

***Components of an Inclusive Postsecondary Transition Program for Older Students with Intellectual Disabilities at a Four-Year University***

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**Abstract**

This paper provides an overview of ***Project Panther PLUS (Postsecondary Learning for Universal Success)***, an inclusive postsecondary transition program for students with intellectual disabilities (ID) ages 22-26 at Florida International University (FIU) in Miami, Florida, USA. With an emphasis on employment and independent living, ***Panther PLUS*** provides students with the tools needed to change their lives for the better, specifically in areas such as Self-Determination and Career Development and Employment. During the two-year program, students have the opportunity to participate in the Students Transitioning to Adult Roles Person-Centered Planning (STAR PCP) process in which they invite members of their support system to help plan their future by setting short-term and long-term goals around five transition domains (e.g. Campus and Community Engagement). Setting and committing to these goals are crucial for success in the program, as students are required to participate in specialized internships and an intensive yearlong independent living component during their second year.

Unlike ***Panther PLUS***, many postsecondary transition programs focus on younger student populations, usually between the ages of 18-21. When designing ***PLUS***, it was imperative to consider the older population and its implications in terms of program design and support and the needs in the local community. Since these older students have been out of school for up to six years, we have learned, during our first year of implementation, that they often require more support and have modified the program design to better align student needs while still keeping with the primary goals of meaningful, paid employment and independent living upon graduation.

Keywords: postsecondary transition programs, special education, higher education, students with intellectual disabilities (ID)

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## Introduction

***Project Panther PLUS: Postsecondary Learning for Universal Success*** is a certificate, non-degree inclusive postsecondary transition program for students ages 22-26 with intellectual disabilities (ID) at the School of Education and Human Development at Florida International University (FIU) in Miami, Florida, USA. Launched in Summer 2016, the two-year program is designed to develop a well-rounded and self-sufficient young adult in an inclusive and supportive University community of learners who will be marketable for competitive, integrated, and paid employment and be able to live independently upon graduation.

Unlike ***Panther PLUS***, many postsecondary transition programs focus on younger student populations, usually between the ages of 18-22, as those students are eligible and receive federal funding for transition services outlined on their Individualized Education Plans (IEP) through a US federal law called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). At the age of 22, students with disabilities age out of the provisions of IDEA (2004) and move into the adult service agencies in their communities (Grigal et. al., 2012). In fact, about one-third of postsecondary transition programs partner with the local K-12 public school system and allow the students to be dually enrolled at both the University and their high school (Plotner & Marshall, 2015), much like ***PLUS'*** sister program also at FIU – ***Project Panther LIFE: Learning Is For Everyone***.

Due to scarce research and the limited number of programs serving older populations, it was imperative to consider the population's unique needs and adapt the design to better align these needs with the pilot cohort. In this paper, we will be discussing the design of ***Project Panther PLUS***, including curriculum, system of supports, internship and employment opportunities, and independent living instruction along with the ways in which we have modified the program design during the first year of implementation to better fit student needs.

Before we delve into the design of the program, it is important to first understand the importance of a college education for this population and the federal legislation that allowed for the development of ***Project Panther PLUS***.

### A College Education

For many students, attending college upon high school graduation is a rite of passage for a number of reasons including tradition, future career goals, and for some, even the social aspect of campus life. Receiving a college degree nearly guarantees a higher salary for many graduates as they are better equipped for the workforce. In fact, those adults earning a Bachelor's degree make almost twice as much as those with only a high school education (Papay & Griffin, 2015). College also provides students with a number of opportunities to develop soft skills such as problem solving, communication, and discipline, all of which are required for success in a future career (Grigal, Hart, & Weir, 2012).

However, students with ID did not always have the same opportunities and privileges in terms of acquiring a postsecondary education due to low expectations and minimal opportunities available (Grigal & Hart, 2013). In fact, only 23% of high school

students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) attend a two-year or four-year college (Grigal & Hart, 2013) with only 11% of high school students with ID having the goal of attending an institute of higher education (IHE) on their educational plan (Grigal et. al., 2015). Research also shows that students with ID are less likely than their peers without a disability to graduate from high school (Mock & Love, 2012) and those students whom graduate often receive a special diploma that unfortunately, does not make them eligible for a college education.

The low statistics of students with ID attending college are not to be interpreted as evidence of a lack of student achievement but instead, a lack of understanding on the part of educators of these students' potential (Cook, Hayden, Wilczenski, & Poynton, 2015) coupled with low expectations from families and administrators. Until recently with the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA), educators wrongly believed that encouraging a student with ID to attend college meant setting them up for failure but this misconception stems from the "educator's focus on disability and weakness rather than abilities, strengths, and learning variabilities" (Cook et. al., 2015, p. 42). As educators, it is important to remember that while these students do have a disability, they also have abilities that should be recognized, praised, and encouraged, as with any other student.

Considering the low numbers of students with ID receiving a postsecondary education, it is no surprise that it is also reflected in their employment outcomes. Students with ID are more likely to be unemployed, and even underemployed, and subsequently, are an at-risk population for indefinite poverty (Mock & Love, 2012). The employment rate gap only worsens as those with I/DD age as only 32% of adults ages 20-30 have secured employment when compared with 74% of adults without disabilities (Grigal & Hart, 2013).

Because of the staggering statistics of outcomes for students with ID, specifically those related to employment, the federal government took further action and reauthorized the HEOA of 2008 with specific provisions related to the postsecondary education of students with ID. Due to the HEOA (2008), students with ID now have unprecedented access to college in the form of Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) (Mock & Love, 2012) and access to federal financial aid.

### **The Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) & TPSID Programs**

The HEOA of 2008 increased access to postsecondary education (PSE) for students with ID. The HEOA defines a student with intellectual disability as:

...a student (1) with "mental retardation" or cognitive impairment, characterized by significant limitations in intellectual and cognitive functioning, and adaptive behavior as expressed in conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills; and (2) who is currently, or was formerly, eligible for a free appropriate public education under the IDEA (Mock & Love, 2012, p. 290).

In 2010, Congress authorized the creation of 27 model demonstration projects (TPSID programs) through grants and a TPSID National Coordinating Center (NCC) at the

University of Massachusetts Boston via the Office of Postsecondary Education (OPE), Think College (Papay & Griffin, 2015; Grigal & Hart, 2013). The NCC is tasked with providing oversight for the evaluation of the 27 colleges and universities that were awarded the TPSID model demonstration grants and gathering comprehensive data on outcomes and strategies (Papay & Griffin, 2015; Mock & Love, 2012).

The goal of TPSIDs is to “create, expand, or enhance high-quality, inclusive higher education experiences to support positive outcomes for individuals with I/DD” (Grigal & Hart, 2013, p. 1). The TPSID grants create access for students with ID to postsecondary education through a certificate or non-degree program in an inclusive academic and social environment alongside their peers without a disability on the college campus (Papay & Griffin, 2015). As required by the HEOA, TPSIDs must:

... (1) [be] designed to support students with ID who are seeking to continue academic, career and technical, and independent living instruction in order to prepare for gainful employment; (2) include an advising and curriculum structure; (3) require students with ID participate on not less than a halftime basis with nondisabled students in (1) regular enrollment in credit-bearing courses; (2) auditing or participating in courses for which the student does not receive regular academic credit; (3) enrollment in noncredit-bearing, non-degree courses; or (4) participation in internships or work-based training (Mock & Love, 2012, p. 290).

Although the population of TPSIDs is that of students with ID, their goals for attending college are the same as any other student wishing to attend college including “employment, a better job than a high school diploma may offer, and lifelong social networks” (Mock & Love, 2012, p. 290).

Also through the HEOA, students with ID in programs approved the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) as a comprehensive transition and postsecondary (CTP) program are eligible to receive three (3) specific types of federal financial aid including Pell Grants, FSEOG grants, and Federal Work Study programs (Papay & Griffin, 2013; VanBergeijk & Cavanagh, 2012). Prior to the HEOA, federal financial aid was only available to full-time degree-seeking students which, for the most part, automatically disqualified students with ID in postsecondary transition programs (VanBergeijk & Cavanagh, 2012). Although this does not guarantee a free college education for students with ID, this is a leap in the right direction as these students now have more financial aid options for higher education and do not need to consider it a solely out of pocket expense, much like regular college students.

### **Program Overview**

***Project Panther PLUS*** is a partnership led by the School of Education and Human Development at FIU in collaboration with Parent to Parent of Miami, Inc., Best Buddies, and the Center for Independent Living (CIL) with a focus on employment and independent living while providing the student with an authentic college experience at a four-year University.

With the overarching goal of meaningful and paid employment and independent living in the community, the program also focuses on the following six objectives: (1) to utilize a person-centered-planning process that will enable students to establish and work toward meeting individual and program goals related to the transition domains of Career Development and Employment, Academic Enrichment, Campus and Community Engagement, Independent Living, and Self-Determination; (2) to enhance students' community participation and development of appropriate communication, social, and self-determination skills that will empower them to become self-advocates and independent, productive members of their community; (3) to provide students' families with the necessary information, resources, guidance, and support to facilitate their students' transition toward increased independence and employment; (4) to provide academic and social access and support so that students may participate in classroom based (University coursework) and experiential (campus life and community integration) learning activities; (5) to help students develop their independent living skills and achieve a healthy work/life balance through coursework and seminars/workshops centered on transition domains (e.g. health/nutrition, technology); and (6) to provide employment preparation for students as they work to develop the skills to participate in meaningful, inclusive employment opportunities on the University campus and South Florida community.

The program was launched in the Summer 2016 semester with five (5) students and plans to accept its second cohort of students for the Summer 2017 semester.

### **Program of Study (POS)**

As *Panther PLUS* is a certificate, non-degree program, students enroll at the University as non-degree seeking students and audit courses instead of enrolling for college credit. Enrolling in courses for audit exposes the student to college-level material and allows the student to receive constructive feedback from the professor and interact with peers their age in the classroom.

Similar to the way degree-seeking students choose majors, students can select from two Areas of Specialization based on their future career goals – Health & Wellness and Computing & Technology – with additional areas to be designed for future cohorts. These Areas of Specialization allows for a further customized University experience as much of the coursework and the internship and employment experiences are specific to that area.

The Program of Study (POS) is aligned with transition domains (e.g., Career Development and Employment, Academic Enrichment, Self-Determination) and outlines the key components of the program: (a) required and elective University coursework, (b) campus-based specialized internships, (c) community-based specialized internships, (d) online continuing education courses and its accompanying seminars, (e) *Living Well and Working Well with a Disability* seminars, (f) one-year Independent Living Experience, and (g) required weekly workshops (e.g. Technology, Sexual Health, Financial Literacy, etc.). The POS is used as the main curricular framework to guide students throughout the program and is modified based on the students' chosen Area of Specialization.

The POS can be viewed as the requirements needed in order to graduate from the *PLUS* program and includes nine (9) general University courses (e.g. Essay Writing, Public Speaking), four (4) University courses in the student's selected Area of Specialization (e.g. Foundations of Nutrition, Computer Data Analysis), and five (5) online Ed2Go continuing education courses (e.g. Interpersonal Communication).

### **STAR PCP Process**

Embedded in the POS is the Students Transitioning to Adult Roles (STAR) Person-Centered Planning (PCP) process that encourages students to plan their future by setting short-term and long-term goals around five transition domains with members of their support system: Career Development and Employment, Academic Enrichment, Independent Living, Self-Determination, & Campus and Community Engagement.

The STAR PCP process allows “students to become empowered to explore and share a vision of their own future [including] where they want to live, the work they want to do, the skills they need to learn, the interests they want to pursue, and the relationships they want to build” (Hayes & Muldoon, 2013, p. 5). Engaging in this process allows the student to form a roadmap of where they currently are and where they want to go.

The goal-oriented, student-centered process begins during their first semester of the program and is revisited every other semester until the exit interview during their last semester to ensure the student is working on the established goals. As with planning their future, the student is responsible for setting up all aspects of the STAR PCP meetings, which includes inviting members of their support system (e.g. family members, friends, and program staff), reserving a conference room, and planning refreshments.

The STAR chart collects information at the meeting from the student and his/her support system. The student guides the process by identifying their interests, strengths, and weaknesses along with feedback from his/her support system. The chart serves as a visual reminder that the student is the focus of the STAR PCP process (Hayes & Muldoon, 2013) and is especially important for families to allow their son or daughter to take control of his or her future.



Picture 1: **Panther PLUS** student and his support system at his STAR PCP Meeting.

In the outside areas of the star, members of the support system are asked to share positive adjectives that describe the student (e.g. helpful, friendly). In the middle of the star, the student takes the lead and shares his/her comprehensive vision for his/her future long-term (e.g. in five years) in terms of the five (5) transition domains, such as having full-time employment and/or living on their own or with a roommate. In order to reach the goals listed in the middle of the star, the student and his/her support system must first identify the levels the student is currently performing at in the transition domains (e.g. takes public transportation, does not like to ask for help).

With the current performance levels identified, the group must select the most appropriate short-term goals and skills (e.g. intern at library, learn debit card) in each domain that will need to be mastered in order to achieve the ultimate long-term goal and identify key persons that will assist them in doing so.

The completed STAR chart allows the students' support system to visualize the short- and long-term goals and allows program staff to complete the STAR Action Plan to track progress (e.g. initiating early planning stages of objective) on each goal identified.

The STAR PCP process is crucial for success in the program to utilize the coursework, activities, and specialized internships in order to build a strong resume that will help the student become who he/she wants to be.

### **System of Supports**

In order to ensure success at the University, the program provides students with a system of supports including a Program Coordinator (PC), Student Support Specialist (SSS), Faculty Advisor, CIL Youth Transition Specialist, Parent to Parent Transition & Educational Support Specialist (TESS), and a Best Buddies Employment/Community Liaison (ECL).

The Program Coordinator is responsible for the daily implementation of the program and direct student services including advising. The Student Support Specialist (SSS) is a FIU graduate student who assists with the inclusion of **Panther PLUS** students in

University courses and campus life by fostering academic independence, encouraging student responsibility and accountability for their own learning, and modeling appropriate social behaviors. The SSS meets with the student individually one (1) to three (3) times per week for approximately one (1) to two (2) hours each session and completes weekly Individual Student Mentoring Logs. The SSS is also responsible for leading seminars centered on the Ed2Go online continuing education course for the semester to assist with comprehension of the course material and answer questions.

Beginning in their second semester of the program, **Panther PLUS** students are responsible for selecting and reaching out to a faculty member to serve as their faculty advisor. Faculty advisors provide advisement, guidance, and support by focusing on increasing access and participation for students and modeling the appropriate communication and interactions that take place between a University professor and a University student. Faculty advisors are also responsible for discussing research in the student's field of interest and assisting with course assignments/projects and the comprehension of coursework. Faculty advisors meet twice weekly with students for approximately a one (1) hour session.

Through the program's partnership with Parent to Parent of Miami, Inc., families receive support through a Transition & Educational Support Specialist (TESS) who keeps them updated about program events and activities. The design of the program is such that University staff can focus on providing direct support to the student, much like a regular degree-seeking program, and the TESS can focus on answering family questions and concerns and connecting families to resources and information.

Through the program's partnership with Best Buddies, students are provided with an Employment/Community Liaison (ECL) that serves as a job coach during their time in the **Panther PLUS** program. The ECL focuses on providing employment access and on-site support to the students prior to, during, and after their community-based specialized internships. Additionally, the ECL engages in an assessment process before beginning her work with each student to develop an Employment Profile with the student's employment needs and goals.

Through the program's partnership with the Center for Independent Living (CIL), students are required to attend twice-a-week required seminars titled *Living Well and Working Well with a Disability* led by a Youth Transition Specialist. These seminars assist **PLUS** students to develop important life skills while participating in meaningful learning opportunities that encourage independent living and social skills and equip them with the confidence, awareness, and hands-on experience needed to live in the community.

Although **PLUS** students are considered non-degree seeking students, they have the same access to the University resources as any other student, including the Disability Resource Center (DRC), Center for Academic Success (CfAS), and Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS). The program highly encourages students to access these "natural supports" to receive further guidance in their coursework and integrate into campus life.

The DRC is responsible for providing all registered students with a disability with their course accommodations and communicating these learning needs to the professor. The program strongly encourages, but does not require, all students to register with the DRC in order to access their course accommodations including extended time on exams, a note taker, and limited distraction rooms.

The CfAS provides individual and group workshops and tutoring to assist in the development of academic skills needed to succeed at college. In order to further support the student, **PLUS** requires all students to register with the CfAS and receive at least one (1) hour of tutoring per week on their coursework.

CAPS provides mental health services to students that facilitate and enhance their personal learning, emotional well-being, and academic skills development through the Student Health Center. Unlike the CfAS, **PLUS** does not require that students receive regular counseling but highly encourage it and our support staff frequently refers students to CAPS in order to help cope with the daily stress and frustrations of managing class, internship, and employment.

### **Employment Preparation**

As one of the main goals of **Project Panther PLUS** is employment, the program aims to prepare its students with the skills necessary to attain and maintain employment upon graduation, and even prior to that. During the two-year program, students participate in campus- and community-based specialized internships, attend required career workshops and activities focused on Career Development and Employment, and create and maintain an electronic portfolio (e-portfolio).

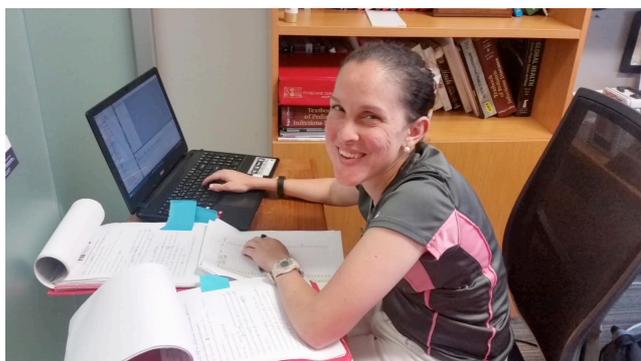
**Career Workshops & Activities.** In partnership with Best Buddies and FIU's Career Talent & Development office, **PLUS** students are required to attend a number of career workshops and activities throughout the academic year also aimed at equipping students with the necessary skills needed to secure and maintain employment.

In addition to offering individual employment support to the students, the Best Buddies Employment/Community Liaison (ECL) also offers workshops and events such as Resume Building & Interviewing Skills, Employability Skills Training, and a networking event with potential employer, throughout the academic year.

FIU's Career Talent & Development office also offers a number of workshops and trainings to all university students focused on making their career dreams a reality. In order to ensure that **PLUS** students are accessing the wide variety of workshops, students follow a semester-long tracking sheet that outlines required activities to be completed and uploaded to their e-portfolio before the end of the semester. Example activities include a Face-to-Face Meeting with the Assistant Director, Resume Building Workshop, and Professional Dining Etiquette.

**Campus- & Community-Based Specialized Internships.** The program is designed such that **PLUS** students participate in campus- and community-based specialized internships in their selected Area of Specialization (Computing & Technology or Health & Wellness) both on campus (semester 3) and in the community (semester 4 &

5) to further develop their employability skills and better prepare them for securing paid employment (final semester).



Picture 2: **Panther PLUS** student working at her campus-based internship site.

During these experiences, student interns are assigned a direct supervisor at each location to whom they report to when they arrive at their internship site. Their direct supervisor is responsible for identifying a list of tasks for the student intern to complete and models completion of tasks, challenges the student intern by increasing responsibilities, and provides ongoing feedback both to the student intern and to the program.

All internship sites, both on campus and in the community, are encouraged to follow the same new employee procedures as they would with any other employee and/or intern. Students are supported during their campus-based internship by the Student Support Specialist and during the community-based internship, by the Best Buddies Employment/Community Liaison. The Student Support Specialist visits and assists the student on-site at the campus-based internship by clarifying task lists, assisting with completion of tasks if needed, and assisting the student in communicating his/her needs to the internship supervisor.

The goal of these specialized internships is to provide the students with an unpaid employment experience that simulates paid employment to equip students with the foundational soft skills (people skills) needed to succeed in a job.

### **Independent Living Experience (ILE)**

The Independent Living Experience (ILE) is a year-long experience in which students focus on developing their independent living and self-advocacy skills to better prepare them for their future. ILE focuses on fostering the development of independent living and self-advocacy skills, furthering self-determination, and promoting social and conflict resolution skills.

ILE begins with a three-month immersive on-campus experience wherein the students live on FIU's Biscayne Bay Campus at Bayview Apartments for the summer. The three-month experience is aimed at helping the students to transition away from the family home to campus living in order to prepare them for independent community living. Following the campus-based ILE where the students learn appropriate independent living skills, they then transition into independent community living with less support for the final two semesters of the program.

Through the program partnership, the Center for Independent Living (CIL) provides hands-on workshops, *Independent Living Mentoring*, three (3) times per week focused on further developing the students' independent living skills. The curriculum focuses on twelve (12) units including Money Management and Student Awareness, Meal Preparation, and Personal Grooming.

In order to further ensure success for the students in the campus-based ILE, students are supported by two (2) Live-In Resident Coordinators (LRC's), also FIU undergraduate or graduate students that live alongside the students in the apartments. The LRC's serve as peer facilitators to encourage a positive, healthy, and safe living environment that fosters independence through the promotion of daily independent living skills, self-care, and appropriate social behaviors. In addition to program support, there is a Resident Assistant (RA) assigned to every floor in the Bayview Apartments who is on-call in case of emergencies.

At the end of the three-month campus-based ILE, students are expected to move into independent living in community. In the community, students can live on their own or with a sibling, fellow **PLUS** students, or roommate of their choice. Due to each family's budget and personal situation, the program works closely with CIL and the students' family in selecting an apartment within the family's budget range and close to the university campus to allow for ease of accessibility for university courses.

### **Electronic Portfolio (E-Portfolio)**

In order to increase marketability for employment, **PLUS** students are required to create and maintain an electronic portfolio (e-portfolio) through PortfolioGen that results in the culminating project of their time in the program. The Program Director and SSS guide students through the process of creating the e-portfolio and uploading artifacts (e.g. assignments) around the five transition domains: Career Development and Employment, Academic Enrichment, Independent Living, Self-Determination, & Campus and Community Engagement. The e-portfolio serves an electronic resume with examples of the student's work that can be provided to potential employers.

The artifacts are carefully designed by program staff to allow potential employers to read and see what the student has learned and accomplished during his or her time in the **Panther PLUS** program. Examples of artifacts include All About Me biography, Career Interview Paper, and Budgeting Plan.

### **Conclusion**

Postsecondary transition programs provide students with ID, a historically marginalized population, access to an authentic college experience, a feat that was previously impossible before the passage of the HEOA (2008). The college experience goes well beyond simply learning in a college classroom though.

By being included on campus in University courses and campus life, students have access and options that help them to evolve into an adult learner and be in control of their learning, make choices, and expand their social circles with similar age peers and those with similar interests. The University experience allows students not only to

broaden their academic horizons but also to learn and further develop the foundational soft skills required for success in potential employment and in the community.

***Project Panther PLUS*** aims to help in closing the achievement gap for employment and independent living outcomes for students with intellectual disabilities and their non-disabled peers. The program is designed to provide students with an authentic college experience in an inclusive University community of learners by allowing students to access, enroll, and participate in coursework and campus life. Although ***Project Panther PLUS*** is only in its first year of implementation, the program hopes to grow and expand in the coming years in order to help them to lead successful and fulfilling lives.

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