocate for themselves and communicate their wants and needs. Learning non-verbal communication skills such as

making eye contact, maintaining positive facial expressions, and having appropriate hand gestures (Brunello-Prudencio, 2001) all indicate friendly components in communicating with others. Furthermore, students with ID should practice proper tone, distance from listener, and appropriate language (Brunello-Prudencio, 2001) in addition to non-verbal components. Students with ID need to be equipped with basic communication and social skills to successfully navigate the transition process and gain success in PSE programs, the workforce, or their vocational endeavors.

### **Vocational experiences**

Vocational experiences assist students with ID to gain vocational skills that can eventually lead to pursuit of a trade. With employment being a primary component of adult life, it is imperative that students with ID have substantive practice gaining vocational skills. For students with ID to be productive in post-secondary life or PSE programs, they must be provided with the proper training to navigate the workforce and maintain gainful employment (Grigal & Neubert, 2004; Roller, 2016). Providing students with ID person-centered (Mercier, 2017) opportunities to participate in vocational experiences will better prepare them for their post-secondary school lives (Pickens, 2015). Throughout the transition planning process, students are assessed and required to provide information regarding their strengths, interests, and needs, which leads IEP teams to develop a plan that individually supports the student. With that plan, vocational skills should be identified and students with ID should be able to practice those skills that will be beneficial in their field of interest. Figure 2 identifies areas of vocational experiences that should be considered when planning and supporting a student with ID for post-secondary success.

## IMPORTANT VOCATIONAL SKILLS TO LEARN

Vocational training should provide students with a curriculum that prepares them for the job that they intend to enter. Broad-based knowledge and skills are good, but for some students with disabilities, specific skills are necessary for survival in the workplace and in the community and need to be explicitly taught.

### Academic Skills

- Reading and writing (e.g., sight-word vocabulary, spelling, handwriting, typing, etc.)
- Math (e.g., basic computation, money, measurement)
- Problem solving
- Listening comprehension
- Speaking
- Computer
- Art or music
- Foreign language

### Communication Skills

- Following and giving directions accurately
- Communicating information
- Understanding and processing information
- Requesting or offering assistance

### Social and Interpersonal Skills

- Answering the phone and taking a message
- Making necessary phone calls to employers and other professionals as part of a job requirement
- Displaying appropriate workplace behavior and etiquette
- Knowing appropriate topics for discussion in the workplace
- Knowing when and when not to socialize on the job
- Learning how to protect themselves from victimization
- Learning social problem-solving techniques

### Occupational and Vocational Skills

There are a number of skills and behaviors that most, if not all, jobs require. It is important to help students who do not already possess these skills acquire them. Examples of these activities include the following:

- Using a time card and punch clock
- Arriving to work on time
- Calling when sick
- Requesting vacation time
- Using the appropriate voice tone and volume
- Accepting instructions and corrections
- Knowing appropriate interaction with coworkers (i.e., getting along; social problem solving; making friends; and recognizing personal, professional, and sexual boundaries)

**There are also a number of skills that students should have to be as independent as possible in their future job searches; these skills include the following:**

- Looking for jobs (advertisements in the newspaper and online, neighborhood help-wanted signs, and local resources)
- Filling out job applications
- Writing résumés and cover letters
- Obtaining necessary identification (photo ID, birth certificate)
- Filling out paperwork (W2 forms, I-9 forms, employer paperwork)
- Having interviewing skills

*Figure 2.* Areas of vocational skills to address for students with ID. From “Principal Leadership,” by E. Levinson and E. Palmer, 2005, 5(8), p. 13.

**Employment.** According to Blackorby and Wagner (1996) and Pickens (2015), students with ID have not been provided with the appropriate skills to engage in competitive employment, are not provided with equal opportunity, and nearly always get paid less than their non-disabled counterparts. Carter et al. (2016), and Levinson and

Palmer (2005) affirmed that students with ID in post-secondary life are considerably more likely to be unemployed, have lower job satisfaction, make less money, and feel unprepared. Employment opportunities post-secondary school vary drastically and include the following: (a) sheltered employment, which is segregated employment in which students with ID work alongside other individuals with disabilities, (b) supported employment, which refers to employment with on-going support and integration, (c) customized employment, which aims to individually meet the needs of the person with a disability and the employer, and (d) traditional employment, which is employment without needed supports or accommodations. During secondary school and no later than their 16th birthday, the IEP team, including the student, should collaboratively work together to address the needed vocational skills with a systematic plan for improving upon skills necessary to become independent and competitive in the workplace (Levinson & Palmer, 2005).

### **Supports for ID Students in Secondary Education**

The review of literature identified various crucial factors that contribute to students with ID's successes, such as self-determination, fair accessibility in education, support in the school and family life environment, mentors, and overall knowledge of what is available to them. These factors are especially true when considering individuals with significant cognitive disabilities (Carter et al., 2008; Roller, 2016). Another critical support in secondary school, and especially during the transition phase, is the collaboration between key stakeholders (Pickens, 2015; Upshaw, 2013) such as special education teachers, administration, service providers, community resources, families, students with ID, and PSE programs. The family and student involvement are not only



highly recommended but is required by law. Family collaboration is critical to supporting students with ID through the transition phase. Lastly, the review of literature revealed the benefits that inclusive opportunities provide students with ID (Agran et al., 2006; Carter & Hughes, 2006; Cooney et al., 2006; Winter et al., 2010).

A significant amount of literature exists regarding the benefits of developing self-determination skills like problem-solving (Cote, 2009), goal setting, self-advocacy, self-management, and self-awareness (Agran & Wehmeyer, 2005; Cantley, 2011; Carter et al., 2008; Lachapelle et al., 2005). Self-determination skills promote independence for students with ID and assist them in developing the skills needed to successfully transition from secondary school into adulthood. The IEP and ITP process should include the student and should address self-determination skills as goals with specific strategies that will support the student throughout secondary school and as they transition. Pickens (2015) pointed to the need for students with ID to develop ‘people skills’ as they approach adulthood to successfully navigate the post-secondary world. Self-determination skills are often solidified with the support and collaboration between stakeholders.

Students with ID are more likely to be successful in secondary school and PSE programs with the support and collaboration between stakeholders (Carter et al., 2016; Eckes & Ochoa, 2005; Lee et al., 2006). Providing students with ID the functional curriculum needed to practice and master important learning, social, and life skills, along with the consistent support and implementation by family, staff, and teachers, creates greater opportunities and provides students with ID the support necessary to be successful (Bouck, 2010; Fekete, 2013; Hawpe, 2013; Trohanis, 2008). Positive outcomes for

students with ID exist in some circumstances, but there is a gap in understanding which combination of supports best served students with ID who successfully transitioned to PSE programs. Collaboration between key stakeholders allows for shared best practices, knowledge of PSE programs, and supports that will assist students with ID to master skills needed to become meaningful members of society.

Finally, students with ID are well supported when they are provided fair access to education and inclusive opportunities. According to Puckett, Mathur, and Zamora (2017), peer mentoring can be highly effective when implemented with special education students, which has been proven to increase motivation and involvement in both special education and general education classes. For students with ID to gain the skills and growth they need in secondary school, it is imperative that students feel well-supported, challenged, and informed throughout various academic and vocational opportunities. Mentors for students with ID provide significant opportunities for students with ID to feel inspired through bonds, activities, and assistance through difficult tasks. Mercier (2017), discussed the significance of mentoring to increase engagement for students with ID in a variety of ways. Students with ID who are provided multiple, meaningful opportunities to engage in inclusive settings are more likely to show consistent improvement in learning, behaviors, and social skills (Agran et al., 2006; Carter & Hughes, 2006; Winter et al., 2010). The Think College Standards-Based Framework for Inclusive Higher Education exists to support students with ID in their PSE endeavors by providing inclusive opportunities to learn, gain independence, and grow as productive members of society (Grigal & Hart, 2010; Hart, Grigal, Sax, Martinez, & Will, 2006). The continuum of supports for students with ID in secondary school and PSE is present, but the fidelity

by which some programs are conducted, the collaboration between stakeholders, community resources, equal access to educational opportunities, and other factors can negatively or positively affect the path students take.

### **Barriers for ID Students in Secondary Education**

After a thorough review of literature, students with ID in secondary school have not been provided the same fair access in educational opportunities and continue to struggle through transitions from secondary school to their post-secondary lives (Carter & Hughes, 2006; Cooney et al., 2006; Fekete, 2013), which likely limits their involvement in post-secondary endeavors. The Disability Rights of California (2017) stated:

The California Legislature has found and declared that improvements in special education have not resulted in paid employment or maximum integration of special education students into the community. The legislature states that there is no formalized process that bridges the gap between school and post-school services and resources, and that there is insufficient coordination between educators, adult services providers, employers, and families which would lead to paid employment and social independence. Because of this, the majority of options available to adults with disabilities foster dependence rather than independence. The Legislature's goal for transition services is a planned movement from school to adult life that provides opportunities which maximize economic and social independence in the least restrictive environment. (p. 10-3)

The life of a student with ID consists of many obstacles no matter the interventions in place (Mercier, 2017); however, it is especially difficult during the transition phases of their lives, including transitioning to independent living or supported living, PSE programs, work, and other post-secondary responsibilities (Grigal et al., 2011). With the rate of employment for students with ID at only 9%, and approximately only 15% of special needs students, not just students with ID, attending post-secondary school (Shah, 2011), there is an urgent need to understand why some students with ID successfully transition to PSE programs and some do not. It is necessary to provide students with ID the opportunities to master skills necessary to be independent and competitive in the workplace (Mercier, 2017; Pickens, 2015). The limited amount of involvement in post-secondary education for students with ID is staggering.

To date, fair access for students with intellectual disabilities is inconsistent across the nation, the state, and even individual school districts (Duff, 2013). While including students with ID in the LRE is the law, perceptions and follow through of what LRE is depends on the special education professionals, funding, and knowledge-base at each school site or district. A myriad of programs exists to address students with special needs on secondary school campuses. Once again, the programs vary based on each district and sometimes vary based on schools in a district. Programs range from inclusion, or mainstream, models, fully-contained special education classes, and separate school settings, or fully excluded. A push for greater inclusion of students with ID began and the need for accommodations and modifications to the general education curriculum become more common (Carter & Hughes, 2006). To elaborate, IDEA (2004) clearly stated individuals with severe cognitive disabilities could access the LRE to gain skills,

including emotional and social growth, to become productive, contributing citizens. Subsequently, fair access also directly links to transitioning, information about program options, and supports. Due to the nature of the disability, including the weakened life skills set (Benito, 2012), students with ID require consistency in program delivery, opportunities to practice and master meaningful life skills, and collaboration between secondary school and PSE programs (Roller, 2016).

Therefore, students with intellectual disabilities in secondary school settings require consistent program structures (Carter & Hughes, 2006), greater transition supports, and knowledge of post-secondary options (Grigal & Hart, 2010; Winter et al., 2010). Changes in federal law, such as the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, have made improvements to availability in post-secondary programs offered to students with ID. Shah (2011) and Winter et al. (2010) identified a significant problem by identifying how little information is available to students, their families, and the secondary schools they attend. Seldom are IEP teams and transition processes monitored closely and virtually no accountability exists as to what information is provided to families and students in terms of support, both in secondary school and post-secondary school (Shah, 2011). For students with ID to become functional members of society, they must be afforded the support, time, and knowledge base of what is available to them, both in secondary school and when considering post-secondary education.

Furthermore, inconsistencies in information delivery to secondary students regarding PSE programs, how students become eligible to attend and lack of space available, staffing and training needs, and transportation issues are all additional barriers that can prevent students with ID from pursuing PSE (Hart et al., 2006; Mercier, 2017).

Despite this issue and the overall need for increased communication and collaboration, students with ID in secondary school are hindered by the assumption of inability (Love, 2013) and repeatedly excluded from the IEP and ITP process in many cases (Fekete, 2013). Devaluing students with ID and not providing them continuous opportunity to participate and take ownership in their future prevents them from having a ‘voice’ and providing valuable information throughout the transition process (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005; Fekete, 2013).

Finally, the greatest barrier for students with ID in secondary school is the lack of research and understanding regarding what actual experiences, supports, and exposures occurred that they feel assisted them in successfully transitioning and attending PSE programs. The lack of research base regarding the lived experiences of students with ID in this process hinders professionals from making needed adjustments and prevents families from advocating alongside students in the process of transitioning to PSE programs. Understanding the lived experiences of students with ID in the secondary setting is crucial to determining what factors contributed or inhibited their post-secondary life choices, specifically in education and attendance of PSE programs.

### **Related Studies and Need to Investigate**

This current study further explored the lives of students with ID, transition processes, and the opportunities that led students with ID to pursue PSE. After a thorough review of literature based on the history of special education law, PSE, transition processes, characteristics of students with ID, and various important and related factors of secondary school, the researcher only found one similar study. Duff (2013) conducted a research study based on having conversations with students with ID

regarding their high school experiences. The study encompassed a brief review of history of special education law, some seminal cases, information about important documents and rulings all over the world, and the perceptions of families, students, and teachers. While Duff's study undoubtedly contributed to a better understanding of student experiences in high school, there was no connection regarding the experiences, exposures, or supports that students had that led them to pursue PSE. In fact, only one of the students utilized in Duff's (2013) study attended PSE and reflected on it being his personal decision. Although Duff's study was related in terms of studying students with ID regarding their high school experiences, there was no relation or current study that addressed the experiences, exposures, and supports students with ID had in secondary school that led them to pursue and attend PSE programs.

Several seminal authors were cited and served as a support and foundation of this study along with the Think College Standards-Based Framework for Inclusive Higher Education. All four researchers currently serve in the special education or research department of their respective universities. Additionally, these four seminal authors all research students with ID and the various factors that affect their lives. The little research on this topic has provided some valuable insights regarding supports for students with ID, transition, and PSE programs. However, there are not any current studies that highlight the lived experiences, exposures, or supports that were present for students with ID that propelled them to attend PSE programs. In addition to the four seminal authors, Dr. Martin Agran, Dr. Michael Wehmeyer, Dr. Erik Carter, and Dr. Meg Grigal, this study was considered a replica study of Dr. Kathleen Mercier. In 2016 and 2017, Dr. Mercier

researched the lived experiences of students with ID in PSE programs and recommended that a study like this be conducted due to the large gap in research literature.

Several authors have conducted research on the education of students with severe disabilities, self-determination, transition, health, and safety for students with disabilities, and personnel preparation. The research has been key to this study due to the extent and nature of the research produced on the topic. Understanding the significance of self-determination as it relates to students with ID and the various components of the transition process aided the researcher in providing a thorough background of students with ID in secondary school and PSE settings. Also, multiple researchers' work largely focused on self-determination skills and the impact of self-determination on students with ID. The works of the seminal authors contributed to the understanding and background regarding skills and transition processes for students with ID and the impact they have as students with ID transition into adulthood. Several authors also co-authored many of the works reviewed for this study and are expert researchers in self-determination as it relates to students with ID, positive psychology and strengths-based approaches, the education of students with ID, and access to the general education curriculum. The research of the seminal authors was crucial in providing a thorough history and background of current research and literature regarding the education of students with ID.

Dr. Grigal's research and contribution to this study was significant as she is the principal investigator for the Think College Standards-Based Framework for Inclusive Higher Education. That framework was utilized as the basis for this research study. Dr. Grigal's research focused on inclusion, developmental disabilities, intellectual disabilities, staff training, and universal design for learning. Although Agran, Duff,



Wehmeyer, Carter, and Grigal contributed to understanding the various aspects of transition, characteristics of students with ID, PSE inclusion, and other related issues to students with ID, none investigated the lived experiences of students with ID in secondary school as it related to their successful transition into PSE programs. In contrast, there are well-developed programs through the Think College system that support students with ID in all aspects of need, including independent living, learning, skill-building, and employment.

### **Summary**

According to the review of literature regarding students with ID and their education and opportunities through the transition from secondary school to post-secondary life, it is clear that students with ID have not been offered equal opportunity during the transition phase of their lives (Duff, 2013), knowledge of PSE options are often unknown or students with ID are expected to receive services until the age of 22 in their high school settings (Benito, 2012; Grigal et al., 2002), and school teams and PSE programs do not collaborate as effectively as they should (Roller, 2016). Other noted themes following the in-depth review of literature include the assumption that students with ID are incapable of participating in the IEP and ITP process regarding decisions that will affect their lives (Love, 2013), the inconsistent delivery or lack of time to practice and master life skills, exclusion from IEP and ITP processes which inhibits them from having a ‘voice’ in decision making (Fekete, 2013; Grigal & Hart, 2010), minimal access to inclusive opportunities (Carter & Hughes, 2006; Fekete, 2013), and repetitive schedules with little rigor or opportunity to make life skills improvements (Carter et al., 2008; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998).

Over the past 40 years, significant improvements were made in educating students with ID (Hernandez, 2006; Upshaw, 2013), but there is still a large gap in research surrounding the exposures, supports, and experiences that students with ID have in secondary school as it relates to their successful attendance of PSE programs (Mercier, 2017). Due to the significant amount of change that has occurred over the past four decades, school districts are tasked with the overwhelming need to adapt, support, and create more inclusive opportunities. In the 1970s, the change from complete segregation of students with ID to attendance of public schools with non-disabled peers occurred. Unfortunately, the inconsistencies with delivery of services, opportunities in programs, and collaboration continued to plague the field of special education, particularly those with more severe disabilities. In the 1980s, there was a large push to educate teachers and staff to establish a foundation for which to better serve students with ID in secondary school. Upshaw (2013) stated that one of the most significant initiatives to occur happened in 1984 and addressed transition services. In 1990, IDEA sought to reaffirm the need for mandated transition skills and services for students with ID in secondary school. The reauthorization included transition processes that were aimed at bettering the quality of life for students with ID through policy and practice (Upshaw, 2013; Yell, 2012). Finally, the 2000s brought forth IDEA, which further defined provisions regarding FAPE and LRE. While growth was evident in terms of legislation, opportunities for students with ID in secondary school remained limited, as did the knowledge and attendance of PSE programs (Roller, 2016) and the need for partnerships between secondary school and PSE programs (Grigal et al., 2012).

While research has been conducted on transition process, students with ID, PSE programs, and student experiences, experts continue to seek understanding on how to better support students during secondary school and throughout the transition process to PSE programs. The HEOA of 2008 did, indeed, provide more opportunities for students with ID to learn and master skills in PSE programs, however, there is still a severe disconnect in program knowledge, collaboration, and understanding the lived experiences of students with ID as they transition out of secondary school. Understanding the lived experiences of students with ID in secondary school who have successfully transitioned into PSE programs will provide valuable information for professionals in the field, families, and school districts in better supporting students with ID and their transition into adulthood.

### **Synthesis Matrix**

The researcher used a synthesis matrix to collect and organize literature related to the topic of secondary students with ID and PSE programs. Variables that were related to the study were identified and included in the synthesis matrix. A chart was created to confirm the relationship between the sources and demonstrate reliability of the review of literature.

### CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

At its core, qualitative research begins with passion, the potential use of a theoretical framework, rich inquisition, and the in-depth study of a human problem (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). When considering the purpose and research questions of a study, it is essential to formulate the best possible research method. Methodological approach, sensitivity, and integrity are all substantial components of qualitative research (Patton, 2015). The purpose of this study was to investigate and describe the secondary lived experiences of students with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) in Post-Secondary Education (PSE) settings in southern California to gain knowledge as to what propelled them to attend PSE. The study was guided by the Think College Standards Based Conceptual Framework for Inclusive Higher Education as a basis for investigating the standards in relation to secondary school settings to understand students' paths to higher education and the many factors that potentially aided them in getting there.

Understanding the lived experiences of a student with ID in secondary school as it relates to their successful transition into PSE is the central theme of this study. Creswell (2014) emphasizes the significance of qualitative research serving as a tool of educating readers and the important role the researcher plays as a tool of investigation. Qualitative research best serves the desire to investigate and describe how a group of individuals behave and interact in their environment. Creswell (2014) and Patton (2015) explained that qualitative research aides in painting a holistic picture of participant behaviors and their lived experiences, which is why the researcher chose qualitative research for examining the experiences of students with ID in PSE settings and their experiences in secondary school that propelled them to attend college. To capture the significance of

this study, it was crucial to gain the perspectives (Patton, 2015) of the students so that their experiences would positively impact and increase the number of students who attend PSE.

### **Overview**

Chapter II served as a comprehensive, in-depth review of literature regarding the history of special education, intellectual disabilities, and secondary and PSE settings for students with intellectual disabilities. The purpose of Chapter III is to explain the use of qualitative research and the emphasis and reason ethnography was utilized as a focus.

The remaining sections of Chapter III describe the purpose of the research and the research questions. Additionally, the research design, with clear descriptions of qualitative research and ethnography, is explained. The population, target population, sample population, and specific sample are thoroughly explained. The instrumentation used, validity, and reliability for the data collected are included, as well as, a clear description of the data collection processes and how the researcher analyzed the data. The limitations section describes the limitations the researcher faced followed by a summary of the essential parts of Chapter III. In summary, Chapter III provides detailed information that could guide a researcher to replicate the study.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to investigate and describe the secondary school lived experiences of students with intellectual disabilities that propelled them to participate in post-secondary education settings in southern California, that were designed based on the Think College Standards-Based Conceptual Framework for Inclusive Higher Education.

## **Research Questions**

The research question for this study was: What were the secondary school lived experiences of students with intellectual disabilities that propelled them to participate in post-secondary education in southern California that were aligned to the Think College Standards-Based Conceptual Framework for Inclusive Higher Education?

## **Research Design**

The selection of a research design is directly connected to the nature of the research problem (Creswell, 2014). The research design was purposefully selected according to the variables of the study and the population being studied. Qualitative research requires a diverse design and thoughtfully planned out approach. Additionally, qualitative research produces data that can lead to greater understanding of individuals and the data can result in rich stories. The use of qualitative ethnography is most appropriate for understanding the voices of students with ID and their lived experiences (Creswell, 2014). With the use of qualitative ethnography, the researcher could gain in-depth knowledge of the culture of students with ID in PSE, which helped the researcher make connections between their experiences and what led them to college.

The research design used for this study was appropriate due to the relationship between the problem, purpose, and research question that needed to be investigated. The data collection procedures, participants, and expectations of participations were all considered to ensure integrity and sensitivity during the processes. The purpose of the research design was to create a road map for the study that would lead to conclusions, which would then answer the research question. Creating a research design that created a

pathway for the participants of the study to openly share their experiences was the goal of the researcher.

### **Qualitative Research**

Qualitative inquiry was essential to this study as it allowed the participants the opportunity to share their lived experiences through the complex path of navigating from secondary school to post-secondary education. Through skilled interviews and rich observations, the researchers immersed themselves into the qualitative inquiry process and collected unique and meaningful data (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2015). Gaining deeper knowledge of experiences, examining insights and perceptions, and seeking to understand participants' lives is the reason qualitative research was chosen for this study.

Due to its richness and depth, qualitative research offered the greatest opportunity to describe the lives of students with ID and tell their stories. According to Patton (2015), qualitative inquiry captures the essence of perspectives, behaviors, and patterns, which is appropriate for understanding why students with ID think and act the way that they do. Examining and interpreting the behaviors and perspectives of students with ID allowed the researcher to gain insight necessary to answer the research question. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) stress the significance of behavior occurring due to multiple, complex factors. Investigating many complex factors relating to students with ID and their lived experiences supported the researcher's efforts to answer the research question.

Creswell (2014) explains the need for qualitative research design to include observation, interviews, and various forms of artifacts. The researcher who collects varied, vast data can triangulate the data and tell stories that are robust and detailed and

allow for greater understanding of the participants and their lives. Collecting various forms of data through these methods allowed the researcher the ability to examine themes through a coding process. According to Patton (2015), themes emerge naturally from the in-depth interview process and detailed observations that occur in many settings. To summarize qualitative research design, the researcher should compile the data and present the information in narrative form and allow the themes to speak authentically to the reader.

Patton (2015) describes the research design as a roadmap of the study, particularly the plan that sets the direction for the study yet is flexible and emergent throughout the data collection process. When considering the design strategies and characteristics of qualitative research, the researcher considered the natural setting, which allows for the participants to be studied in their natural environment; context sensitivity, which allows for the researcher to consider situational elements; direct data collection, which allows the research to directly collect relevant data; rich narrative descriptions, which allow the researcher to share detailed descriptions of behaviors; process orientation, which focuses on the 'why' and 'how' of the occurring behaviors; inductive data analysis, which includes generalizing and synthesizing information; participant perspectives, which focus on participant knowledge of meaningful situations; emergent design, which is capable of evolving and adapting to the study as research is conducted; and complexity of understanding and explaining, which includes the complex explanations and knowledge of many perspectives (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

To understand the exposures, experiences, and supports of students with ID when they were in secondary school, the researcher selected a qualitative research method. It



was essential for the researcher to understand what impacted their lives and propelled them to make the transition from secondary school to PSE. Opposed to quantitative research methods, which consist of analyzing numbers, qualitative research allows for the examination of behaviors of a group of people such as the research of students with ID in PSE settings. Currently, according to the review of literature in the previous chapter, there is an urgent need to understand students with ID who attend PSE and determine what factors led them to pursue PSE after secondary school. This study aimed at capturing the heart of PSE students with intellectual disabilities' experiences in secondary school and their paths into adulthood.

### **Ethnography**

Ethnography serves as an inquiry framework to understand the culture of a group of people and how it explains their perspectives and behaviors (Patton, 2015). In consideration of the population and potential data collection processes, the researcher chose ethnography as a framework of questioning, investigating, and understanding the lives of students with ID in secondary school. According to Creswell (2014), ethnography is designed to understand behaviors, language, and actions of a group of individuals in their natural setting over a certain length of time.

Ethnography allows the researcher the greatest opportunity to understand the various experiences of studied individuals, including students with ID, staff within the Think College school systems, families, and friends. Mole (2008) emphasized the invaluable and innovative ways to approach observation, a key point in qualitative ethnographic research. Gathering a vast array of perspectives and experiences allowed

the researcher to have a comprehensive understanding of the lives of students with ID and the paths they took in secondary school that led them to attend post-secondary education.

As an ethnographic researcher, it was imperative to collect data in the natural setting with various opportunities to observe in different settings (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2015). The data collection for this study required careful planning due to the start and end of college semesters. To gather significant data, the researcher chose to collect data during the summer session of 2017 and into the fall session of 2017. Understanding the culture of this group of people required the researcher to hone into factors shared amongst them (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). McMillan and Schumacher (2010) also stated the continued interaction with the participants allows the researcher to gain perspective, purpose, and recognize traits or themes. Allowing a broad timeframe allowed the researcher to spend quality time with all participants, including students with ID, faculty, professors, families, and peers, and created the opportunity for relationship building and openness between the research and the participants.

**Vantage point.** For truly understanding the culture, perspectives, and behaviors of students with ID who successfully transitioned into PSE programs, the researcher purposefully chose to research students attending PSE instead of students currently in secondary school. Students currently in secondary school have not yet successfully transitioned and therefore, cannot fully explain or understand the supports, experiences, or exposures that will have helped them in that process.

### **Population**

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) stated that the population is a group of individuals that conform to a criterion for the researcher to generalize results of the

research and data collected. The population intended for this research consisted of 263 PSE programs for students with ID across the United States of America that are included in the Think College framework for inclusive higher education. As of the 2015 Think College annual report, 888 students with ID went through the Transition to Post-Secondary for Students with Intellectual Disability (TPSID) program. All 263 PSE Programs currently in existence are structured as part of the Think College framework for inclusive higher education, but not all 263 are included as part of the TPSID.

According to the Think College (n.d.), options for education and other extracurricular activities vary depending on the college or university. A variety of educational, extracurricular, and community activities exist, such as academic coursework, life skills, employment, independent living, clubs, and fun activities (Think College, n.d.). The multitude of activities that exist within the Think College programs allowed the researcher various opportunities for observations and artifact collection. While the Think College Standards-Based Framework for Inclusive Higher Education focuses on intellectually disabled students, every campus also offers support or special programs for varying disabilities, not just students with ID. For this study, the researcher only studied students with ID and the individuals that surround them in their PSE settings, included in the Think College Framework for Inclusive Higher Education.

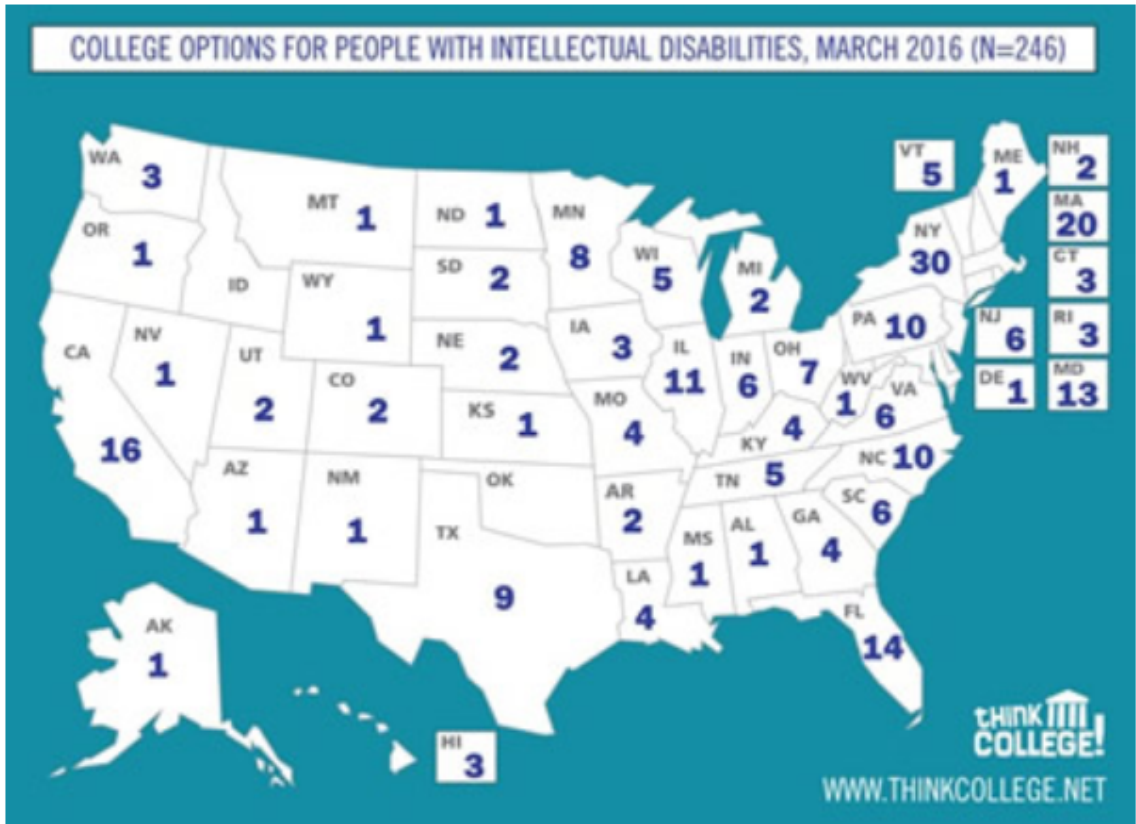


Figure 3. Think College Database: College Options for Individuals with ID in the U.S. (Think College, n.d.).

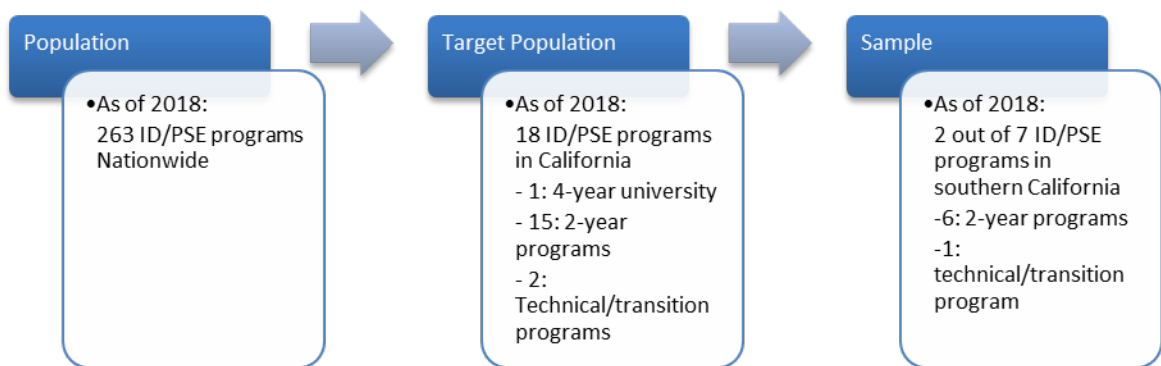
### Target Population

For researchers to yield the specific type of data necessary to tell a story, the population must be further narrowed, and a target population must be identified (Creswell, 2014). The researcher targeted schools in California that are included in the Think College Standards-Based Conceptual Framework for Inclusive Higher Education. California was chosen as the targeted location due to the location of the researcher (convenience sampling) and the ease of travel in consideration of the amount of time to be spent at each school. Time played a major factor as ethnographic research was the chosen methodology. According to Think College, California had 18 colleges or universities identified as serving students with ID. The target population consisted of

those 18 colleges or universities, 1 was a four-year university, 15 were identified as two-year programs, and the remaining 2 were technical schools (Think College, n.d.).

### Sample

Before data collection could begin, the researcher must further funnel down the population and identify a sample population to be studied. Identifying a sample population allows the researcher to identify a group of individuals from whom data are collected (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The sample utilized for this research is Pathway at UCLA and TIL at Taft College. The sample included researching students with ID who attend PSE programs in the Think College framework for inclusive higher education in southern California. Seven of the 18 PSE programs were in southern California, which gave the researcher various options. Six of the 7 PSE programs located in southern California were two-year programs and one was a technical school (Think College, n.d.). In consideration of time, location, and opportunities for the appropriate amount of data collection needed for this study, the researcher chose to study two of the seven schools located in southern California, Pathway at UCLA and TIL at Taft College. From those two schools, 15 students with ID were chosen as participants, along with family members, faculty and administrators, and peers.



*Figure 4.* Population breakdown of PSE programs for students with ID as of 2018

### **Sample Procedures**

Sampling procedures of a given study are typically categorized by a descriptive term, such as random, convenience, or probability (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Due to the travel constraints of the researcher, the amount of time the data collection procedures would take, and with extensive consideration of the participants, convenience sampling was deemed most appropriate for this study. Convenience sampling was the chosen sampling method for this study as it best suited the needs of the researcher and was appropriate for gathering data to answer the research question. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), convenience sampling, which may also be called available sampling, is best suited for studies in which the group of individuals being studied is easily accessible. Accessibility was a major factor as the researcher needed the location and availability of the participants to be fluid to conduct thorough observations and interviews.

For this study, the sample, students with ID who attend PSE in southern California, was appropriate because the primary purpose of the research was to better understand this group of individuals and the needed sample appropriately correlated to the use of convenience sampling (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Furthermore, the population, target population, and sample are directly linked to the purpose and research question and allowed the researcher the opportunity for in-depth investigation (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patton, 2015).

In consideration of the research question and sample, the researcher chose two colleges in southern California for this study. Pathway at UCLA and Transition to

Independent Living (TIL) at Taft College were identified as the two colleges utilized for this study based on location, ease of access, and program quality. The selection of Pathway and TIL were appropriate because their locations allowed the researcher various opportunities to complete data collection procedures in a timely manner. The researcher conducted interviews with a variety of stakeholders including: 15 students with ID from TIL and Pathway, four family members, three administrators/program managers, and four non-disabled peers. In addition to extensive interviews and observations, artifacts were also gathered. The sample is represented below in Figure 5.



*Figure 5.* Think College sample for this study

### **Instrumentation**

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) described instrumentation as a threat to internal validity related to testing. A variety of factors affected the results of a study, including changes in the individuals who collect data or alterations to the instruments used to collect data. With regards to qualitative research, the key instrument in qualitative researcher is the researcher themselves. This portion of Chapter III includes specific information related to this study regarding validity, content validity, reliability,

internal reliability, and intercoder reliability. Throughout the rigorous data collection process, the researcher must provide specific information related to the instruments used in the study (Creswell, 2014). Collecting data for analyzing and extracting relevant information must be done with ethical and well-planned processes by the researcher.

As explained by Creswell (2014), the researcher must provide detailed information regarding what type of instruments are used for the study. Specifically, the research conducted semi-structured interviews (Appendices A-C), in-depth observations in various settings using observation logs (Appendix D), and an analysis of artifacts. Due to the qualitative, ethnographic nature of the study, the researcher used semi-structured interviews with the students with ID (Appendices A), faculty of the individual PSE colleges (Appendix B), family members of the students (Appendix C), and the focus group that included stakeholders who interact or are a part of the program (Appendix E). The Think College Standards-Based Framework for Inclusive Higher Education served as a foundation for the interview questions combined with the 2006 National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS-2) survey, which focused on questions relating to youth with special needs, their home and school experiences, and post-secondary outcomes. In-depth observations were conducted in academic and non-academic settings and, thus, the researcher was also an instrument of data collection in the process. Lastly, artifacts brochures, records, and fliers were collected to add supporting background, knowledge, and depth to the data collected.

### **Think College Standards**

The researcher chose to utilize the Think College standards as part of the basis for the interviews due to the Think College Framework for Inclusive Higher Education being



utilized as a foundation of this study. Included in the Think College standards are the following: academic access, career development, campus membership, self-determination, alignment with college systems and practices, coordination and collaboration, sustainability, and ongoing evaluation (Think College, n.d.).

### **National Longitudinal Transition Study-2.**

The second component and basis for the interview questions included the NLTS-2. According to the review of literature conducted by the researcher, it was found that the NLTS-2 served a nationwide study of students in secondary school and sought to understand their experiences and achievements through characteristics of students and their households, secondary school programs and services, transition into adulthood, post-secondary education, and identification of factors that contributed to positive outcomes (NLTS-2). The researcher noted clear alignment between the Think College standards, the NLTS-2, and the research question itself, hence, deeming the combination appropriate for this study.

### **Researcher as an Instrument**

Due to the nature of qualitative ethnographic research, the researcher is considered an instrument of the study. The researcher was the primary instrument during the interview process, which means that there were natural opportunities for potential biases (Patton, 2015). A researcher as an instrument in a study is common practice in qualitative research. It is necessary for a researcher to immerse themselves in an environment and dig deep with their participants to answer the research question.

## Validity

When considering research instruments, the researcher must recognize the importance of validity. Validity, in qualitative research, refers to the process of checking for accuracy of the findings by implementing specific procedures (Creswell, 2014). Validity assists the researcher in ensuring the findings are accurate and have a strong foundation. The researcher, for this study, ensured validity by utilizing a blended approach of the NLTS-2 survey and the Think College Standards-Based Framework for Inclusive Higher Education. The interview questions (Appendices A-C) could be validated as the questions were related to previous national studies that were also qualitative in nature. The research also engaged in professional review of interview questions with an expert in the field, which also added to the strength of ensuring quality findings. It was also important for the researcher to understand the relationship between the phenomena and the realities of the students with ID (Patton, 2015). To further validate findings, the researcher was careful to relate the observation log (Appendix D) directly to the Think College Standards-Based Framework for Inclusive Higher Education.

Using multiple approaches to address validity is essential for strength and accuracy in research findings (Creswell, 2014). The researcher utilized the various means of data including interviews, focus groups, observations, and artifact collection, to triangulate the data, which contributed to validity. Content validity, specifically, the extent to which a researcher understands and ensures that an instrument represents all variables or facets, was used by the researcher. The researcher conducted the following steps to contribute to the validation of the study:

1. Having an expert review the interview questions validates the interview questions are aligned to the study. Three individuals were chosen to review interview questions based on their expertise, over ten years of experience, and knowledge of literature. This procedure ensured that the instruments used for the study were appropriate to answer the research question and ensured validity and reliability.
2. The researcher conducted mock interview with individuals who were not participants of the study to practice tone, pace, and time. The delivery and overall interview technique of the researcher was reviewed, and feedback was sought by the expert panel. This procedure ensured that the researcher had adequate, reliable interview techniques before data collection took place.

Internal validity refers to experimental procedures or experiences of the participants that allow the researcher to draw conclusions or inferences (Creswell, 2014).

External validity threats refer to the incorrect conclusion or inference made about a sample or situation (Creswell, 2014). The potential threats to internal and external validity were considered by the researcher and various measures were taken, such as triangulating data and in-depth analysis of data by multiple coders to reflect common themes. Additionally, qualitative data does not require a generalization of findings, therefore it is not a concern.

### **Reliability**

Unlike validity, which encompasses the accuracy related to findings and procedures (Creswell, 2014), reliability refers to consistency across all areas of the research (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2015). To maintain instrument reliability, themes and

procedures were analyzed thoroughly to determine similarities and trends (Patton, 2015) amongst the data. Reliability includes various considerations such as ethically appropriate methods, consistency in approaches, exclusion of bias, and passion toward retrieving authentically genuine information from participants. Documentation and objectivity are two other tools the researcher used to ensure reliability throughout the data collection process (Creswell, 2014). The researcher conducted the following steps to contribute to the reliability of the study:

1. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), the truthfulness and authentic nature of research should be evident. Triangulation of data from the various instruments used is helpful to the process of internal reliability. The picture, created by the themes, became clearer as the data converged. To gain authentic data, it was imperative that the interview questions be written in a manner that was easy to comprehend by all stakeholders. For the data to be substantiated, it must be fully comprehended and accessible to all stakeholders, so the data gathered reflects the truth. Acquiring an expert panel of professionals to overlook and provide feedback regarding various aspects of the instrumentation process and instruments used is essential to ensure internal reliability. All measures about internal reliability were considered for gaining stronger, clearer conclusions.
2. As defined by Creswell (2014) and McMillan and Schumacher (2010), intercoder reliability, also known as intercoder agreement, is the process by which coders agree about the rating of themes, traits, and frequencies of data. With intercoder reliability in mind, the researcher requested a colleague who

has over 15 years in the field of special education, to code approximately 10% of the data to ensure accuracy. Successful confirmation and agreement of the themes, traits, and frequencies is considered at 80% and higher.

### **Data Collection**

Through ethnographic lenses, the researcher sought meaning behind the decisions that led students with ID to successfully transition from secondary school into post-secondary education. Incorporating the Think College Conceptual Framework for Inclusion Higher Education allowed the researcher a solid foundation by which to conduct research. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) explain qualitative data as observations, in-depth interviews, document and artifact collection, and other related matter. With the focus of two PSE programs in southern California as the sample, 15 students with ID who attend those PSE programs, and supporting stakeholders, the researcher began the rigorous process of data collection. The inclusion of various stakeholders including administrators, professors, peers, family members, and other faculty, in addition to students with ID, prepared the researcher with rich information from various perspectives. The data collection process was thoroughly planned and implemented, combined with an ethnographic approach by the researcher, that led to the examination and understanding of the factors that propelled secondary students with ID to attend PSE programs. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), the entire purpose of an ethnographic approach is to collect the most relevant and significant information that can aid in addressing a specified theme, trait, or behavior.

With intense commitment and focus, the ethnographic researcher intends to gain deep understanding of the cultural group being studied to target specific themes

(McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). To connect themes to aide in answering the research question relating to the experiences, exposures, and supports that secondary students with ID had that propelled them to attend PSE programs, the researcher had to schedule data collection, collect data, and analyze the data through an intense coding process. Data collection occurred during a 10-week timeframe between October and December 2017. The timeframe was deemed appropriate by the researcher in consideration of the elements of ethnography.

With consideration to the basis of the Think College Standards-Based Conceptual Framework for Inclusive Higher Education, the researcher could solicit information that was relevant to better understanding students with ID and the experiences they had that led them to attend PSE programs. The researcher could identify the sample population from the larger population, which included 263 PSE programs nationwide. Utilizing convenience sampling (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010) was mandatory for this study as the researcher needed to be able to access the participants on a regular basis and did not have the means to travel excessive distances.

Before the data were collected from the sample population of students with ID attending PSE programs in southern California, the researcher had to first receive approval letters to conduct data from UCLA-Pathway and Taft College-TIL and then submit the application for research involving human or animal participants to the Brandman University Institutional Review Board (BUIRB) for approval. Once approvals were received (Appendix F), the researcher formally contacted the PSE programs for this study. For this study, students with ID who attend PSE programs in southern California, within the Think College Framework for Inclusive Higher Education, needed to be

sought out for the research question to be answered authentically. The following sections include information about the types of data, the data collection procedures, and the data analysis.

### **Internal Review Board**

As mentioned above, the approval to conduct research from BUIRB was necessary before the researcher could begin collecting data at the PSE programs. Given the specific sample population, students with ID who attend PSE programs in southern California, the research used signed informed consents (Appendix G). The informed consent included information about the researcher, the purpose of the study, why the research was being conducted, what was expected of participants, study benefits, and confidentiality procedures. With ethical considerations at the forefront, the researcher relayed the important fact that participation in the study was voluntary.

Due to the nature of the participants, students with ID, it was important that the researcher further consider ways to protect these individuals and make them feel comfortable. The students with ID who participated in the study were individuals who were responsible for their own educational rights and were allotted the opportunity to bring advocates as support should they need to. Creating a sense of safety and openness throughout the data collection process was important for the researcher. Another consideration to ensure a safe data collection process was the parent assent, informed consent form (Appendix E). The parent assent form was an added precautionary measure to protect this population of students. In the field of special education, it is necessary to consider all legal aspects of the rights of students with

disabilities. The process of having the additional form signed also allowed the researcher to further clarify the needs of the study and involve the family members in the process.

### **Types of Data**

According to Creswell (2014), data collection methods should stem directly from the research question itself. With the research question in mind, the researcher used qualitative ethnographic approaches in collecting data. The types of data included in this study are interviews, observations, document and artifact collection, and focus groups. Using various types of data allowed the researcher to triangulate the data and create themes according to the data.

**Interviews.** Of all the forms of data collected in this study, interview data lent itself to truly understanding the rich meaning behind how individuals perceived the world around them and how they rationalized import events along their paths (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The interviews (Appendices A-C) included formal, semi-formal, phone interviews, and focus groups to create different ambiances in which to collect data and provide various opportunities to share information in settings that may be more comfortable to the participants. For this study, 15 with ID from PSE programs in southern California were used, parent/guardian or family members of the students, faculty members, administrators, and the focus group of non-disabled peers and other employees of the PSE programs.

The interview questions designed for this study were based on the Think College Standards-Based Framework for Inclusive Higher Education and the NLTS-2 survey. The formal, semi-formal, focus groups, and phone interviews all included elements of the Think College Standards-Based Framework for Inclusive Higher Education and the



NLTS-2 survey for collecting rich data to answer the research question. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), qualitative interview questions should be authentically open-ended. With ethical considerations in place, the researcher was certain not to phrase questions that specifically elicited the desired data, but rather created truly open-ended questions to enable the interviewees to provide honest, authentic information about their transitions from secondary school into PSE programs.

**Observations.** Creswell (2014) described the purpose of observational data collection as being an integral part of the qualitative research method and includes, keeping logs, taking field notes, and carefully observing the behaviors and surroundings of the participants. Where interviews serve as providing information in a more structured manner, observations catch the subtle nuances of the environment and behaviors of the participants. Throughout the observation process, the researcher collected data in the natural settings of the participants, which created an opportunity to collect authentic data (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2015). The researcher collected observational data over five sessions at each school site. Observational data was collected from academic and non-academic settings to contributed to creating a clearer, more accurate picture of their daily experiences.

Gaining insight, observing naturally occurring phenomena, and taking note of specific behaviors (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010) was the intent of the researcher during observational data collection. The researcher maintained a non-participant role (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010) throughout observations to ensure natural, honest, and realistic feedback. The variety of settings, academic and non-academic, also contributed to rich observational data.

**Documents and artifacts.** Collecting various forms of data allowed the researcher to fill gaps, gain rich information, and more purposeful data to answer the research question (Creswell, 2014; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Documents and artifacts were gathered in various forms. With the signed informed consent in place, the researcher retrieved a wide variety of documents and artifacts from the students with ID, faculty members, and records held by the school and family. In consideration of confidentiality, it was essential that the researcher eliminate all identifying data from the documents and artifacts gathered for this research study. Per the informed consent, the identification of the participants must be confidential. Patton (2015) refers to documents and documentation as being an extremely information rich source for qualitative studies. Document and artifact collection and analysis proved invaluable to the researcher in creating more vivid pictures of the lives of students with ID attending PSE programs.

In the following sections, data collection procedures are clearly delineated for a better understanding the process of data collection. Due to the strategic implementation of data collection procedures, the researcher clearly detailed and accounted for data as they were collected, which allowed the data analysis process to be a smoother production.

**Preparation for data collection.** Before initial data collection could begin, the researcher had to contact the PSE programs chosen for the study. The PSE programs were located utilizing the Think College database, which houses the names, locations, information, and contact information for all 263 PSE programs in the Think College Framework for Inclusive Higher Education. In preparation for initial contact, the researcher wrote a letter (Appendix H) detailing the purpose of the study, interest in research at the site, and desire to solicit participants that would aide in answering the

research question. The letter was then distributed to relevant administrators at the two Think College PSE programs identified for this study: Pathway at UCLA and TIL at Taft College. Creating a professional, friendly relationship with the administrators at each site was vital to gaining access to the PSE programs and participants.

Once the relationships were established and a clear understanding of requests were considered, the researcher proceeded to establishing participants with the assistance of the administrators. The initial meeting, and all other meetings following, were held by phone or in person at a time convenient for both researcher and administrator. Creating and maintaining effective communication with the research participants was an integral component of this study as it created an open dialogue by which concerns could be addressed and needs could be met. The researcher ascertained that communication be continuous and as much of an 'open-door' policy as possible during the eight-week data collection period.

To ensure all potential participants were fully informed of study responsibilities, knowledgeable about the research purpose and need for the study, and were given the opportunity to ask questions and get acquainted with the researcher, an orientation meeting at each PSE site was scheduled. At this time, participants were informed of their ability to terminate participation at any time (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). At the completion of the meeting, the researcher provided each potential participant with an informational flyer (Appendix H) they could show their families. Potential participants invited to the meeting included students with ID who attended PSE programs, PSE program administrators, additional faculty members (professors and other personnel), non-disabled peers, and family members.

Providing a sense of control and role for the participants during the data collection process afforded the researcher the ability to establish working relationships. The researcher provided all contact information for questions, concerns, or needs related to the study. The orientation meeting was short in length limit the time burden on participants; however, it was long enough to thoroughly and clearly explain the study and requirements for participation. The researcher ensured all potential participants received all information related to the study and thus, held meetings and engaged in phone and email communications. The intent of the researcher to engage all potential participants was purposeful and consistent.

With guidance from McMillan and Schumacher (2010), the researcher organized the orientation meeting in a way that reflected the informed consent. The agenda for the meetings, whether in-person or virtual, included the purpose of the study, description of time commitment, description of the benefits of participant contribution, notice of confidentiality, contact information, reminder of volunteer status and ability to terminate participation, possible schedule, and a request for informed consent (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The researcher worked purposefully to create a positive, inviting ambiance, including food, materials, and informational fliers, for the orientation meeting at each PSE program site to ensure that potential participants felt welcomed and comfortable. For the phone meetings, virtual meetings, and email communication, the researcher clearly relayed information and provided visuals to ease the process of communicating via technology.

The goal of the orientation meeting process was to gain commitment from participants who could help contribute to understanding what supports, experiences, and

exposures students with ID had in secondary school that propelled them to attend PSE programs. Fortunately, at the meeting, the researcher gained commitment from students with ID who met the criteria for the study, some of their family members, and administrative/faculty for participation in the research study. The researcher maintained a clear focus on the morally proper (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010) path of working with participants and had all participants signed informed consents and permission to record, gain access to records, and be observed. Requiring an informed consent be signed for participation in the research study was imperative due to the nature of the topic, need to access records, and, to ensure the participants fully understood what their roles were in the process. With consideration the sample population of the study, the researcher encouraged the students with ID to review the informed consent form with a family member, advocate, or trusted acquaintance before signing for full commitment to the research study. To properly manage communication, the researcher requested all participants to complete a contact information form to help with scheduling purposes, questions, and needs. Maintaining a morally appropriate approach with the participants was vital to the process.

The remainder of this section details the specific data collection procedures and protocol for this study.

**Interviews.** Interviews took place with all participants, including the 15 students with ID, at each PSE program site, faculty/professor participants, family members, administrators, and additional non-disabled participants (focus group). All meetings were held with just the participant and researcher, unless an advocate was requested to be present. The only interview that included multiple people was the focus group. The

following measures were aligned in relation to the interviews and interview process with participants:

1. Prior to the orientation meeting, a letter of introduction (Appendix H) was sent (email and mail) to the PSE program administrators providing information regarding the purpose of the research and request to study at their PSE program site.
2. Follow-up procedures, including phone call and email, took place if the administrator did not return contact within 48 hours. It was imperative the researcher make contact due to strict timelines with work schedule and data collection processes.
3. Once a relationship was established with the PSE program administrators, the researcher organized an orientation meeting, gained participation commitment, received signed informed consents, and then scheduled interviews with each category of participant.
4. Following the secured commitment for participation, the researcher scheduled meeting times for interviews to take place, which took place in a comfortable environment agreed to by each participant.
5. Interview questions and topics (Appendices A-C) were sent to each participant at least 48 hours in advance of the meeting to allow time to review information, ask questions, and fully comprehend what the interview would entail.
6. Along with the interview questions that were sent in advance of the interviews, a request was made of each participant to bring a document or

artifact. A list of possible documents or artifacts was given to each participant at the same time the interview questions were sent. This allowed the researcher to gain multiple forms of data in a single period, which eased the process of data collection.

7. Confirmation of attendance to the interview was gained approximately 24 hours in advance via phone call or email by the researcher. At that time, location of the meeting and time were also confirmed.
8. Before the interview officially began, the researcher reminded each participant of their voluntary status, their right to take breaks as needed, and their right to terminate participation at any time.
9. The researcher ensured enough time be allotted before and after the interview for questions or concerns to take place.
10. The interviews were scheduled for approximately 30 minutes as not to overwhelm the participant or require too much time from the participant. The interviews were recorded (prior consent from each participant was signed) using two separate digital voice recorders, one as the primary source and one served as back-up.
11. After the interview, the researcher explained the process and purpose of transcription, thanked the participant for their time, and confirmed follow-up communication would take place.
12. The researcher sent the recorded audio files of the interviews to a transcription service. Once the transcribed interviews were received, the researcher cross-referenced the transcribed data and provided a copy to each participant. That

process aligned with the open, honest approach the researcher took with the participants.

**Observations.** For in-depth descriptions of behaviors, interactions, and experiences of students with ID in PSE programs, the researcher observed each participant in two settings, academic and non-academic. The following measures were aligned in relation to the observations and observation processes with participants:

1. Contacted each participant and described the observation process and requested information about observation settings.
2. If a response was not received within 48 hours, a follow-up email was sent to the participant.
3. Once communication was established and the participants understood the process, the researcher scheduled a date, time, and setting for the observational data collection.
4. Confirmation of the observation was gained approximately 24 hours in advance via phone call or email by the researcher. At that time, date, time, and setting were confirmed.
5. The researcher ensured a timely arrival and completed observations for each participant.
6. After the observations, the researcher arranged for the observational data to be sent to a transcription service.
7. When the transcribed observational data was returned to the researcher, the researcher cross-checked the observation logs, detailed descriptions, and narratives taken during the observation process with the transcribed data.



8. The researcher then determined if additional observations were necessary and contacted the participants accordingly.
9. Additional observations in various settings were conducted as needed.

**Documents and artifacts.** During the formalizing of the interview process, the researcher sent a list of potential artifacts that the participants could bring to add to the document and artifact data collection. It was required that each document or artifact be relevant and meaningful to the student with ID, participant, and PSE program. Some examples of potential documents and artifacts were syllabi, student work samples, transcripts, and brochures. The following steps and strategies aided the researcher in collecting documents and artifacts:

1. To save time and remain efficient, the researcher accessed all public documents and artifacts possible.
2. Regarding private or sealed documents and artifacts, the researcher was able to access those items due to the signed informed consent. This allowed the researcher to access things like schedules and special education records. Other non-public documents and artifacts were gathered during the interview process or by request to the PSE program administrators and PSE staff.
3. A review of the documents and artifacts took place and the researcher determined if additional items were necessary for the research study.

### **Data Analysis**

The purpose of data analysis and interpretation is to create an understanding of the data (Creswell, 2014). The researcher employed a method by which data was pieced apart and then categorized into multiple different genres. During the separation and

reorganizing of data, themes and traits tend to naturally emerge. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), typical data analysis strategies should include the process by which data was synthesized. To focus on the research question at hand, the researcher chose to exclude data that seemed irrelevant. Following a comprehensive review of data, the researcher distributed the data to a transcription service to be transcribed.

Transcribed data, along with rich, detailed reflection, contributed to the process of triangulating data.

### **Data Transcription**

As described by McMillan and Schumacher (2010), data transcription is the process of gathering information, such as notes, and translating them into a format that can easily be processed for data analysis. After a thorough review of data, the researcher sent the interview data to a transcription service. This process allowed the researcher to gain perspective and a clearer image of the picture being painted by the data. After the transcribed data was received by the researcher, it was reviewed once again for accuracy, and sent to the relevant participants to maintain an honest process. The observation logs, field notes, documents, and artifacts were all arranged according to elements related to genres.

### **Data Coding**

Creswell (2014) described the process of coding data, or axial coding, as a purposeful process of disaggregating data into refined themes. Qualitative data, by nature, is quite rich and dense. Organizing, pondering, questioning, and prioritizing data is necessary for themes and trends to emerge. Natural themes began to emerge throughout the data analysis process and thus, the researcher coded the transcribed

interviews, observation logs, field notes, documents, and artifacts using the NVivo software. As asserted by McMillan and Schumacher (2010), the process of formally coding data aides in identification of themes, trends, and frequencies. NVivo software assisted the researcher in tracking the themes and frequencies of the data. Frequencies are essential in the data analysis process because frequencies over a certain amount truly, accurately identify and confirm a theme. Following the identification of themes and frequencies, the researcher analyzed the themes and frequencies to gain deeper knowledge of the data and better understand what propelled students with ID in secondary school to attend PSE programs.

### **Ethnographic Analysis of Data**

The entire purpose of data analysis is to extract the true meaning of the data and paint a beautiful picture of what is. The essence of ethnographic data analysis occurs with the complexities of the behaviors and group of people being studied (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Through ethnographic lenses, the researcher assessed the themes, trends, and frequencies and triangulated the data as a method of reliability. The significance of the ethnographic approach was evident in the data analysis process as rich, detailed, unique pictures of the lives of students with ID were painted.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

The researcher considered the strengths and limitations of the study, or parts of the study that could negatively impact the data and process, by acknowledging various components of the research design, sample population, and procedures. This study, which addressed understanding the experiences, supports, and exposures students with ID

had in secondary school that propelled them to attend PSE programs, had several limitations that were considered by the researcher including the following:

1. Sampling procedure. The researcher used convenience sampling due to travel constraints during the data collection processes. Convenience sampling was considered as a potential limitation due to PSE programs and sample population being chosen solely on location. It could be perceived as not being representative of the larger population of students with ID due to the convenience sampling procedure. To minimize issues associated with the chosen sampling procedure, the researcher took great caution in generalizing the data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Additionally, the sample population and characteristics needed for the study clearly matched the larger population, students with ID who attend PSE programs.
2. Sample size. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), one of the most important factors in qualitative research is the size of the sample. Due to limitations with travel, only two PSE programs were chosen for the study. The sample size was considered as a potential limitation as the overall number of participants, 15 students with ID, was not significant when compared to the larger sample population. With extensive consideration to the small sample size, the researcher off-set the potential limitations of not finding significant relationships or behaviors with participants and engaged in thorough observations, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and strategic artifact and document collection and review.

3. **Researcher as an instrument.** Researcher as an instrument and bias were considered as potential limitations due the profession and knowledge of the researcher and ethnographic approach to the study. Research bias refers to the process by which the researcher who performs the research has some influence over the results. To discount researcher bias and the utilization of researcher as an instrument, the researcher kept highly moral standards of conducting research and followed procedures carefully to ensure safety, honesty, and consistency across all areas of data collection and analysis. Remaining open and clear with participants, maintaining a moral perspective, and ensuring voluntary participation (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010) are all ways in which the researcher attempted to limit the possibility of researcher bias and concerns related to researcher as an instrument.
4. **Amount of time:** With a qualitative ethnographic approach, extensive time was spent during the data collection process and during data analysis. With in-depth observations, interviews, focus groups, documents, and artifacts to study and code, the researcher had an immense amount of work, which directly relates to time. Through the reliability and validity measures taken, including having a professional code up to 10% of the data and the use of coding software, the researcher counteracted some of the difficulties associated with time.
5. **Self-reported Data:** This study utilized qualitative, ethnographic methods such as semi-structured interviews, which is considered a limitation due to the self-reported data. The limitation regarding self-reported data was rectified by the

researcher using other forms of data as well, including observations and artifacts. Using various forms of data collection contributed to the validity of the findings and the triangulation of data.

The researcher also considered strengths of the study. Using ethnographic research, the answer to understanding the supports, exposures, and experiences of students with ID in secondary school that propelled them to pursuing PSE could be answered through in-depth observations, interviews, and artifact collection (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patton, 2015). The amount of observation opportunities and interviews allowed the culture of this participant pool to be studied and understood to the degree of the purpose of this study.

### **Summary**

This chapter encompassed the various components necessary to conduct an ethnographic study to understand to the reader and for replication of future studies. Understanding the culture, behaviors, and actions (Creswell, 2014) of students with ID in PSE programs was essential to determining the factors, exposures, and experiences they had in secondary school that propelled them to attend PSE programs. Careful research design, along with an ethnographic approach, aided the researcher in the process of answering the research question. With clearly outlined processes for data collection and analysis decisions and procedures, this study is capable of being replicated for future researchers.

Chapter IV provides information regarding findings in detail. With a careful approach to follow the thorough steps outlined in Chapter III of this study, the researcher was able to carry out the various steps of the research design. Having a solid research

design with clearly delineated steps to follow allowed the research to efficiently collect and analyze the data. Chapter IV shares the findings of this study in detail.

## CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS

It was the objective of the researcher to investigate and describe the secondary school lived experiences of students with intellectual disabilities (ID) that propelled them to participate in post-secondary education (PSE). Creswell (2014) describes the data analysis and interpretation process as a process by which data is segmented and then placed back together to create themes, which lead to stories. Furthermore, Creswell (2014) describes the importance of organizing and preparing data, thoroughly reading data, coding data, and determining the themes and descriptions that are interrelated and relevant to the research purpose and question. Chapter IV portrays the results of the data collection process, along with the many, in-depth stories shared by research participants in the research study. This chapter includes an overview, the purpose statement, the research question, research methodology, including data collection processes, the population, the sample, demographic data, and the results of the findings and, which lead to themes, in accordance with the Think College framework for inclusive higher education.

### **Overview**

Chapter I of this study includes information regarding the introduction of the topic, background of students with ID, and the significance of the problem. Chapter II serves as an in-depth review of literature regarding students with ID from historical perspectives to current information. Chapter III served as a detailed description of the methodology processes, and Chapter IV is the culmination of those procedures in which themes from the data emerged. The instruments utilized to collect the data for this study were instrumental to the retrieval of the data and the process of analysis. The researcher



utilized in-depth interviews, observations, and artifacts to answer the research question. The data exposed six themes aligned to the eight standards from the Think College framework for inclusive higher education (Mercier, 2017).

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to investigate and describe the secondary school lived experiences of students with intellectual disabilities that propelled them to participate in post-secondary education settings in southern California, that were designed based on the Think College Standards-Based Conceptual Framework for Inclusive Higher Education.

### **Research Questions**

The research question for this study was: What were the secondary school lived experiences of students with intellectual disabilities that propelled them to participate in post-secondary education in southern California that were aligned to the Think College Standards-Based Conceptual Framework for Inclusive Higher Education?

### **Research Methods and Data Collection Procedures**

To share the lived experiences of students with ID in secondary school that have successfully transitioned to PSE, the researcher focused on the students' voices (Mercier, 2017). Additionally, other participants' perspectives and stories enhanced and added to what the student's shared. The meaningful connection and contributions made by the participants throughout the data collection process provided the researcher with unique, thoughtful stories, which translated into concrete findings. Ethnography served as an excellent vehicle for this study as it allowed the researcher the flexibility and ability to explore the culture of students with ID.

After the initial identification of participants for the study, the researcher followed the following processes to collect data that was necessary to answering the research question. The methods utilized were followed to seek the most honest, substantial stories of students with ID participating in PSE settings in Southern California (Mercier, 2017) regarding their secondary school experiences. Over a period of approximately 10 weeks between October and December 2017,

- The researcher spent 11 days at UCLA and Taft College.
- The researcher completed over 30 hours of recorded interviews with research participants.
  - Interviews ranged in length from 15 minutes to over 2 hours.
- The researcher spent over 30 hours observing students in various settings.
- The researcher also immersed herself in the natural environment, completing more than 25 hours of inclusive observations on the two campuses.
  - The inclusive observations included campus tours, office and facilities, classrooms, special events, independent living facilities, built-in supports, peers, and interactions between students and personnel.

### **Population**

The researcher targeted schools in California that are included in the Think College Standards-Based Conceptual Framework for Inclusive Higher Education. California was chosen as the targeted location due to the location of the researcher (convenience sampling) and the ease of travel in consideration of the amount of time to be spent at each school. The two PSE settings used for the study included Pathway at UCLA in Los Angeles, California, and the Transition to Independent Living (TIL) at Taft

College in Taft, California. Pathway and TIL were chosen due to their well-organized programs, location, and link to the Think College system of colleges for students with ID. Although both colleges offered exceptional, well-established programs, Pathway at UCLA was part of a prominent university and TIL at Taft College was part of a community college setting.

### **Sample**

Identifying a sample population allowed the researcher to identify a group of individuals from whom data are collected (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The sample included researching students with ID who attend PSE programs in the Think College framework for inclusive higher education in southern California. In consideration of time, location, and opportunities for the appropriate amount of data collection needed for this study, the researcher chose to study two of the seven schools located in southern California, Pathway at UCLA and TIL at Taft College. Convenience sampling was appropriate because of the accessibility and need for the researcher to conduct data collection over multiple days (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). For this study, there were 26 total participants. From those two schools, 15 students with ID were chosen as participants, along with four family members, three faculty and administrators, and four non-disabled peers.

### **Demographic Data**

For this research study, 26 participants representative of the eligible criteria, and who signed informed consent, participated. Table 1, below, corresponds to the demographic data that describes the attributes of the participants, their role, what program they are associated with, and their pseudonyms. Most participants chose their own

pseudonyms. For those who did not, the researcher chose one that did not reflect their actual name.

Table 1

*Demographic Data for Research Participants*

Participant pseudonym	Age	Study Role	Years of experience	Program (TIL/Pathway)	Year(s) at program
Mr. A	20	Student	N/A	Pathway	2nd
Aidan	19	Student	N/A	TIL	1st
Alan Walker	19	Student	N/A	TIL	1st
Ms. B	N/A	Manager	3	Pathway	N/A
Blondie	N/A	NDP	2	Pathway	N/A
Bob	N/A	Director	12	Pathway	N/A
Ms. C	N/A	Director	2	TIL	N/A
Chip	23	Student	N/A	TIL	1st
Emily	22	Student	N/A	TIL	2nd
Mrs. F	N/A	Family Member	N/A	Pathway	1st
Friend	N/A	NDP	6	TIL	N/A
Mrs. H	N/A	Family Member	N/A	Pathway	1st
Happy	21	Student	N/A	TIL	1st
Joy	23	Student	N/A	TIL	2nd
Ms. M	19	Student	N/A	Pathway	1st
Mr. M	N/A	Family Member	N/A	Pathway	1st
New Guy	N/A	NDP	1	TIL	N/A
Nia	20	Student	N/A	TIL	2nd
Peach	19	Student	N/A	TIL	1st
Poncho	20	Student	N/A	TIL	2nd
Roth	19	Student	N/A	TIL	1st
Mrs. S	N/A	Family Member	N/A	TIL	Graduate
Sasha	24	Student	N/A	Pathway	1st
Thor	28	Student	N/A	Pathway	Graduate
Thornton	26	Student	N/A	TIL	1st
Ms. W	N/A	NDP	2	TIL	N/A

**Presentation and Analysis of Data**

From October of 2017 through January of 2018, the researcher collected data, read and reflected on the process, created themes, interpreted meaning, and coded the data into the 6 themes that were aligned to the Think College framework for inclusive higher education. The data collected over the nearly three months was used to answer the research question for this study.

The data collection processes yielded many rich, meaningful themes. The following represents the secondary school lived experiences of students with ID who are currently attending TIL at Taft College, Pathway at UCLA, or who have attended one of those schools and still meet the criteria of 18-28 years of age. Based on the data collected in this study, the six themes that emerged were:

1. students routinely developed and practiced self-determination and vocational skills in secondary school
2. students had a relationship with a mentor who was deeply vested in the success of their future
3. their family played an instrumental role in the transition process
4. students were involved with and utilized ongoing community resources and their connections to PSE
5. students had consistent participation and experiences that occurred in inclusive academic settings in secondary school
6. students desired to have typical experiences in college

According to Creswell (2014), qualitative researchers should utilize a hierarchical approach that will build data from the bottom up. Due to the ethnographic nature of this study, the data was often interrelated. Utilizing the bottom to top technique, the researcher began the coding process. Creswell (2014) recommended locating five to seven meaningful themes that appeared most often in the data. For this study, the researcher narrowed down the data and locate the rich stories from the students with ID and the other participants of the study into six themes. Following the organizing and preparation of data for analysis, the researcher conducted an in-depth review of the data,

and coded the data for frequencies. Based on the themes that appeared most frequently, the researcher organized the stories to further emphasize the significant results of the data, which expressed the secondary school lived experiences of students with ID who have participated in PSE settings.

The six themes identified for this study, along with the Think College standard, or standards, they align to are listed in Table 2 with the frequency count of each theme. Themes were not just identified because of their prevalence, but also due to each them having a minimum of 100 frequencies. Each theme identified in Table 2 related to one or more of the Think College standards relating to the secondary school lived experiences of students with ID who attend or attended PSE.

Table 2

*Cross reference of themes related to the Think College Standards and frequency count*

Themes	Think College Standard Alignment	Frequency
Involvement and use of ongoing community resources and their connections to PSE	1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8	173
Routinely developed and practiced self-determination and vocational skills in secondary school	3, 4, 6	162
Consistent participation and experiences that occurred in inclusive academic settings in secondary school	1, 3, 6	149
The family played an instrumental role in the transition process	1, 4, 5, 6, 7	145
A relationship with a mentor who was deeply vested in the success of their future	1, 3, 5	124
Desire to have typical experiences in college	1, 2, 3	118

The triangulation of data occurred as the researcher collected data through many sources, such as interviews, observations, and artifact analysis. Table 3 is a representation of the various forms of data collected, which contributed to the themes. A significant portion of the data is represented by the interviews due to the nature of the

research question. Understanding the lived experiences of students with ID in secondary school and their path to PSE was investigated, which is why the interviews played such a crucial role in the data collection process. Observations also played a meaningful role in data collection because the researcher was immersed in the setting for various occasions such as, time spent in independent living facilities, office and staff visits, and even a Thanksgiving holiday feast with all the PSE personnel and student body. The ability to observe and understand the relationships of the students with each other and with staff was invaluable to the data collection process. The observations in Table 3 are not represented as hours or settings, but rather number of unique instances that lasted in length from 20 minutes to multiple hours. Artifacts included program pamphlets, student work samples, website information, and items received on campus tours.

Table 3

*Representation of data through multiple sources*

	<u>Pathway</u>			Interviews	<u>TIL</u>		<u>Total</u>
	Interviews	Obs.	Artifacts		Obs.	Artifacts	
Self-determination	10	5	3	16	3	2	39
Mentor	8	2	2	10	2	1	25
Family	10	3	3	16	2	0	34
Community resources	10	2	2	16	3	2	35
Inclusive academics	8	0	2	13	0	0	23
Desire	8	4	0	12	2	0	26

**Themes Related to Think College Standards**

Represented in Table 4 are the Think College standards along with the number of themes related to each standard. As is seen in Table 4, some themes related to more standards than others due to the nature of the stories that emerged in data analysis. The

researcher thoroughly evaluated each theme and placed each theme as it related to each standard. The standards were not evaluated in the process.

In Table 4, the researcher presents a breakdown of how the themes emerged (Mercier, 2017) based on the stories of research participants and their relation to the Think College standards. Table 4 displays each of the Think College standards as they correlate to the 6 themes retrieved from the data regarding the lived experiences of students with ID and their path to PSE. After analyzing the 6 themes that emerged from data analysis, it was evident that the 6 themes clearly aligned to each of the Think College standards. In addition to the actual eight standards, quality indicators and benchmarks are included in the Think College framework for inclusive higher education.

Table 4

*Think College standards and related themes*

Standard	# of Related themes	Theme	Theme	Theme	Theme	Theme
1: Academic Access	5	Mentor	Family	Community resources	Inclusive academics	Desire
2: Career Development	2	Community resources	Desire			
3: Campus Membership	5	Self-determination	Mentor	Community resources	Inclusive academics	Desire
4: Self-Determination	2	Self-determination	Family			
5: College Systems and Practices	2	Mentor	Family			
6: Coordination-Collaboration	4	Self-determination	Family	Community resources	Inclusive academics	
7: Sustainability	2	Family	Community resources			
8: Ongoing Evaluation	1	Community resources				



The remaining portions of Chapter IV will follow the order and presentation of Table 4 to further emphasize and share the lived experiences, ‘stories’, of the research study participants and how it aligned to the standards. The description of each standard is shared according to the related themes (Mercier, 2017) that emerged from data analysis. Each theme is thoroughly described to highlight the relationship of the lived experiences of students with ID to each Think College standard.

### **Standard 1: Academic Access**

Standard 1 focused on facilitating high-quality academic access for students with ID (Grigal, Hart, & Weir, 2011), which includes inclusive opportunities through comprehensive programs that include disabled and non-disabled peers. Standard 1 includes three quality indicators and 16 benchmarks that assess participation in courses and skills necessary for lifelong learning (Grigal, Hart, & Weir, 2011; Mercier, 2017). For students with ID, the ability to access academics lends to increased opportunities for students to learn alongside both disabled and non-disabled peers (Mercier, 2017). In addition, with the ability to access all the resources available on a school campus, such as classes, campus services, transportation, housing, food, and extra-curricular activities, students are not only able to learn in academics, but also life skills. One student, Alan, discussed his classes in secondary school with the researcher and shared that he was in general education classes, but also experienced and participated in classes that prepared him for college, work, and other things. He learned responsibility, organization, how to write checks and manage paperwork, and general job skills. The ability to access various academic and skill-based classes supported students with ID throughout the transition process and helped to propel them to PSE.

As seen in Table 4, the data collected by the researcher that was related to Standard 1, Academic Access, included 5 themes. Students were successful in transitioning into PSE because they had a relationship with a mentor who was deeply vested in the success of their future, their family played an instrumental role in the transition process, of their involvement and use of ongoing community resources and their connections to PSE, they had consistent participation and experiences that occurred in inclusive academic settings in secondary school, and they desired to have typical experiences in college. The following sections under Standard 1: Academic Access highlight the 5 themes as they relate to Standard 1 and the research question for this study.

**Students had a relationship with a mentor who was deeply vested in the success of their future.** According to the data collected, there were multiple ways in which student experiences reflected academic access. One of the secondary school lived experiences of students with ID that propelled them to participate in PSE was having a relationship with a mentor who was deeply vested in the success of their future, which was referenced 124 times in the data. During one of the many interviews conducted for this study, the researcher interviewed a family member of one of the students with ID, Mrs. H, who was asked if there was a person who impacted the student in secondary school that might have affected their decision to go to college, she said,

You know, what really pushed him to go to college was his brother. He goes to a university and he has always wanted to do what his brother is doing. His brothers were the hook, you know. I think they helped him be who he is today. They are the ones who really carved it out for him.

They're all so kind and advocate for him and he wants to do what they're doing.

This was also highlighted in the interview with that very same student who spoke highly of his brothers and the role they took in his life. The notion that students are accessing education more productively with a mentor, leader, meaningful relationship, or exemplar was evident within the data. Additionally, the mentors mentioned were non-disabled peers or family members who were in college or who had attended college and who were supportive and present in the students' lives. The mentors were described as people who loved and cared for the students, educated, challenged the students, and as a person who provided important information in a meaningful way. Sasha, a student, expressed the significance her mother placed on college and "decided to go to college because her whole family had gone, and it felt like a tradition." Based on this study, participants described the importance of providing mentorship to underrepresented populations of students for students to equally and productively access education. Significant mentorship occurred in the lives of students with ID, which contributed to their advancement and smooth transition into PSE.

**Students' families played an instrumental role in the transition process.**

Based on the secondary school lived experiences of students with ID represented in this study, students with ID had families who played an instrumental role in the transition process, which propelled them to attend PSE. This theme was referenced 145 times in the data analysis. Students with ID who have successfully transitioned into PSE had families that played an instrumental role in the transition process by advocating for their children, ensuring necessary accommodations or modifications were in place, researching

programs and types of supports, and providing consistent encouragement throughout the change. Students with families who played an instrumental role in the transition process relates to Standard 1, Academic Access, because the advocacy and knowledge families had regarding attending classes with non-disabled peers, accessing a wide variety of classes, participation in classes that relate to their goals and interests, accommodations, technology, and overall resources is relevant to Standard 1 and mentioned throughout the data.

While some students and families described a positive relationship with the IEP process at secondary school, some did not. However, despite the differences in the relationships between families/students and personnel, the constant similarity in data was the role the family played in the process. Mrs. F described a very “trusting process” in which she felt there was a lot of “respect” and that she and the school were “partners” in the process. In contrast, when asked about the IEP process and the transition from secondary school to PSE, Mrs. H described feeling like portions of the IEP were “cut and pasted” and that the staff at the school “didn’t really care or understand.” Alan walker, a student who participated in the study, described having “good support at his house and that he had a good life.” Out of the 26 participants in this research study, 23 mentioned the significant role that the family played in the secondary school transition process for students with ID. Having consistent support from family throughout the transition phase from secondary school to PSE helped students access academic courses and receive services that would assist them in being successful and transitioning to PSE.

**Students’ involvement and use of ongoing community resources and their connections to PSE.** One of the factors for students with ID who were successful in

transitioning into PSE was involvement in community resources and ongoing services, supports, and information that led to PSE. Participants mentioned involvement and use of community resources as an important part of a successful transition into PSE 173 times as highlighted by the extensive interviews, observations, and artifacts collected by the researcher. In addition to academic access and services, students with ID who received additional community resources such as life skills services, information regarding programs and events, and other services, made great strides throughout secondary school, which led them to attending PSE. According to Happy, a student, “the only information ever received about college came from the regional center.” This sentiment was echoed by many students with ID who participated in this study. Participants in this study received the majority of their additional services, support in transition, and PSE information from community resources, such as the regional center.

Based on the data collected, students felt “supported,” “involved,” and “informed” through community resources, including advocates. Most of the students and family members described the community resources as the “only resource” they had in finding services and information for the transition from secondary school to PSE. Additionally, most of the students involved in this study received or were involved with some form of community resource throughout secondary school, which contributed to them being able to access academics equitably and make progress toward their goals. Students’ involvement and use of ongoing community resources contributed to their completion of secondary school and transition to PSE.

**Consistent participation and experiences that occurred in inclusive academic settings in secondary school.** Students with ID who had consistent participation and

experiences in an inclusive academic setting in secondary school transitioned successfully into PSE settings. Experiences regarding inclusive academic settings were mentioned 149 in the data collected. Gaining experiences in an inclusive setting that included non-disabled peers proved beneficial regarding the lived experiences of students with ID because students described feeling “normal,” “happy to do what others were doing,” and “learned important skills” that led them to successfully transition into PSE. Thornton, a student, said he “always loved general ed. classes.” Thornton also shared that he was around “mostly normal kind of people and that’s what he was used to.” This was especially evident as he shared various stories of his experiences in general education. When the researcher asked him to clarify, he said “I just mean I want to be around people who don’t have difficulties, so I can learn and grow.” Student participants repeatedly expressed their desire to be around non-disabled peers and their desire to make improvement.

One of the director’s, Ms. C, expressed the importance of students “receiving homework regularly, participating in class, engaging in activities, and using technology.” This was highlighted as the researcher first met one of the TIL students as she was practicing her job skills through a school secretary job at the college. The overall need for students to learn alongside non-disabled peers, access curriculum, and learn socially in a larger setting was present in much of the data. Participating and experiencing inclusive academic settings with non-disabled peers in secondary school made students feel typical, like they were given a chance they deserved, successful, and required them to work harder toward their goals. Consistent participation and experiences in inclusive

academic settings was one of the described lived experiences of students with ID that propelled them to attend PSE.

**Desire to have typical experiences in college.** Students with ID were successful in transitioning from secondary school to PSE because they had the desire to have typical experiences in college. As evidenced by this study, research participants described the significant role that the desire to having typical experiences in college played in successfully transitioning into PSE. The desire to have a typical experience in college was mentioned 118 in the data. Some ‘typical’ experiences mentioned in the data were; the ability to live independently; the ability and desire to live with roommates; the desire to be challenged; the desire to live away from home; participation in parties or other social events; and the desire to earn a certificate or degree to gain a job in the workforce someday. Sasha, a student, said,

Just basically my entire family went to college and then I hear about how my cousins never went to college. So, I feel like I don’t want to miss out on that. I feel like it’s really important. I just feel like if you don’t go to college you’re just not going to get very far in life.

Not only were students motivated and supported by a mentor in their lives, but most students interviewed for this study described the desire to have a college experience. Thornton said, “for the most part, I thought just being in the university, living on campus was living the American dream.” Participants in this study described seeing college experiences on movies and learning about college from family and friends, which contributed to their desires of going to college after secondary school, which was evident in the stories they shared with the researcher. The desire to meet qualifications required

for college contributed to students accessing academics in secondary school. Evident from this data was that students' desire to have typical college experiences played a major role in their advancement to PSE.

## **Standard 2: Career Development**

Standard 2 is focused on career development and the supports and experiences necessary to find and keep employment when students are transitioned out of secondary school (Grigal, Hart, & Weir, 2011). Standard 2 has one quality indicator with seven benchmarks. Mercier (2017) described the need for students to develop vocational experiences and career awareness by being involved and identifying goals. According to the data collected, the lived experiences of students with ID in secondary school that propelled them to attend PSE were reflected in the involvement and use of ongoing community resources and their connections to PSE and the desire for students to have typical experiences in college. The next two sections highlight the data collected from the research study participants regarding the lived experiences of students with ID in secondary school and the relation to Standard 2.

**Students' involvement and use of ongoing community resources and their connections to PSE.** One of the lived experiences of students with ID that contributed to their attendance in PSE programs was their involvement and use of ongoing community resources and their connections to PSE. Participants mentioned involvement and use of community resources as an important part of a successful transition into PSE 173 times. Students with ID in secondary school who had consistent involvement and use of community resources, including social skills, speech and language, and job development, gained skills necessary to be successful in PSE and get a job.



The involvement in additional resources supporting independence, social skills, and executive functioning skills contributed to students becoming ‘career ready,’ gaining important skills necessary to more independently communicate needs and concerns, and improve in organization, which contributed to responsibility. Ms. M, a student, was involved in a friendship club, while Happy, another student, was involved in job development courses. Friend, a non-disabled peer, shared that “students in this program are often referred by friends, families, or community resources, like the regional center.” He also said that “students who have developed job and life skills in high school are more successful in college.” As evidenced in this research study, students with ID described lived experiences that included their involvement and use of community resources, which was a major factor that propelled them to attend PSE.

**Desire to have typical experiences in college.** The desire that students had in secondary school to achieve the goal of attending college propelled them to improve important vocational skills that lead to career development, which also propelled them to successfully transition into PSE. The desire to have a typical experience in college was documented 118 in the data. Not only were students receiving additional resources outside of the standard school setting, but students had the urge to achieve more and gain experiences, which contributed to the development of important skills. When asked what being successful meant to him, Mr. A, a student, said that “getting a job, actually, having a job, and being independent” made him want to go to college and have those experiences. Additionally, when asked what made her want to go to college, a student, Emily, said,

So, I figure if I go to college, then I have a good idea of what I want to do and then I'd go there and hopefully that will help me get to my goal. I want to go to college and experience classes and finish, so I can become a writer. I also wanted to like get more learning and help with like not knowing what to do.

In relation to Standard 2: Career Development, the desire that students with ID felt to have traditional college experiences and make progress toward life goals was evidenced by mention of research participants describing the importance of responsibility, timeliness, organization, social skills, and growth. All stakeholders referenced college experiences and the skills and attributes necessary for students to be successful. Having the desire to have typical experiences in college was a highly referenced lived experience of students with ID that contributed to them attending PSE.

### **Standard 3: Campus Membership**

Standard 3 addresses the social aspect of students being involved in school-wide events, clubs, organizations, or other activities that are not necessarily related to academics or actual, specific classes. Standard 3 included one quality indicator and four benchmarks related to campus programs, recreational facilities and programs, social communication, and other social activities (Grigal, Hart, & Weir, 2011). Ms. M, a student, shared a variety of ways she was involved with campus activities and extracurricular activities and said,

Well, my school was a big school. It had a lot of different subjects and sports. The main event that I was mostly joined when I was at high school was choir during my four years. I made a lot of friends when I was at high

school and made my best friend there, too. I started out playing piano and harp and I loved art and I loved the learning center. I did prom twice, during my junior and senior year. I also went on a choir trip to Paris and London. I was a part of Friendship Circle.

Based on the data collected that is related to Standard 3: Campus Membership, the secondary school lived experiences of students with ID included routinely developed and practiced self-determination and vocational skills, a relationship with a mentor who was deeply vested in the success of their future, involvement and use of ongoing community resources and their connections to PSE, consistent participation and experiences that occurred in inclusive academic settings in secondary school, and the desire to have typical experiences in college.

**Routinely developed and practiced self-determination and vocational skills in secondary school.** Students with ID who were successful in getting into PSE had a strong sense of self-determination and practice with vocational skills in secondary school. This was highlighted by Ms. M in one of the observations at her independent living facility on campus in which she explained the various processes that she and her roommates commit to keep an organized home. Some of those items included a calendar of chores for the apartment, label systems for their personal belongings, and check-ins with the site independent living facilitator from an outside agency that works with the college. One of the reasons students were active on campus was due to their routinely developed and practiced self-determination and vocational skills. These practiced skills contributed to being included on their school campus in various extra-curricular type activities. This theme was referenced 162 times in the data gathered by the researcher.

Students participated and practiced self-determination and vocational skills in programs like school to career, job development, community-based instruction, friend's groups, clubs, and lunch buddies when they were in secondary school.

In a discussion regarding a students' high school experiences, Mrs. F, a family member said,

Student was incredibly involved in a regular schedule and practiced yoga, choir, photography, and participated in SCROC (Southern California Regional Occupational Center), which is work experience. Student was always a model student, all of her teachers said, like she was a TA for History of Art. She's just a lovely hard worker and in fact, would never go to school without her homework being done. She's totally independent and works so hard.

The researcher spent time with the student mentioned above over three days at UCLA in which the researcher saw these strong, independent vocational skills in action. All 15 of the students who participated in this study described practicing independence, being involved in some form of job skill development, practicing social skills, attending activities and clubs, or engaging in difficult activities. During an observation at TIL, the researcher observed Joy, a student, practicing her self-determination and vocational skills at a campus job onsite at TIL. Students who routinely developed and practiced self-determination and vocational skills were impacted positively, and these skills were essential in helping them get into PSE.

**Students had a relationship with a mentor who was deeply vested in the success of their future.** Students were connected and participated on campus because

they had a relationship with a mentor who was deeply vested in the success of their future, which contributed to them successfully transitioning to PSE. Based on the stories from research participants, this theme was mentioned 124 times in data collected. The data collected uncovered a clear connection between students having a meaningful mentor, being involved in various extra-curricular activities, and successfully transitioning into PSE. Participants described attending “chess clubs,” “friend clubs,” “football games,” and “other fun activities” with best friends, siblings, teachers, and other people described as very meaningful in their lives. The ability to connect meaningfully contributed to the growth and success of students with ID in secondary school and throughout the transition process.

Feeling valued, motivated, and supported by somebody who they admired was a commonly described lived experience for students with ID in secondary school as was evident by the various stories, visits with families, and observations. Some stories shared by student participants included their participation in events with siblings or friends who they trusted and admired and ability to receive help when they needed it from someone they trusted, which contributed to them accessing things on campus. Out of the 26 stakeholders interviewed for this research study, none referenced a school provided mentorship program. All student participants who referenced the significance of a mentor in their life mentioned somebody who they independently met and grew close with or someone who was related to them. Out of the 6 themes that emerged, along with many lived experiences described regarding secondary school experiences, students with ID saw value in having had a mentor who was deeply vested in their future as being a contributing factor in getting to PSE.

**Students' involvement and use of ongoing community resources and their connections to PSE.** One-way students remained involved in the campus environment in secondary school was by using ongoing community resources, which led them to attending PSE. After reviewing the data collected by the participants, this theme occurred 173 times. Emily, a student, described being “involved in talent development, which helped with juggling and with knowing what to do.” Getting additional services, practice with important life skills, and other various push-in or after-school supports helped the students become more productive members of their campus in secondary school. The importance of campus membership was highlighted by the directors of both schools, as well as the program manager at one of the schools. Campus membership was observed in action as the researcher participated in a Thanksgiving celebration that included staff, students, NDP's, and family members.

As evidenced by the data, students with ID participated in various campus activities and outside campus activities or programs that included friendship groups, resource support, speech and language development, occupational therapy support, counseling, and life skills. Having the support of the community resources for students with ID in secondary school was described as significant by all stakeholders in this research study. One family member, Peach, said the “only way we [he and student] heard about this program [Pathway] was because of the regional center.” He went on to describe the community-based instruction type classes his student was involved with, as well as the social friendship groups. It was evident that receiving and being involved with community resources in secondary school propelled students to develop and

transition into PSE, which promoted campus membership both in secondary school and PSE.

**Consistent participation and experiences that occurred in inclusive academic settings in secondary school.** Students with ID who consistently participated and experienced inclusive academic settings in secondary school were involved with various aspects of campus membership, which aided students in the transition process and contributed to them getting into PSE. The inclusive settings that many of the research participants experienced, contributed to their involvement of various campus components. The student participants in this study spent a substantial amount of time in settings with non-disabled peers as was highlighted in the stories they shared with the researcher.

The data collected from the students with ID regarding their secondary school experiences indicated that consistent participation and experiences in “regular” classes helped students “manage a stressful workload,” “make friends more easily,” “find fun things to do,” and “participate in stuff that they were not always comfortable with.” A student, Aidan, described receiving more services at a younger age, but as he progressed into secondary school, he participated in general education classes and worked toward career classes like Photoshop and graphic design. He described being involved with the “artsy” classes and programs on campus, which helped him further skills needed for advancement in school and a career. Most student stakeholders described being included in some, if not all, general education classes, with special education support. Based on the stories of research participants, the inclusive academic opportunities in secondary school propelled students with ID to attend PSE.

**Desire to have typical experiences in college.** The desire to have typical college experiences was a common lived experience described by students with ID when reminiscing about what made them go to college. The desire for students with ID in secondary school to have typical experiences in college is reflected in Standard 3: Campus Membership because students' desires propelled them to become involved in certain activities or programs that they may otherwise not have been involve with. This theme was represented in data 118 times.

According to Peach, a student, when asked about experiences in high school, he said, "I was a normal high school student and I just took all of that stuff and tried my best, and now I'm going to college." The majority of the student participants in the study described areas that they increased involvement on campus to further their skills, so they could improve, become more independent, and go to college. That innate urge to experience college in a traditional sense like "all the regular kids" was prominent in the data. It was clear, as evidenced by the data and frequencies, that students' desire to experience college played a crucial role in them making it to PSE.

#### **Standard 4: Self-Determination**

Standard 4 is focused on the facilitation and development of self-determination skills including the involvement of students making goals, developing and promoting self-determination skills, and family involvement (Grigal, Hart, & Weir, 2011). Standard 4 has 3 quality indicators and 15 benchmarks. Evidence of Standard 4: Self-Determination was reflected in theme 1, routinely developed and practiced self-determination and vocational skills in secondary school, and theme 3, the family played an instrumental role in the transition process. According to the data collected by the



researcher in relation to Standard 4, the lived experiences of students with ID in secondary school were reflected in their independence, self-advocacy skills, desire to reach goals, and involvement in IEP decisions. The following sections under Standard 4 reflect the self-determination skills (Mercier, 2017) developed in secondary school by students with ID who attended PSE.

Routinely developed and practiced self-determination and vocational skills in secondary school. As referenced in Standard 3 and 6, the theme regarding routinely developed and practiced self-determination and vocational skills in secondary school was reflected heavily in the data and was a major contributor to students with ID who transitioned to PSE. Students with ID who successfully transitioned into PSE had self-determination skills that were practiced and desired in secondary school. Self-determination and other vocational skills were mentioned 162 times in the data. Every student participant interview included information regarding various skills, including goal setting, participation in important decisions, self-advocacy, desire to improve, desire to be independent, and social skills.

Ms. B, a program manager, was asked what types of things students with ID in secondary school need to be successful in PSE like Pathway and TIL and she said, Students should explore careers, but there needs to be actual laid out plans and skill development. Students should experience job or vocational training programs and be able to understand appropriate behaviors, executive functioning skills, timeliness, and responsibility. They need to stop pushing them [students with ID in secondary school] through and teach them [students] accountability.

Research participants described skills such as goal setting, participation in IEP team decision making, job skills, executive functioning practice, and social skills. The students with ID who participated in this research study had practiced self-determination and vocational skills, which contributed to their success in getting to college.

**Students' families played an instrumental role in the transition process.** Of the lived experiences described regarding students with ID in secondary school, the instrumental role that the family of students with ID played in the transition process assisted students in getting to PSE. One way students made progress and improved upon important skills was through the support, guidance, and input by family members. This theme weighed heavily and was reflected in Standard 1, 4, 5, and 6. With the support and guidance from family members, students improved and developed important self-determination skills that contributed to their successful transition into PSE.

Although multiple pieces of data reflected the significance of the family role in transitioning from secondary school to PSE, one research participant, Poncho, described having “really supportive parents.” Sasha, a student, also described having a family that helped her “get better.” Mrs. S, Mrs. H, and Mrs. F, all parents, described “knowing how to navigate the educational system,” “being very involved,” and “finding ways to get more services/supports” for their students to improve, not only academically, but regarding social skills, vocational skills, and self-determination. The crucial role that a positive, involved family played in the transition process for students with ID aided them in getting to PSE.

## **Standard 5: College Systems and Practices**

The largest, most in-depth standard in the Think College framework is likely Standard 5 as it encompasses 5 quality indicators and 22 benchmarks (Grigal, Hart, & Weir, 2011). While much of Standard 5 pertains to the college setting, some components of it related to the themes present in the data, such as program structures, courses, access to academics, vocational components, participation, collaboration with faculty and staff, and campus membership. Based on the data collected that is related to Standard 5: College Systems and Practices, the lived experiences of students with ID in secondary school that propelled them to attend college included a relationship with a mentor who was deeply vested in the success of their future and their families played an instrumental role in the transition process. The following two sections highlight the significance of the themes as they relate to Standard 5: College Systems and Practices, as well as how the themes relate to answering the research question.

**Students had a relationship with a mentor who was deeply vested in the success of their future.** Standard 5: College Systems and Practices is related to students having described a meaningful relationship with a mentor because student's improved outcomes, participated in co-curricular activities, participated in social events, and transitioned to PSE, which was all made possible by their motivation and support throughout secondary school. Those factors contributed to students with ID successfully transitioning to PSE. Meaningful mentorship was described by nearly all students who participated in this study. According to multiple stakeholders, the participation and involvement in various programs was increased due to students feeling challenged,

motivated, and valued by the person or persons they looked up to. According to data collected by the researcher, this theme appeared 124 in the data.

The researcher spoke with Ms. W, a non-disabled peer, and asked her about the students' experiences in college. Ms. W stated, "The students that I know in this program work hard, always seem to try their best, have good families, and really seem to be motivated to improve." Although the observations of Ms. W do not directly reflect mentorship from a meaningful individual, they do reflect the observation that students appear well-supported and motivated, which is related to students' having had a mentor who was deeply vested in the success of their future. As evident by multiple pieces of data, of the lived experiences in secondary school described by research participants, having a significant mentor who valued their future contributed to them successfully advancing to PSE.

**Students' families played an instrumental role in the transition process.** One of the secondary school lived experiences of students with ID that propelled them to participate in PSE was the instrumental role that their families played throughout the transition process. The theme of the family playing an instrumental role in the transition process is reflected in Standard 5 as families advocated for increased services, researched and visited the PSE sites, and made the connections between secondary school and PSE to assist their students in successfully transitioning into PSE.

When asked how he heard about Pathway and the transition into PSE, Mr. A, a student, said, "My mom heard about Pathway and then spent the time researching it. It was because of her that I found out about it and that is why I'm here." Multiple participants described positive family relationships, assistance from parents or siblings,

support with difficult times or classes, and family assistance with accessing PSE. Due to the nature of the knowledge and support students with ID in secondary school received from their families, they successfully transitioned to PSE and participate in the college systems and practices.

### **Standard 6: Coordination and Collaboration**

The purpose of Standard 6: Coordination and Collaboration, is to facilitate and establish connections and relationships between campus resources, departments, services, scheduling, person-centered planning, and activities (Grigal, Hart, & Weir, 2011).

Standard 6 includes 2 quality indicators and 9 benchmarks that reflect various themes present in the data. According to the data related to Standard 6: Coordination and Collaboration, the lived experiences of students with ID in secondary school who successfully transitioned to PSE were involved with routinely developed and practiced self-determination and vocational skills, had a family that played an instrumental role in the transition process, had involvement and use of ongoing community resources and their connections to PSE, and had consistent participation and experiences that occurred in inclusive academic settings. The following four sections highlight the stories from research participants as they relate to Standard 6: Coordination and Collaboration.

**Routinely developed and practiced self-determination and vocational skills in secondary school.** Students made progress in school and advanced to PSE because they routinely developed and practiced self-determination and vocational skills in secondary school. The mention and importance of self-determination and vocational skills was mentioned in some capacity by every stakeholder group. A family member, Mrs. S, described the vocational skills that contributed to her students' success and said,

I think that what [student] had really gained in high school in terms of her classes is she gained organizational skills. She may not know the materials, she may not be able to retain the materials, but you know what, she knows how to utilize her resources. She'll look in the glossary. I mean, what kid does that? Not many. She knows how to tap into her resources. Her study skills teacher helped her to become more successful and get through things.

The practice with essential life skills, such as being organized, using strategies, and self-advocating were mentioned multiple times in data collected by the researcher. According to the lived experiences of students with ID in secondary school who transitioned into PSE, these qualities and skills were important and mentioned 162 in the data. Coordination and collaboration played a significant role in self-determination and vocational skills in secondary school as mentioned by family members, directors, program manager, and many of the student participants. After being asked about the collaboration and coordination of the transition of students with ID, a program manager, Ms. B, said,

We do a lot of outreach in the sense that we go to transitional fairs with school districts and with the regional centers. A lot of it has to do with the relationship building so we do have a couple of contacts at some school districts that we hear from every year. Making face-to-face contact seems to be the most effective, especially for parents who've never heard of Pathway. We work with Level Up Solutions and we actually contract

them to provide a structured social recreational program. They work with us to provide events on campus and in the community.

Students who practiced self-determination and vocational skills in secondary school participated in programs and activities that were coordinated and collaborative with community resources, service providers, and PSE, which positively impacted their transition and propelled them to participate in PSE.

**Students' families played an instrumental role in the transition process.** Not only did students' families play an instrumental role in the transition process, but they did so, in part, by coordinating and collaborating with the students' secondary school, services providers, community resources, and PSE sites, which contributed to their attendance in PSE. Family member stakeholders described building partnerships with the school, increasing needed services, working closely with community resources, and researching options for their students.

One participant, Mrs. S, shared her experiences with the secondary school process as follows: "My husband and I, we're both teachers so we help our girls a lot. We know how to navigate the educational system." The coordination and collaboration between the families and the PSE sites played a significant role in the success of students with ID transitioning into PSE. Students and families described wanting to be a part of PSE and described how they went about getting there. Student participants in this study described having families who were "supportive," "helped out a lot," "cared about their futures," and "believed" in them. The path to PSE for students with ID was made possible because of the instrumental support of the family throughout the transition phase.

**Students' involvement and use of ongoing community resources and their connections to PSE.** Coordination and collaboration played a major role in students' involvement and use of ongoing community resources, which led to students successfully transitioning into PSE programs. The researcher interviewed two program directors and one program manager who all emphasized the importance of coordinating and collaborating with secondary schools and families to encourage and promote students with ID success.

As referenced by multiple research participants, community resources were crucial in the process of transitioning into PSE. Community resources included additional services, life skills support, independent living skills, information, regional center resources, and other services pertaining to improving the lives and skills of students with ID. Based on the data, most research participants described how community resource programs or centers, secondary schools, and families collaborated to coordinate plans and services that would benefit students with ID and promote the important skills they needed to transition from secondary school. Based on the stories of research participants and other data, it was clear that students with ID benefited from the use of ongoing community resources, which contributed to their advancement to PSE.

**Consistent participation and experiences that occurred in inclusive academic settings in secondary school.** Students with ID maintained consistent participation and gain unique experiences in inclusive academic settings in secondary school due to the coordination and collaboration between case carriers, general education teachers, service providers, and families, which propelled them to attend PSE. The opportunities that students with ID had in secondary school that allowed them to learn and grow alongside



non-disabled peers provided students with the opportunity to practice essential skills such as social skills, executive functioning skills, and academic skills, as referenced by nearly half of the research participants.

Coordination and collaboration are contributing factors to any school site, but the extent to how well each school site does this varies. Based on this research study, coordination and collaboration were implemented with fidelity, which is evident in the amount of inclusive opportunities students with ID described when asked about their lived experiences in secondary school. Student participants who participated in inclusive settings for some or all their school day described feeling challenged, described feeling like they were like everyone else, and felt that they learned how to behave better. Many research participants referenced how their special education case managers worked closely with their families and their other teachers, which made them feel successful. As evident by the data, one of the secondary school lived experiences of students with ID that propelled them to go to PSE was the opportunity to consistently participate in inclusive academic settings.

### **Standard 7: Sustainability**

Standard 7: Sustainability has 2 quality indicators and 8 benchmarks, which relate to maintaining relationships, providing information to students, service agency funds and resources, disabilities services, work development, families, students, and communication, amongst other things (Grigal, Hart, & Weir, 2011). In relation to Standard 7: Sustainability, the themes that related the most included the family role in the transition process and the use of ongoing community resources and their connections to PSE. Evidence related to this standard that correlates to the themes includes the use of

and relationship with community resources, communication and collaboration with the family, and the overall transition processes between secondary school and PSE. The next two sections describe the themes that contribute to answering the research question and their relation to Standard 7: Sustainability.

Students' families played an instrumental role in the transition process.

According to data, the family involvement and support played an instrumental role in the transition process, which propelled students with ID to participate in PSE. Multiple research participants identified the instrumental role that the family of students with ID played in the transition process, which relates to maintaining relationships, providing resources, and communication in Standard 7: Sustainability. Mrs. F, a family member, said,

She did an additional year [of high school] because I thought that she could use one more year of emotional development. And so, she spent a fifth year reluctantly at high school. She was very upset, because she's such a good student and that she couldn't believe that anybody would spend five years in high school and nobody does that.

Family members went to great lengths to support, challenge, and provide guidance to students throughout secondary school to better prepare them for college. The family support and encouragement in improving skills related to peer and staff relations, services, and effective communication all contributed to increased independent and the attainment of important skills necessary to transition from secondary school.

According to the student research participants, factors pertaining to sustainability were directly related to their families being involved and helping throughout this

significant phase in their lives. Another component to this standard was shared by Sasha, a student, who shared the importance her mother placed on college with the researcher. Most of the student participants in this study expressed the significance their family placed on college and the hopes they had for their future independence. This desire by many family members, including Mrs. F, Mrs. H, and Mrs. S, for their students to transition smoothly into effective, productive programs was mirrored in the data. Due to the various reasons highlighted in this section, students with ID transitioned from secondary school and participated in PSE due to the instrumental role their families played in their lives.

**Students' involvement and use of ongoing community resources and their connections to PSE.** Directly related to Standard 7: Sustainability, was the students' involvement and use of ongoing community resources and their connections toward attendance in PSE. Students with ID were successful in transitioning into PSE programs due to their involvement of community resources, which were connected to PSE programs that collaborated with various programs, centers, and service providers. Represented in Standard 1, Standard 2, Standard 3, Standard 6, Standard 7, and Standard 8, students' involvement and use of resources outside of the school setting was reflected 173 in the data.

Both directors and the program manager interviewed provided the researcher with a compelling amount of information about various ways they provide outreach, work with community resources, and ensure students with ID make progress, both academically, but also with essential life skills. The connection between maintaining sustainable, productive programs and involvement and use of ongoing community

resources for students with ID was clear based on the paths that multiple student participants described. According to the directors and program manager, the purpose of the TIL and Pathway programs is to promote independence, increase social skills and social opportunities, and to assist students in learning the skills they need to be successful in the workforce and in life. Secondary programs that had similar qualities were described by multiple research participants. The ongoing, consistent use of community resources was a major factor in participation in PSE for students with ID.

### **Standard 8: Ongoing Evaluation**

Standard 8: Ongoing Evaluation only has 1 quality indicator, with 6 benchmarks related to facilitating and providing high-quality educational opportunities and services for students with ID (Grigal, Hart, & Weir, 2011). Standard 8 reflects the need for schools and programs to continuously develop and strive for excellence (Mercier, 2017). Out of the eight standards in the Think College framework for inclusive education, ongoing evaluation was least reflected in the data with only one theme that coordinates to the meaning behind the standard. The following section emphasizes the importance that students' involvement and use of ongoing community resources played in students with ID transitioning into PSE as it relates to Standard 8: Ongoing Evaluation.

**Students' involvement and use of ongoing community resources and their connections to PSE.** The involvement and use of ongoing community resources and their connections to PSE was reflected in Standard 8: Ongoing Evaluation as multiple stakeholders referenced the quality of certain services, opportunities, and interventions that students with ID received. Evidence of the lived experiences of students with ID in secondary school as it related to the involvement of community resources and ongoing

evaluation was evident when the researcher spoke to a family member, Mrs. F, who spoke in-depth about a community resource that her daughter participated in, which helped her gain job and life skills. Additionally, it was explained to the researcher that this program had high expectations for students with ID and required consistent attendance and participation. High quality programs and services for students with ID was mentioned throughout the data and by all stakeholder parties in the data. The involvement and use of ongoing community resources that had connections and information about PSE was one of the factors that contributed to student attendance and participation in PSE programs.

### **Summary**

The data represented in this study reflected an extensive process that occurred over a three-month period and included triangulating data that included interviews, observations, and artifacts. The data was read, coded, and thoroughly examined by the researcher, which ultimately gave way to six clear themes in the data. The lived experiences of students with ID in secondary school that propelled them to participate in PSE were routinely developed and practiced self-determination and vocational skills in secondary school, which occurred in data 162 times; a relationship with a mentor who was deeply vested in the success of their future, which occurred in data 124 times; the family played an instrumental role in the transition process, which occurred in data 145 times; involvement and use of ongoing community resources and their connection to PSE, which occurred in data 173 times; consistent participation and experiences that occurred in inclusive academic settings in secondary school, which occurred in data 149

times; and the desire to have typical experiences in college, which occurred in data 118 times.

## CHAPTER V: FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Students with ID should be recognized for their rich potential and possible contributions to the world in their post-secondary lives (Benito, 2012; Eckes & Ochoa, 2005; Grigal & Hart, 2011). The need to understand what experiences, supports, and exposures support and encourage a successful transition and attendance of a PSE program is crucial to encouraging and promoting a successful adult life. It was the purpose of this research to investigate and describe the secondary school lived experiences of students with intellectual disabilities (ID) that propelled them to participate in post-secondary education (PSE) in Southern California that aligned to the Think College Standards-Based Conceptual Framework for Inclusive Higher Education (Mercier, 2017) so that families, educators, and the entire professional community in education would have a deeper knowledge of the various factors that aide and encourage students with ID to transition to PSE. The researcher conducted a qualitative study, with an ethnographic approach, which served as an inquiry framework to understand the culture of students with ID, including their perspectives and behaviors (Patton, 2015). In consideration of the population and data collection processes, the researcher chose ethnography as a framework of questioning, investigating, and understanding the lives of students with ID in secondary school. To answer the research question, it was necessary to share the voices of the student participants regarding secondary school programs, transition processes, and relationships between secondary school and PSE for future students with ID.

Over a three-month period in the fall of 2017, the researcher collected data that included interviews, observations, and artifacts, followed by an extensive data analysis

process that revealed the secondary school lived experiences of students with ID who have participated in PSE. For this research study, 26 participants representative of the eligible criteria, and who signed informed consent, participated. After completion of the detailed data triangulation process, 6 themes, with over 100 frequencies each, emerged that corresponded with the lived experiences of students with ID in secondary school who have participated in PSE. Chapter IV was organized by displaying the 6 themes that emerged from the data as they relate to each of the eight Think College Standards. In contrast, Chapter V presents the findings, conclusions, implications for action, recommendations for future research, and a final summary of reflections regarding the research of the secondary school lived experiences of students with ID that propelled them to participate in PSE.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to investigate and describe the secondary school lived experiences of students with intellectual disabilities that propelled them to participate in post-secondary education settings in southern California, that were designed based on the Think College Standards-Based Conceptual Framework for Inclusive Higher Education.

### **Research Questions**

The research question for this study was: What were the secondary school lived experiences of students with intellectual disabilities that propelled them to participate in post-secondary education in southern California that were aligned to the Think College Standards-Based Conceptual Framework for Inclusive Higher Education?



## **Major Findings**

Following an extraordinary review of data, triangulation of data, and data analysis of the interviews, observations, and artifacts, the researcher discovered six major findings. The findings were corroborated by the data collected by the researcher and are presented according to six categories based on the themes that emerged in Chapter IV. The Think College framework was not used as an assessment tool (Mercier, 2017), but rather a framework by which to investigate the secondary school lived experiences of students with ID who have participated or are currently participating at PSE. The purpose of the findings is to highlight the voices of the research participants, along with their stories (Mercier, 2017), along with their connections to the Think College framework. In the following sections, the six findings are highlighted, in addition to the Think College Standards they align to.

## **Unexpected Findings**

The researcher found three unexpected findings following data collection at UCLA and Taft College. First, the researcher did not anticipate that consistent mentorship would occur and yield such high frequency counts. Providing consistent mentors for students with ID proved significant in this study. Second, it was surprising to find that the research participants so readily participated in inclusive academic settings. The majority of participants shared of rich experiences in general education settings. Lastly, and unexpectedly, it was surprising to find that the desire to go to college was so strong amongst the participants. Learning about the various significant reasons why the participants wanted to attend college was fascinating.

## **Students Were Involved in Community Resources That Contributed to a Successful Transition**

The secondary school lived experiences of students with ID who have, or are currently, participating in PSE programs in Southern California that were aligned to the Think College Standards-Based Conceptual Framework for Inclusive Higher Education (Standards 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8) (Mercier, 2017) included involvement and use of ongoing community resources and their connections to PSE, which included receiving pathways to college through collaboration with community resources; provided an array of services that included a variety of community resources; and were capable of being competent and independent when provided information, services, and program options that taught and developed essential life skills that supported academics, social, and vocational growth.

## **Self-Determination and Vocational Skills in Secondary School Were Key to Student Success**

The secondary school lived experiences of students with ID who have, or are currently, participating in PSE programs in Southern California that were aligned to the Think College Standards-Based Conceptual Framework for Inclusive Higher Education (Standards 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8) (Mercier, 2017) included students seeing, learning, and practicing self-determination and vocational skills as part of their secondary experience; provided with challenging situations and/or role play opportunities that put skills (self-determination and vocational) to practice; and students actively participated and engaged in decision-making, discussions, and goal setting in their Individualized Education Plan's (IEP) and transition meetings.

### **Inclusive Academic Settings in Secondary School Led to College Readiness**

The secondary school lived experiences of students with ID who have, or are currently, participating in PSE programs in Southern California that were aligned to the Think College Standards-Based Conceptual Framework for Inclusive Higher Education (Standards 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8) (Mercier, 2017) included participation in rigorous academic settings in which students experienced social and academic challenges; multiple, varied opportunities to interact with non-disabled peers and staff within the inclusive classroom setting that included presenting, collaborating in small groups, and class jobs.

### **Family Played an Instrumental Role in Preparing and Supporting Students with ID**

The secondary school lived experiences of students with ID who have, or are currently, participating in PSE programs in Southern California that were aligned to the Think College Standards-Based Conceptual Framework for Inclusive Higher Education (Standards 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8) (Mercier, 2017) concluded that students greatly benefited from having school team collaboration with families on IEP processes that lead to college; students need and benefit from feeling well-supported and engaged in the IEP process at home and school; and students received increased services and supports due to their families being informed and involved in the IEP process, which contributed to their ability to navigate challenges and persevere.

### **Mentors Drove Students with ID to Pursue College**

The secondary school lived experiences of students with ID who have, or are currently, participating in PSE programs in Southern California that were aligned to the Think College Standards-Based Conceptual Framework for Inclusive Higher Education (Standards 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8) (Mercier, 2017) included students being motivated because

they felt well-informed, supported, and challenged by an important, educated person in their lives and thus, were more successful; students had a role model and were inspired to go to college and developed a strong sense of self due to the encouragement they received; and students had more practice with social opportunities or events, essential life skills, and independence due to their significant relationship with a well-educated individual.

### **Students with ID Wanted the College Experience**

The secondary school lived experiences of students with ID who have, or are currently, participating in PSE programs in Southern California that were aligned to the Think College Standards-Based Conceptual Framework for Inclusive Higher Education (Standards 1, 2, 3) (Mercier, 2017) included the desire to have typical experiences in college. Students looked forward to living independently, living with roommates, being challenged, living away from home, participating in social events, and the ability to gain job skills and employment. The consistent desire to belong in a college setting drove students to excel in secondary school and persevere through challenges.

### **Conclusions**

Based on the triangulation of data, the researcher drew conclusions for each of the six findings. The interviews, observations, and artifacts all contributed to the findings, which led to the conclusions. Additionally, the conclusions determined by the researcher were well-supported by the literature review that was conducted in Chapter II.

**Conclusion 1: Students with ID Benefit from Intentionally Designed and Implemented Services Received Collaboratively Through Secondary School and Community Resources**

Based on the finding that involvement and use of ongoing community resources and their connections to PSE propelled students to pursue PSE, for students to advance to PSE, it can be concluded that collaboration and services with community resources that are intentionally designed and implemented encourages and supports students throughout secondary school and their transition to PSE. As described in in the literature review in Chapter II, another critical support in secondary school, and especially during the transition phase, is the collaboration between key stakeholders (Pickens, 2015; Upshaw, 2013) such as special education teachers, administration, service providers, community resources, families, students with ID, and PSE programs. The continuum of supports for students with ID in secondary school and PSE is present, but the fidelity by which some programs are conducted, the collaboration between stakeholders, community resources, equal access to educational opportunities, and other factors can negatively or positively affect the path students take. Fortunately, the student participants in this research study could participate in and receive community resources in secondary school, which assisted them through the transition process.

**Conclusion 2: Students are More Capable of Being Competent and Independent When They are Provided Information, Services, and Program Options That Teach and Develop Essential Life Skills That Support Academic, Social, and Vocational Growth**

Due to the finding that students were involved and used ongoing community resources, which were connected to PSE, for students with ID to progress to PSE, it can be concluded that students are more capable of being competent and independent when they are provided information, services, and program options that teach and develop

essential life skills that support academic, social, and vocational growth. Providing additional opportunities, including additional services, for education is essential for students with ID to further expand on the important life skills, learning skills, and job skills they need to be successful in their adult lives (Grigal & Hart, 2010). Development of life skills, real-world experiences, and career awareness are all critical elements for students with ID. According to Grigal et al. (2011), providing students with multiple, purposeful opportunities to learn and refine essential life skills will foster self-determination and lead to greater success in their post-secondary lives. Based on the findings in this study, having the opportunity to further strengthen essential life skills through additional services provided by community resources was a key factor in students feeling prepared to go to college.

### **Conclusion 3: Students Who See, Learn, and Practice Self-Determination and Vocational Skills Succeed in Challenging Situations or Opportunities**

Based on the finding that routinely developed and practiced self-determination and vocational skills in secondary school propelled students to pursue PSE, for students with ID to successfully transition to PSE, it can be concluded that students who see, learn, and practice self-determination and vocational skills as part of their secondary school experience through a variety of challenging situations or opportunities succeed in challenging situations or opportunities. Creating rich opportunities, social and academic, for students with ID is necessary for mastery of skills and quality of life. Equally important to life skills are career awareness, family involvement, job skills, student-teacher relationships, peer relationships, and self-determination (Carter & Lane, 2008; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). Students who receive the opportunity to develop and

practice these skills are more likely to successfully transition to PSE. According to Lachapelle et al. (2005), and later re-confirmed by Carter et al. (2011), self-determination enhances the quality of life for students with ID. The definition of self-determination can fluctuate depending on the expert, but ultimately, self-determination refers to a set of skills and abilities such as problem solving, goal setting, self-advocacy, leadership, self-management, self-regulation, self-awareness, self-knowledge, creativity, and pride.

**Conclusion 4: Students Who Actively Participate and Engage in Decision-Making, Discussion, and Goal Setting in Their IEPs and Transition Meetings in Secondary School are Better Equipped at Taking Responsibility for Their Future**

Based on the finding that students with ID had routinely developed and practiced self-determination and vocational skills in secondary school, for students with ID to successfully transition to PSE, it can be concluded that students who actively participate and engage in decision-making, discussion, and goal setting in their IEPs and transition meetings in secondary school are better equipped at taking responsibility for their future. Students with ID can make decisions to navigate their own lives (Mercier, 2017) and should be taught to set goals, take responsibility for their learning and future, and make changes or adjustments as needed to stay on the right path. Goal setting and making progress toward goals are part of the IEP and ITP process, not just great self-determination skills. By law, IEP teams work with students to write goals that address their strengths, needs, and areas of interest. With that, solutions, ways to achieve the goals, and strategies should all be included as well. Goal setting and attainment directly connects to improved self-management and self-regulation for students with ID (Lee et al., 2006; Schelling, 2010). Substantial significance is placed on the transition of

students with ID and the importance of self-management and self-regulation in the process (Carter et al., 2008). Self-management and self-regulation are important life skills related to self-determination and directly relate to the success of living independently in adulthood. To increase chances of attendance to PSE for students with ID, students should actively participate in discussions, decision-making, and IEPs that relate to their transition.

**Conclusion 5: Participation in Rigorous Academic, Inclusive Settings with Varied Opportunities Leads to Smooth Transitions to College**

Due to the finding that students with ID had consistent participation and experiences in inclusive academic settings in secondary school, for students to advance to PSE, it can be concluded that participation in rigorous academic settings in which students with ID will experience social and academic challenges through multiple, varied opportunities to interact with non-disabled peers and staff within the inclusive classroom setting, leads to smooth transitions to college. Students with ID provided multiple, meaningful opportunities to engage in inclusive settings are more likely to show consistent improvement in learning, behaviors, and social skills (Agran et al., 2006; Carter & Hughes, 2006; Winter et al., 2010). Secondary students with ID often get shuffled into fully-contained classrooms, or non-inclusive settings, with little access to the general population of students or general education curriculum due to the increased demands of secondary schools (Carter & Hughes, 2006; Fekete, 2013). According to Grigal, Hart, and Migliore (2011), students with ID have an increased chance of successful transition to PSE and successful adult lives and when they are given an



inclusive education alongside peers without disabilities who can model behaviors and skills through academic tasks and challenging situations.

**Conclusion 6: Learning Environments that Acknowledge and Promote Different Learning Needs Allow Students with ID to Thrive**

Based on the findings that students had consistent participation and experiences that occurred in inclusive academic settings, for students to progress to PSE, it can be concluded that learning environments that acknowledge and promote different learning needs and styles allow students with ID to thrive. Due to the various components of an intellectual disability, it is exceedingly important that school teams, families, and other stakeholders work collaboratively to ensure that a well-balanced learning process occurs. With a variety of different learning styles and needs in a classroom setting, it is essential that the environment is welcoming and positive for all learners. Creating purposeful learning environments to motivate students, encouraging an open and positive environment, having teachers and staff act as facilitators, and ensuring a barrier free (Adams, 2013) environment are all core principles of UDL. According to the Think College Framework for Inclusive Higher Education, programs that are structured for students with ID utilize UDL principles to include students to the fullest potential.

**Conclusion 7: Students Who Are Well-Supported in a Collaborative Effort with Their Families and the IEP Team Are Open to New Opportunities During the Transition Phase of Their Lives**

Due to the finding that students' families played an instrumental role in the transition process, for students with ID to propel to PSE, it can be concluded that students greatly benefit from and feel well-supported when school teams collaborate with families

on IEP processes that lead to college. Fekete (2013) describes the transition from high school to postsecondary education as being a time of great change, which involves unique challenges, and many difficulties. Students with ID require consistent support and collaboration to successfully transition from secondary school to their postsecondary lives. Carter et al. (2016) and Pickens (2015) agreed collaboration between all stakeholders creates more successful opportunities in secondary school and post-secondary school. Students with ID who form relationships with stakeholders, peers, and families early on in their educational career are more likely to relate to the skills being taught and goals that are developed. Family plays a critical role in providing input, knowledge, and participation for students with ID to successfully transition (Pickens, 2015) to post-secondary employment or PSE programs (Moon, Simonsen, & Neubert, 2011).

**Conclusion 8: Students Who Receive Increased Services and Support Due to Their Family Involvement Are Informed and Involved in the IEP Process, Which Contributes to Their Ability to Navigate Challenges and Persevere**

Based on the finding that students' families played an instrumental role in the transition process, for students with ID to successfully transition to PSE, it can be concluded that students who receive increased services and supports due to family involvement are informed and involved in the IEP process, which contributes to their ability to navigate challenges and persevere. The collaboration between secondary schools and post-secondary schools must exist for program knowledge and awareness of opportunities to be present (Roller, 2016). The IEP team must work in accordance with the student and family to work through any supports and challenges during the process of

transition. Many of the research participants in this study were fortunate to have received increased services, which aided them through difficult times that occurred in the transition phase of their lives. Transition skills often coincide with self-determination and include goal setting, self-awareness, independence, and the ability to express ones' own needs, amongst others (Durlak & Rose, 1994; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). The support of family and strong special education teachers, or case carriers, can help to develop and hone these skills. The family role is crucial to the IEP process and inclusion in IEP meetings is mandated by law.

**Conclusion 9: Students with ID Are Motivated When They Feel Informed, Supported, and Challenged by An Important, Educated Person in Their Lives**

Due to the finding that students had a relationship with a mentor who was deeply vested in the success of their future, for students with ID to progress to PSE, it can be concluded that students with ID are motivated when they feel informed, supported, and challenged by an important, educated person in their lives and thus, are more successful. According to Puckett, Mathur, and Zamora (2017), peer mentoring can be highly effective when implemented with special education students, which has been proven to increase motivation and involvement in both special education and general education classes. For students with ID to gain the skills and growth they need in secondary school, it is imperative that students feel well-supported, challenged, and informed throughout various academic and vocational opportunities. Mentors for students with ID provide significant opportunities for students with ID to feel inspired through bonds, activities, and assistance through difficult tasks. Mercier (2017), discussed the significance of mentoring to increase engagement for students with ID in a variety of ways.

**Conclusion 10: Students Who Had a Significant Relationship with a Well-Educated Individual Had More Practice with Social Opportunities or Events, Essential Life Skills, and Independence**

Based on the finding that students with ID had a relationship with a mentor who was deeply vested in the success of their future, for students with ID to progress to PSE, it can be concluded that students who had a significant relationship with a well-educated individual had more practice with social opportunities or events, essential life skills, and independence. Some of the essential life skills include communication and social skills, which promote independence for students with ID and therefore contribute to the overall success and quality of life of the students when skills are practiced and achieved (Carter et al., 2011; Lachapelle et al., 2005). The ability to interact and practice in real-life situations with a mentor or friend is invaluable. Quality relationships between non-disabled peers and students with ID in secondary school plays a major role in decreasing bullying and building self-esteem (Pendleton, 2008). Quality peer relationships also increase the likelihood of successful school adjustment, social opportunities, and long-term skill attainment. Notably, Pendleton (2008) affirms that quality relationships with stakeholders can determine a students' future successes.

**Conclusion 11: Students Who Were Exposed to Various Aspects and Expectations Related to College, Coursework, and Social Opportunities Were Better Prepared to Successfully Navigate the Transition to PSE**

Due to the finding that students with ID had the desire to have typical experiences in college, for students with ID to propel to PSE, it can be concluded that students who were exposed to various aspects and expectations related to college, coursework, and

social opportunities were better prepared to successfully navigate the transition to PSE. According to Petersen (2016), academic access for students with ID and other significant cognitive disabilities requires students to gain experience with knowledge and skills that are integrated with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and their own Individualized Education Plans. Combining the past practices of students with ID, such as life skills and community-based instruction, with the current rigorous standards in general education curriculum in secondary school requires training, consistency, and successful implementation of accommodations or modifications for students to be successful. Engagement with academic rigor, accommodations, and social opportunities that resemble the college experience motivated students with ID to progress to PSE.

**Conclusion 12: Students Who Continually Practiced Skills that Contributed to Maturity and Growth Transitioned to PSE with the Support of a Larger System to Guide Them toward Their Goals in Independence**

Based on the finding that students with ID had the desire to have a typical experience in college, for students with ID to advance to PSE, it can be concluded that students who continually practiced skills that contributed to maturity and growth were able to transition to PSE with the support of a larger support system to guide them toward their goals in independence. With employment being a primary component of adult life, it is imperative that students with ID have substantive practice gaining vocational skills. Practicing skills that contribute to growth and maturity, such as navigating difficult tasks, working in groups, and completing non-preferred tasks all contribute to independence. For students with ID to be productive in post-secondary life or PSE programs, they must be provided with the proper training to navigate PSE and the workforce and maintain

gainful employment (Grigal & Neubert, 2004; Roller, 2016). Students with intellectual disabilities in secondary school settings require consistent program structures (Carter & Hughes, 2006), greater transition supports, and knowledge of post-secondary options (Winter, Martinez, & Queener, 2010). For students with ID to become functional members of society, they must be afforded the support, time, and knowledge base of what is available to them, both in secondary school and when considering post-secondary education. Various crucial factors contribute to students with ID's successes in advancing to college, such as self-determination, fair accessibility in education, support in the school and family life environment, and overall knowledge of what is available to them.

### **Implications for Action**

Due to the results of this ethnographic research study and the crucial need to provide secondary students with ID fair access in educational opportunities during complex transition periods between secondary school and PSE, the researcher recommends the following seven implications for action. The following seven recommendations are intended for secondary school teams and school districts. Furthermore, should secondary school teams and school districts desire to provide exceptional programs that will provide fair access and increase opportunities for students with ID in their post-secondary lives, these implications for action should be pursued as necessary pathways to increase attendance to PSE.

**Implication for Action 1: Students Interact with Community Resources Three Times a Year in College Pathway Discussions, Which Include an Analysis of Data Related to Student Services and Progress**

Based on the finding that secondary school teams and school districts must partner with community resources, it is recommended that students interact with community resources three times a year in college pathway discussions, which include an analysis of data related to student services and progress. Federal law related to special education requires school districts to provide transition planning services for students with disabilities as part of their IEP. By the age of sixteen, perhaps earlier if student need exists, students with ID should participate in IEP and individual transition plan (ITP) meetings (IDEA, 2004). Community resource options must be considered for students with ID for additional practice and support with generalization of essential transition skills. Inconsistent use of services for students with ID, both within the school and through community resources, are typically ineffective when considering progression to PSE. While receiving some supporting services is broadly considered beneficial, students with ID require collaboration and services from community resources along with their secondary school services, which are intentionally designed and implemented. Collaboration between secondary school teams, districts, and community resources is not only beneficial, but of critical importance, and should be developed, planned, and funded accordingly.

**Implication for Action 2: Secondary School Teams and School Districts Fund Staff Collaboration Quarterly to Review the Curriculum, Services, and Alignment with Think College Expectations and Skills to Better Prepare Students with ID, Create Clearly Defined Steps of How to Progress Through Secondary School and into PSE, and Prepare Information and Resources for Students and Their Families, Which**

## **Would Include: Information Fairs; Webinars; Meetings; School Visits; and Contact Information**

Based on the conclusion that students are more capable of being competent and independent when provided information, services, and program options that can teach and develop essential life skills that support academic, social, and vocational growth, it is recommended that secondary school teams and school districts fund staff collaboration quarterly to review the curriculum, services, and alignment with Think College expectations and skills to better prepare students with ID, create clearly defined steps of how to progress through secondary school and into PSE, and prepare information and resources for students and their families, which would include: information fairs; webinars; meetings; school visits; and contact information. According to IDEA (2004), with the intent of a successful transition into PSE and adulthood in mind, IEP school teams should consider the need for aides with placement in public or private agencies, the need to address vocational training, independence, social, IEP goals, and recreational goals. Maximizing information, resources, and pathways for students with ID to successfully build on skills and transition to PSE is critical to providing fair access to education and development for students with ID. Students are more competent and independent when provided information, services, and program options that teach and develop essential life skills that support academics, social, and vocational growth.

**Implication for Action 3: Parents and Secondary School Teams Must Collaborate to Implement Self-Determination and Vocational Skills Across All Settings in Order for Students to Best Generalize and Apply Skills**



A significant amount of literature exists regarding the benefits of developing self-determination skills like problem-solving (Cote, 2009), goal setting, self-advocacy, self-management, and self-awareness (Agran & Wehmeyer, 2005; Cantley, 2011; Carter et al., 2008; Lachapelle et al., 2005). Self-determination skills promote independence for students with ID and assist them in developing the skills needed to successfully transition from secondary school into PSE and adulthood. The connection between families and schools is significant, as was shown in this study. To provide fair access to education for students with ID, secondary school teams and school districts need to collaborate with parents to create opportunities in the school and community for students to learn and develop self-determination and vocational skills, such as job shadowing, goal setting, public transportation, and social skills. Students need to see, learn, and practice self-determination and vocational skills as part of their secondary school experience in collaboration with their home environment through a variety of challenging situations and opportunities to develop and prepare for transition to PSE. For students with ID to understand and generalize important self-advocacy skills, secondary school teams and school districts must schedule multiple opportunities for students with ID to have a ‘voice’ and participate, not only in their IEP meeting, but also in goal setting and tracking, electives, and vocational opportunities in a variety of ways, including: meetings with counselors; case manager check-ins; parent-teacher-student meetings; vocational coaches; or student informational sessions. Mercier (2017) emphasized the need for students with ID to have opportunities and experiences that lead to generalization of skills.

**Implication for Action 4: Lobbyists Must Coordinate with Parents, Teachers, and Students to Intentionally Design Education Policy That Provides Vocational Coaches Within the Secondary School Setting to Support Students with ID Through Intentionally Planned Self-Determination, Self-Advocacy, and Vocational Skills Practice**

Skills to be considered need to include the following: standing up to bullying, requesting assistance, utilizing resources, knowledge of IEP and accommodations; goal setting; and decision-making. To maximize the chances that students with ID will become motivated to attend PSE through a strategically designed and implemented vocational coach program, the coordinator must also organize quarterly visits to various post-secondary education programs or colleges. Students need to actively participate and engage in decision-making, discussion, and goal setting in their IEPs and transition meetings in secondary school and it is imperative that secondary school teams and school districts consider the implementation of a vocational coach program.

**Implication for Action 5: When Designing A New Full Inclusion School, A Task Force Made Up of Stakeholders Including Parents, Community Members/Resources, Higher Education Experts, Teachers, and Administrators Must Spend One Year Planning, Which Would Include Professional Development, Site Visits to Model Inclusion Schools, and Collaboration and Planning Time Between General Education, Special Education, and Service Providers, Which Includes an Inclusive Plan for Structured and Unstructured Settings**

Students with disabilities, their families, and advocates continue to raise expectations, require equality, and demand inclusive practices (Carter & Hughes, 2006).

Given the significance of an inclusive setting for students with ID, it is imperative that a task force comprised of relevant stakeholders provide training in universal design for learning (UDL) strategies, heterogeneous grouping, disability awareness, learning styles, and communication. It is crucial that school districts fund a one-year plan for inclusive schools because students with ID must participate in rigorous academic settings in which they will experience social and academic challenges through multiple, varied opportunities to interact with non-disabled peers and staff in an environment that acknowledges and promotes different learning needs and styles.

**Implication for Action 6: Parents Must Maintain Involvement and Attend Secondary School Sites Multiple Times to Participate in Opportunities Each School Year to Celebrate, Observe Student Successes, and Work with School Teams (aside from just IEPs), Which Will Reinforce Positive Academic, Behavioral, and Social Skills Actions**

Family plays a critical role in providing input, knowledge, and participation for students with ID to successfully transition (Pickens, 2015) to post-secondary employment or PSE programs (Moon, Simonsen, & Neubert, 2011). Research proves that parents who are knowledgeable and actively engaged in the successful outcomes of their children are more likely to productively navigate post-secondary life. While the IEP and IEP meetings are of critical importance, secondary school teams and school districts often do not pursue additional opportunities to purposefully engage families of students with ID or other special needs. Parents must intentionally involve themselves as part of the school process, which will assist in knowledge of various activities and opportunities. Not only would purposefully planning multiple opportunities for families to engage in the school

setting with their students be positive for the students, but it would also initiate mutual respect, trust, and collaboration between schools and families. Students significantly benefit from feeling well-supported when school teams collaborate with families on IEP processes and activities that lead to college or college readiness.

**Implication for Action 7: School Districts Must Develop and Fund a Mentor Program Between Secondary Schools and Current College Students, That Can Exist Throughout the Secondary School Tenure, Until Transition, That Includes Quarterly Visits to PSE Sites, Observations, and Activities at Both PSE Sites and Secondary Schools**

Unfortunately, mentor programs for students with ID and other special needs in secondary school are rarely heard of or fully developed, yet this study and research discussed in Chapter II emphasize the importance that motivation, support, and knowledge plays in the success of students with ID in their transition into adulthood. Students with ID are motivated in academic, vocational, and social opportunities when they feel informed, supported, and challenged by an important, educated person in their lives and thus, are more successful. Funding a mentor program between secondary schools and current college students would greatly benefit secondary schools and the school district due to increased participation and engagement in services, goals, and school, which all contribute to positive outcomes.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

Based on the findings, conclusions, and implications for action, to encourage students with ID to develop skills, improve academic achievements, and transition successfully, the researcher recommends the following subjects for consideration of

further research to contribute to the field regarding students with ID and their progression to PSE:

- Examine middle school programs for students with ID. Do they have clear transition processes? What supports exist? It is extremely important to understand if school districts or middle school programs have clear transition processes from middle school to secondary (high) school. If they do, what are they? Are they replicated for transition to PSE?
- Investigate the lived experiences of students with ID who are currently secondary school. What supports do they feel help them? Are they on a path to PSE? Are students informed and aware of PSE options and ways to transition? There is a crucial need to understand what students with ID feel is the expectation for life after secondary school.
- Explore secondary school inclusion models to examine what supports, accommodations, and programs are embedded for students with ID. Was their model self-made? Is it based off some program, idea, or framework? Locating and researching an exemplar program would be beneficial to students and the larger field.
- Investigate the perceptions of faculty in secondary school regarding the inclusion of students with ID. What are staff expectations? Do their perceptions alter the path that students take? It is important to explore if staff perception is affecting the path of a student with ID in terms of successfully transitioning to PSE.

- Investigate potential programs that have a continuum for students with ID from elementary school through secondary school. It could be beneficial to learn if the consistent connection between programs positively impacts the path of students with ID.
- Explore secondary level vocational programs that are embedded at public secondary schools. Vocational skills are key to secondary level students with ID and their growth toward independence. If there are programs that are embedded at public high schools, could significantly benefit the field.
- Explore the effects of check-in and check-out (CICO) programs for special education students. Are they in place for students with ID? CICO systems would assist with the generalization of skills for students with ID. If this type of system is in place at schools for students with ID, it would be essential to explore how it impacted their growth.
- Explore and investigate the role of case carriers for students with ID in secondary school. What is their connection, if any, to PSE programs? Do they work closely with the district to transition students with ID? What is their perception on where students should go?
- Investigate the legal aspects of students with ID receiving more services, placement considerations, and transition processes.

### **Concluding Remarks and Reflections**

The implementation of Public Law (PL) 93-112 in 1973, known as The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, brought forth the first of many federal civil rights laws to protect the rights of individuals with disabilities. Although the Rehabilitation Act of

1973 was transformational, numerous reauthorizations and additional civil rights laws were added to further strengthen the rights of individuals with disabilities over time, such as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) in 1975. The key focus of the EHA was to provide fair access to education and was designed for individuals with mental or physical disabilities. Although the researcher was not yet born when those essential education acts were implemented, her passion for learning and growth played a significant role in her life, including her personal and professional endeavors. In 2007, the researcher began her teaching career in general education. Not more than one year into her teaching career was she quickly drawn to the special education population she interacted with. It was at that moment that she pursued her degree in special education and, ultimately, her life was altered for good.

Almost immediately, the researcher's passion for special education students shone as she continued to advance in various programs that supported students with mild to moderate disabilities, emotional disturbance, autism, and intellectual disabilities. With a keen focus on promoting equity in education, the researcher took on the role of advocate, nurturer, and mentor, as well as teacher. With fierce commitment, she worked tirelessly to support students with special needs across all settings: encouraged; promoted their strengths; developed rapport; and educated fellow staff and support personnel. The researcher truly sees her students for their strengths and remarkable potential contributions to the world. The researcher has dedicated her life to serving students with special needs and thus, committed to leaving a lasting impression on the field by conducting research to investigate the secondary school lived experiences of students with ID who propelled to PSE to create awareness, opportunity, and pathways to college.

The significance of completing this research study was nothing short of exceptional. To say that the researcher, herself, was transformationally changed is an understatement. While the time spent researching was exhausting, every moment spent by the researcher investigating, analyzing data, and learning more about students with ID propelled the researcher to want to do even more in the field. Due to the large number of research participants being students in PSE, it was even more meaningful to hear their ‘voices’ regarding their lived experiences and the things that altered their path on the way to PSE. The researcher was deeply humbled at the chance to contribute to the body of knowledge surrounding students with ID, particularly being able to share the secondary school lived experiences of students with ID that led them to successfully transition to PSE, with the desire that other individuals who read this would be altered for good and commit to supporting students with special needs so that they may become contributing members of our society.



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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A – STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

PSE Program: Pathway/TIL (circle one)

Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Introduction

- Welcome and Thank You for participating
- Discuss purpose of the interview
- Reminder of Informed Consent
- Present interview structure (audio recorded, taking notes, and pseudonym)
- Questions before beginning
- Test audio equipment
- Make sure participant feels comfortable, offer water or snacks throughout, check environment for lighting and distractions, reminders about taking breaks or discontinuing at any time

#### Demographic Information

1. What is your age?
2. Before entering \_\_\_\_\_ (PSE) where did you go to high school?
3. How many years did you attend \_\_\_\_\_ high school?
4. Where is your high school located?
5. How many semesters have you been attending \_\_\_\_\_ (PSE)? When did you first begin at \_\_\_\_\_ (PSE)?

#### Academic Access

1. Can you tell me about some of the classes you took at \_\_\_\_\_ high school? What class did you enjoy the most and why? Did you experience difficulties with any of your classes at \_\_\_\_\_ high school? If so, can you tell me how you overcame them?
2. Can you tell me about what you did in your classes? How did you study?

#### Career Development

1. Can you tell me how high school prepared you for transition into the workforce or transition into \_\_\_\_\_ (PSE)?
2. Tell me about the job skills you learned from being in high school. Can you give me an example of a job skill you are good at? What about the ones you need to work on?

#### Campus Membership

1. Tell me about what you did on campus at \_\_\_\_\_ high school. Who did you hang out with?
2. Can you tell me about the friendships you developed at \_\_\_\_\_ high school? How often do you talk or hang out? Are you still in touch?

#### Self-Determination

1. Can you tell me about where you live? Who do you live with?

2. Can you tell me a story about a time in high school where you had to make a big decision? Were there others who helped you? If so, how did they help?
3. How do you get around in your community?

#### College Systems/Practices

1. Can you tell me about your plan for life after you finished high school? What did you hope to learn so you could be successful in adulthood and in college?
2. How does it feel to be a student in college? How did it feel when you were a student in high school?

#### Coordination and Collaboration

1. Tell me about how you learn about activities on campus in college. How did you learn about activities at school when you were in high school?
2. How do you feel that your professors or other adults on campus help you? How did you feel about getting help from adults or teachers when you were in high school?

#### Sustainability

1. What advice would you give to a new student coming to this college program? What kind of things do you feel helped you to go to college?

#### Ongoing Evaluation

1. What kinds of tests did you take in high school?
2. What kind of tests did you take when you first started in college?
3. What kind of tests do you do throughout the school year?

At the conclusion of the interview, ask the participant if he/she has any questions for the researcher or anything else he/she would like to add.

Thank the participant for his/her time and reassure the confidentiality of all responses.

\*Adapted with permission from Dr. Kathleen Mercier

## APPENDIX B – FACULTY/STAFF INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

PSE Program: Pathway/TIL (circle one)

Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_

### Introduction

- Welcome and Thank You for participating
- Discuss purpose of the interview
- Reminder of Informed Consent
- Present interview structure (audio recorded, taking notes, and pseudonym)
- Questions before beginning
- Test audio equipment
- Make sure participant feels comfortable, offer water or snacks throughout, check environment for lighting and distractions, reminders about taking breaks or discontinuing at any time

### Background Information

1. How long have you been supporting \_\_\_\_\_(PSE)? (Admin/Faculty)
2. What is your current level of involvement with the program and the students?
3. Tell me about your initial feelings when you heard about the idea of supporting students with ID at your college? What were the reactions of your colleagues?
4. Do you have a relationship or transition process established with high schools?

### Academic Access

1. How do you feel the classes offered here at \_\_\_\_\_(PSE) are in support of developing students with ID to be successful?
2. What could be done at the high school level to better prepare students with ID to attend college?
3. What are some of the barriers that exist in the transition process and how are they handled?
4. Tell me about what has impacted how you teach the most? (accommodations, training, additional content, pacing of content, planning teams, etc.)

### Career Development

1. Tell me about the experiences the students have to gain job skills.
2. Is there a seamless transition between high school and college that supports gaining job skills and independence?

### Campus Membership

1. Can you describe the social opportunities that exist to get students with ID involved in the college?
2. What experiences do you think students with ID need to have had in high school to be able to access and involve themselves at the college?
3. What events/activities do they engage in the most? Why?

### Self-Determination

1. Tell me about how you feel the students' living accommodations impacts their experience in college.
2. How do you work with the students to promote their independence?
3. Do you feel the students came to the college with adequate skills to promote independence (e.g. a good starting point)?

#### College Systems/Practices

1. Tell me about how the supports for students in the areas of academics, campus, or job development have contributed to the student's lived experience in the program.
2. Do the supports mimic what they received in high school?
3. Can you describe how a student would know what classes to take? Who guides them in the process?

#### Coordination and Collaboration

1. How has the involvement of the administration impacted the lived experience of the student with ID in the \_\_\_\_\_(PSE) program?
2. If your role as the administrator/faculty were to be eliminated, how would the experience for the student with ID be changed?
3. Does collaboration and coordination occur between high schools and PSE programs?

#### Sustainability

1. Tell me about how the students' experiences would be different if the \_\_\_\_\_(PSE) program did not exist?
2. How do you determine if a student is making progress and is successful in your program?

#### Ongoing Evaluation

1. What has surprised you most about the experiences of these students in your program?
2. How do you see the students' experiences impacting their community when they leave?
3. What factors do you think existed in high school that aided the students in transitioning into PSE?
4. What factors exist in your program that can aide the students when they leave?

At the conclusion of the interview, ask the participant if he/she has any questions for the researcher or anything else he/she would like to add.

Thank the participant for his/her time and reassure the confidentiality of all responses.

\*Adapted with permission from Dr. Kathleen Mercier

## APPENDIX C – FAMILY INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

PSE Program: Pathway/TIL (circle one)

Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_

### Introduction

- Welcome and Thank You for participating
- Discuss purpose of the interview
- Reminder of Informed Consent
- Present interview structure (audio recorded, taking notes, and pseudonym)
- Questions before beginning
- Test audio equipment
- Make sure participant feels comfortable, offer water or snacks throughout, check environment for lighting and distractions, reminders about taking breaks or discontinuing at any time

### Background Information

1. What is your relationship to the student?
2. Where did the student attend high school?
3. What programs were they involved in at \_\_\_\_\_ high school?
4. How long has the student been at the \_\_\_\_\_ (PSE) program?

### Academic Access

1. How do you feel the classes and/or programs the student took at \_\_\_\_\_ high school influenced his/her experience and path to college?
2. Can you think of a specific class or experience that the student had in high school that changed him/her for the good?
3. Was there an individual or staff member that you feel impacted the student, whether good or bad, that affected their path to college?

### Career Development

1. Did the student participate in job skill development in high school?
2. Did the high school offer any programs, community opportunities, or transition processes for the student during the high school period?
3. Can you tell me a story of when you saw a noticeable change in the students' work ability due to being enrolled in the \_\_\_\_\_ (PSE) program?
4. Do you feel that the education and job skill preparation in high school was supportive as they transitioned to college?

### Campus Membership

1. How do you see your student participating on the college campus with the other students?
2. Tell me about how those activities have enriched the life of your student.
3. What activities, events, or programs was the student involved in at their high school?
4. Were there opportunities or plans in place for the student to be involved on their high school campus?

### Self-Determination

1. How was the student in high school in terms of life skills, independence, and social skills?
2. Where do you see the student in five years after completing the \_\_\_\_\_(PSE) program? Employment? Independence? Social?
3. How would the student you described in five years be different if he/she had not participated in the \_\_\_\_\_(PSE) program?

### College Systems/Practices

1. Tell me about how it feels to have a student with ID in college.
2. How do you feel about the way that the \_\_\_\_\_(PSE) program includes your student in the culture of the campus?
3. Is there a connection or correlation between the experiences the student had in high school and the experiences they are having in college?
4. What practices or systems existed in high school? Are they similar or different than what the student is involved in now?

### Coordination and Collaboration

1. Tell me about how you communicate with others at the school, if at all.
2. How often did you communicate with the students' high school team?
3. Was there collaboration between the high school team, yourself, and the college?
4. How were next steps, in terms of transitioning, determined at the high school?
5. Can you describe to me when you knew you were comfortable with sending your student to \_\_\_\_\_(PSE)?

### Sustainability

1. What advice would you give to other families who are considering sending their student to the \_\_\_\_\_(PSE) program?
2. Was there a person, program, or moment in high school that contributed to your student attending PSE? Please tell me about it/them.

### Ongoing Evaluation

1. Can you describe what you feel has been the most meaningful moment for your student this far in the program?
2. What was the most meaningful moment in high school?

At the conclusion of the interview, ask the participant if he/she has any questions for the researcher or anything else he/she would like to add.

Thank the participant for his/her time and reassure the confidentiality of all responses.

\*Adapted with permission from Dr. Kathleen Mercier





## APPENDIX E – FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

PSE Program: Pathway/TIL (circle one)

Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_

### Introduction

- Welcome and Thank You for participating
- Discuss purpose of the interview
- Reminder of Informed Consent
- Present interview structure (audio recorded, taking notes, and pseudonym)
- Questions before beginning
- Test audio equipment
- Make sure participant feels comfortable, offer water or snacks throughout, check environment for lighting and distractions, reminders about taking breaks or discontinuing at any time

### Background Information

1. Identify roles of those who attended: \_\_\_\_\_ Non-disabled peer; \_\_\_\_\_ Faculty; \_\_\_\_\_ Other provider
2. How long have you been supporting the \_\_\_\_\_ (PSE) program? Less than 1 year, 2-3 years, 4-5 years, 6 years or more.
3. Have you worked at the high school level? If so, what are some of the similarities and differences?
4. (If a student) Did you go to school with students with ID when you were in high school?

### Academic Access

1. Can you tell me about some of the classes that you take (or participate in) here with students with ID?
2. What types of interactions do you have in class? What benefits and barriers would you describe in the inclusive classroom?

### Career Development

1. Tell me about how you feel the college experience has prepared students with ID to be employed.
2. Can you describe an experience where you saw a student with ID learn and apply a job skill?

### Campus Membership

1. How do you perceive the inclusion of students with ID on the college campus? What do you feel students with ID contribute to the college campus?
2. Can you describe a friendship/social relationship that you have developed with a student with ID? How has the friendship/social relationship changed you?
3. Do you recall opportunities to learn or interact with students with ID or other special needs students when you were in high school? Tell me about that.

#### Self-Determination

1. Can you tell me about your living arrangements on the campus and what types of students are in your dorm?
2. How do you think that the college dorm-like living experience has impacted the students with ID at \_\_\_\_\_(PSE)?

#### College Systems/Practices

1. What do you hope to learn in college so you can be successful in adulthood?
2. Tell me about what similarities or differences you feel that students with ID would have compared to the answer you just gave.

#### Coordination and Collaboration

1. How do you feel the faculty on the campus support you as a student? What about students with ID?
2. Are there events or programs that specifically target inclusion at your college? What about at your high school?

#### Sustainability

1. What advice would you give to an incoming student with or without a disability about going to this college?
2. How should future students

#### Ongoing Evaluation





1. What would you perceive as meaningful experiences for students with ID in college?
2. How do you see the students' experiences impacting their community when they leave?

At the conclusion of the interview, ask the participant if he/she has any questions for the researcher or anything else he/she would like to add.




Thank the participant for his/her time and reassure the confidentiality of all responses.


\*Adapted with permission from Dr. Kathleen Mercier

## APPENDIX F – IRB AND INSTITUTIONAL APPROVALS

BUIRB Application Approved: Britta Davidson  Inbox x   

---

 **Institutional Review Board** <my@brandman.edu> 9:17 AM (1 hour ago)  

to me, ddevore, jlee1, buirb 

Dear Britta Davidson,

Congratulations! Your IRB application to conduct research has been approved by the Brandman University Institutional Review Board. Please keep this email for your records, as it will need to be included in your research appendix.

If you need to modify your BUIRB application for any reason, please fill out the "Application Modification Form" before proceeding with your research. The Modification form can be found at [IRB.Brandman.edu](http://IRB.Brandman.edu)

Best wishes for a successful completion of your study.

Thank You,

BUIRB  
Academic Affairs  
**Brandman University**  
16355 Laguna Canyon Road  
[Irvine, CA 92618](http://Irvine_CA_92618)  
[buirb@brandman.edu](mailto:buirb@brandman.edu)  
[www.brandman.edu](http://www.brandman.edu)  
A Member of the Chapman University System

This email is an automated notification. If you have questions please email us at [buirb@brandman.edu](mailto:buirb@brandman.edu).

September 22, 2017

Brandman University  
Institutional Review Board  
16355 Laguna Canyon Road,  
Irvine, CA 92618

**Re: Britta Davidson, researcher for students with ID in PSE**

To Whom It May Concern,

Britta Davidson has provided me with an overview of the scope of her research and I understand that the study would be based on research conducted at our program by Kathleen Mercier last year. The research as described by Ms. Davidson would be qualitative and include interviews, observations, and review of artifacts with participants and affiliates associated with the Pathway program.

I understand that participation is voluntary and all participants will be presented with informed consent, participant Bill of Rights and in addition, but not limited to, extensive precautionary measures that the researcher has taken to safeguard against potential risks including submission of a standard review through Brandman University IRB, option for use of a cultural informant to navigate the cultural setting, use of a support representative during interviews for non-conserved, adult students with ID, and parent/family assent/informed consent on behalf of the non-conserved, adult student with ID.

Pathway recognizes the efforts of the researcher to further the body of knowledge regarding supporting students with ID in PSE and welcomes Ms Davidson to seek potential participants to conduct her research study.

Sincerely,



Eric M. Latham,  
Director Pathway at UCLA Extension



Ms. Britta Davidson

November 2, 2017

Your request to collect data from the Taft College Transition to Independent Living (TIL) program student population (dissertation research proposal titled *Promoting Equity in Education: Understanding the Lived Experiences that Propelled Intellectually Disabled Secondary Students to Continue Their Education in College*), is approved.

Approval is good for one year. All data collection from Taft College students must be concluded no later than November 2, 2017. Any changes to the research protocol must be reported to the Taft College IRB for approval prior to implementation. Changes made without approval through the IRB process constitute a violation of the IRB policies and void this approval.

Please work with Carey Carpenter, the director of TIL, to arrange contact with the students. Ms. Carpenter may be reached by phone at 661.763.7773 or through email at [ccarpenter@taftcollege.edu](mailto:ccarpenter@taftcollege.edu).

Congratulations and best wishes as you work through the dissertation process,

*Sharyn L. Eveland*

Sharyn L. Eveland, EdD  
Chair, Taft College IRB  
[seveland@taftcollege.edu](mailto:seveland@taftcollege.edu)  
661 763-7866

## APPENDIX G – INFORMED CONSENT FORM

### **Informed Consent—Interview**

**Information About:** Students with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) accessing Post-Secondary Education (PSE) settings and the relation to their secondary experiences.

**Responsible Investigator:** Britta Davidson

**Purpose of Study:** The purpose of this ethnographic study is to investigate and describe the secondary school lived experiences of students with intellectual disabilities that propelled them to participate in post-secondary education settings in southern California, that were designed based on the Think College Standards-Based Conceptual Framework for Inclusive Higher Education.

**Why is this research being done?** This study intends to gather information regarding students with ID in PSE programs and their secondary experiences that led them to attending college.

**Who are potential participants?** Potential participants include students with ID in PSE ages 18-28 years who are non-conserved, family members of students with ID in PSE, administrators and faculty members who support students with ID in PSE, and non-disabled peers who are aware of students with ID participating on the same PSE setting.

Students with ID who participate will be required to confirm eligibility as a student with ID by verification of eligibility from the PSE program director/administrator.

**What is expected of the participants?** For those who qualify as potential participants, they will decide to take part in the research study by signing the informed consent document.

Students with ID will complete an individual interview Britta Davidson, researcher, and be observed in a minimum of one academic setting/classroom and one non-academic setting (social or vocational). Students with ID will sign an additional informed consent document specific to the observation. Students with ID are allowed to bring a supportive representative, selected by the student, to the interview who would act in the best interest of the student.\*

Administrators, faculty, and family members will complete an interview with Britta Davidson, researcher. \*\*Family members will complete ascent box upon signature acknowledging participation for the student with ID.

Non-disabled peers and other faculty/staff members of the PSE who chose to participate will complete a group interview at a designated location.

All interviews will be audio recorded. A transcript of the interview will be sent to the participant for review and correction. The interview can be paused or discontinued at any time by the participant. Artifacts gathered by the researcher will be kept strictly

confidential and in a locked location only accessible to the researcher.

**How much time is required from the participant?** The individual interviews will take approximately one hour. The interviews will be audio recorded and a transcript of the interview will be sent to the participant for review and anything that the participant feels is in error or should be omitted, will be done so by the researcher. The audio recordings will be kept in a secured electronic file, accessible to only the researcher for review of the conversation for validity of the responses. The electronic files and transcription will be destroyed no longer than five years after the research is completed. The observations will take approximately one to two hours depending on the activity/setting being observed.

**Where will the interviews and observations take place?** The interviews will take place at an agreeable, private location that is comfortable for the participant. The observations will take place at the location of choice by the student with ID in either an academic or non-academic setting.

**What benefit can the participants consider?** Participants will not be compensated for his/her contribution, but will agree to participate on a voluntary basis. Participants may feel rewarded knowing that contribution to the field of inclusive higher education has been made.

**How will the participants' confidentiality be protected?** The researcher will keep all recorded interviews, observation documentation, and artifacts in a locked location only accessible to the researcher. Pseudo names will be used for all participants with the exception of the signed consent form which will be kept secure by the researcher and then destroyed at no longer than five years after the research study is completed.

**What risks can the participant expect?** There is greater than minimal risk of physical, psychological, social, or financial risk to participate in this research.

By participating in this study, I agree to complete an interview with researcher, Britta Davidson. The interview will take approximately one hour and will be scheduled at a location comfortable and agreeable to me. Completion of the interview will occur between October and November 2017.

I understand that:

- . a) There are greater than minimal risks associated with the research. I understand that the researcher will protect my confidentiality by keeping my identifying documents in a locked drawer accessible only to the researcher.
- . b) The potential benefit of this study will include my contribution of experience to the world of inclusive higher education. The findings of the study will be available to me at the conclusion of the study. I will not be compensated for my participation. I willingly participate on a voluntary basis. At any time, I wish to discontinue my participation in the research, I can do so; however, I will need to contact Britta Davidson to alert her of my discontinued participation.



- c) If I have any questions or concerns, I can contact Britta Davidson, researcher, at brittadavidson@gmail.com or by cell phone at 760-485-0429. I can also contact the Office of the Assistant Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, Brandman University, at 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA 92618, (949) 341-7641 or Dissertation Chair, Dr. Jeff Lee at jlee1@brandman.edu.

I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form and the “Research Participant’s Bill of Rights.” I have read the above and understand it, and I hereby consent to the procedures set forth.

Printed Name of Participant & Role	Signature of Participant

Signature of Researcher & Date \_\_\_\_\_

\*\* Although my student \_\_\_\_\_ (name), is a non-conserved adult and maintains his/her own educational rights, I \_\_\_\_\_ (parent name) understand and agree to the terms of the research study, with recognition of protection to my student's confidentiality, allow my student \_\_\_\_\_ (name) to participate in this research study. My student \_\_\_\_\_ (name) must also sign in agreement to be part of this study. My acknowledgement alone does not constitute my student's participation in the study. \_\_\_\_ (parent initial)

\*I intend to bring a support representative with me to the interview. \_\_\_\_\_ (student with ID initial)

\*Adapted with permission from Dr. Kathleen Mercier

## **Informed Consent-Observation**

**About: Students with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) accessing Post- Secondary**

**Education (PSE) settings and the relation to their secondary experiences.**

**Responsible Investigator:** Britta Davidson

**Purpose of Study:** The purpose of this ethnographic study is to investigate and describe the secondary school lived experiences of students with intellectual disabilities that propelled them to participate in post-secondary education settings in southern California, that were designed based on the Think College Standards-Based Conceptual Framework for Inclusive Higher Education.

**Why is this research being done?** This study intends to gather information regarding students with ID in PSE programs and their secondary experiences that led them to attending college.

**Who are potential participants?** Potential participants include students with ID in PSE ages 18-28 years who are non-conserved.

**What is expected of the participants?** For those who qualify as potential participants, they will decide to take part in the research study by signing the informed consent document.

Students with ID will agree to being observed in one academic setting/classroom and one non-academic setting (social or vocational).

The observation can be paused or discontinued at any time by the participant. Observational notes gathered by the researcher will be kept strictly confidential.

**How much time is required from the participant?** The observations will take approximately one to two hours depending on the activity/setting being observed.

**Where will the interviews and observations take place?** The observations will take place at the location of choice by the student with ID in either an academic or non-academic setting.

**What benefit can the participants consider?** Participants will not be compensated for his/her contribution, but will agree to participate on a voluntary basis. Participants may feel rewarded knowing that contribution to the field of inclusive higher education has been made.

**How will the participants' confidentiality be protected?** The researcher will keep all recorded interviews, observation documentation, and artifacts in a locked location only accessible to the researcher. Pseudo names will be used for all participants with the exception of the signed consent form which will be kept secure by the researcher and then destroyed at no longer than five years after the research study is completed.

**What risks can the participant expect?** There is greater than minimal risk of physical, psychological, social, or financial risk to participate in this research.

By participating in this study, I agree to complete an interview with researcher, Britta Davidson. The interview will take approximately one hour and will be scheduled at a location comfortable and agreeable to me. Completion of the interview will occur between October and November 2017.

I understand that:

- . a) There are greater than minimal risks associated with the research. I understand that the researcher will protect my confidentiality by keeping my identifying documents in a locked drawer accessible only to the researcher.
- . b) The potential benefit of this study will include my contribution of experience to the world of inclusive higher education. The findings of the study will be available to me at the conclusion of the study. I will not be compensated for my participation. I willingly participate on a voluntary basis. At any time I wish to discontinue my participation in the research, I can do so; however, I will need to contact Britta Davidson to alert her of my discontinued participation.
- . c) If I have any questions or concerns, I can contact Britta Davidson, researcher, at [brittadavidson@gmail.com](mailto:brittadavidson@gmail.com) or by cell phone at 760-485-0429. I can also contact the Office of the Assistant Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, Brandman University, at 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA 92618, (949) 341-7641 or Dissertation Chair, Dr. Jeff Lee at [jlee1@brandman.edu](mailto:jlee1@brandman.edu).

I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form and the “Research Participant’s Bill of Rights.” I have read the above and understand it, and I hereby consent to the procedures set forth.

---

Printed Name of Participant & Role

---

Signature of Participant

---

Signature of Researcher & Date

\*Adapted with permission from Dr. Kathleen Mercier

## APPENDIX H – INVITATION LETTER

Dear \_\_\_\_\_(Director of PSE Program),

Hello. My name is Britta Davidson, and I am currently a Doctoral Candidate with Brandman University, pursuing an Ed.D. in Organizational Leadership.

In my growth as a transformational leader, my deep passion for serving students with special needs in elementary and secondary school (for the last 10 years), has evolved into my desire to leave a legacy in innovative research regarding students with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) accessing Post-Secondary Education (PSE) settings. More specifically, I want to understand what students experienced in high school that led them to attend college. I have learned a great deal about the Think College research initiative and my study will include use of the Think College framework and its impact on the lived experiences of students with ID in PSE as it relates to their high school experiences.

A fellow doctoral student, Dr. Kathy Mercier, conducted research at your PSE site last year. My research is directly related to her study. I am interested in conducting research with \_\_\_\_\_(PSE) to assist high school programs in turning obstacles into opportunities for students with ID so that they can attend PSE. My research will be qualitative in nature and would include interviews, observations and artifact reviews to answer my research question. My study will be reviewed by the Brandman University IRB and will include obtaining an informed consent from each participant and the identities of all participants will be kept strictly confidential.

Would you be willing to meet with me to discuss and learn more about my proposed research study? I anticipate being cleared for data collection by September 2017. I am willing to answer any questions you may have regarding my research study.

Thank you very much for your consideration and leadership in serving exceptional students.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Britta Davidson

brittadavidson@gmail.com

760-485-0429 (cell)

\*Adapted with permission from Dr. Kathleen Mercier

APPENDIX I – INFORMATIONAL FLYER



## Study Volunteers Needed!!

A research study to  
**CELEBRATE**  
Students with Intellectual Disabilities  
accessing College!

**Who:** Students with ID (18-28), family members,  
program administrators, faculty members, & non-disabled students

**When:** TBD

**Where:** TBD

**Time:** 5pm-8pm

**Formal Presentation at 6pm**

-Details, eligibility, study requirements, expectations,  
and outcomes will be discussed at the event.

-Complimentary Pizza and Soda will be provided (while  
it lasts)

-Researcher will be available from 5pm-6pm and 7pm-  
8pm to answer individual questions and provide further  
information.

Researcher: Britta Davidson  
760-485-0429  
[brittadavidson@gmail.com](mailto:brittadavidson@gmail.com)

If you are unable to attend, virtual meetings will be available!



Knowledge is power.

APPENDIX J – NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH CERTIFICATE

