



Florida
Developmental
Disabilities
Council, Inc.

SECTION 1:

Developing a Postsecondary Career and Technical Education Program for Students with an Intellectual and Developmental Disability in Florida's Technical College System: **INSTITUTIONAL LEADERS AND POLICYMAKERS GUIDE**

**Replication Guide Based on Project TOPS at
Robert Morgan Educational Center and Technical College**

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This guide was developed by the Project TOPS team and Rick Lockenbach, co-writers; Carmy Greenwood, editor; and Alycia Malicz, graphic designer.

Cover photo by Vivian Vieta. Posters on pages 7 and 11 created by Project TOPS students and Matty Rodriguez-Walling, facilitator.

WELCOME

Is your community seeking ways to expand postsecondary education options and career opportunities for residents who have an intellectual and developmental disability? Do you aspire to make your community a place where all students see a clear path ahead for independence and sustainable, satisfying employment after high school?

If so, read on to learn about a model program in Miami, Florida, that is exploring ways to provide support for students with an intellectual and developmental disability to help them enroll in and complete postsecondary career and technical education (CTE) programs at technical colleges in Florida.

You'll learn about the supports provided to help students master career skills and earn occupational completion points, career certificates, and industry certifications or licensure. You'll also be introduced to some of the financial and other resources that can be accessed for program development and to enable students to enroll in and complete their postsecondary CTE program.

The posters used in this publication and the Project TOPS logo were developed by Project TOPS students with assistance from members of the Project TOPS team.



HOW TO USE THE REPLICATION GUIDE

This *Institutional Leaders and Policymakers Guide* is accompanied by a document called *Section 2: Launching a Postsecondary Career and Technical Education Program for Students with an Intellectual and Developmental Disability in Florida's Technical College System: Program Developers Guide*.

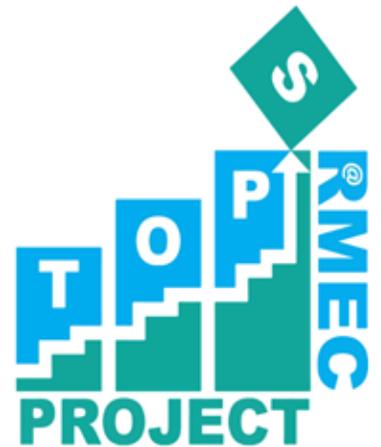
The purpose of the replication guide is to help partnerships around the state implement an inclusive postsecondary CTE program at a technical college in Florida for students with an intellectual and developmental disability who have

exited secondary education. Although each program will reflect the needs of the students and community it serves, many features of such programs will be the same no matter where they are located. Section 2 of the guide provides more in-depth information about starting and sustaining a program and includes links to resources that will be helpful for implementation teams as they set up and operate their programs.

This guide is available for download from the Florida Center for Students with Unique Abilities (FCSUA) at: fcsua.org



Project TOPS



Approved by Florida Department of Education
Florida Department of Education
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Each year in Florida, thousands of high school seniors choose a postsecondary CTE program as their next step on the path to adulthood, independence, and a rewarding career. Many CTE programs are offered by the public institutions that are members of the Florida College System. They are also offered by the technical colleges that are operated and governed by Florida school districts. These technical colleges have unique strengths that come from being part of an institution (i.e., the school district) that is deeply embedded in the community. They are well-positioned to cultivate a ground-level understanding of the needs of students and job seekers in their community and the needs of local employers for workers with skills in high-demand career fields.

The CTE programs offered at Florida's public technical colleges are focused on preparing individuals for the workplace in a targeted and cost-effective manner. The same benefits that these programs offer any student also apply for students with an intellectual and developmental disability, who typically have few postsecondary education options and high rates of unemployment and underemployment.

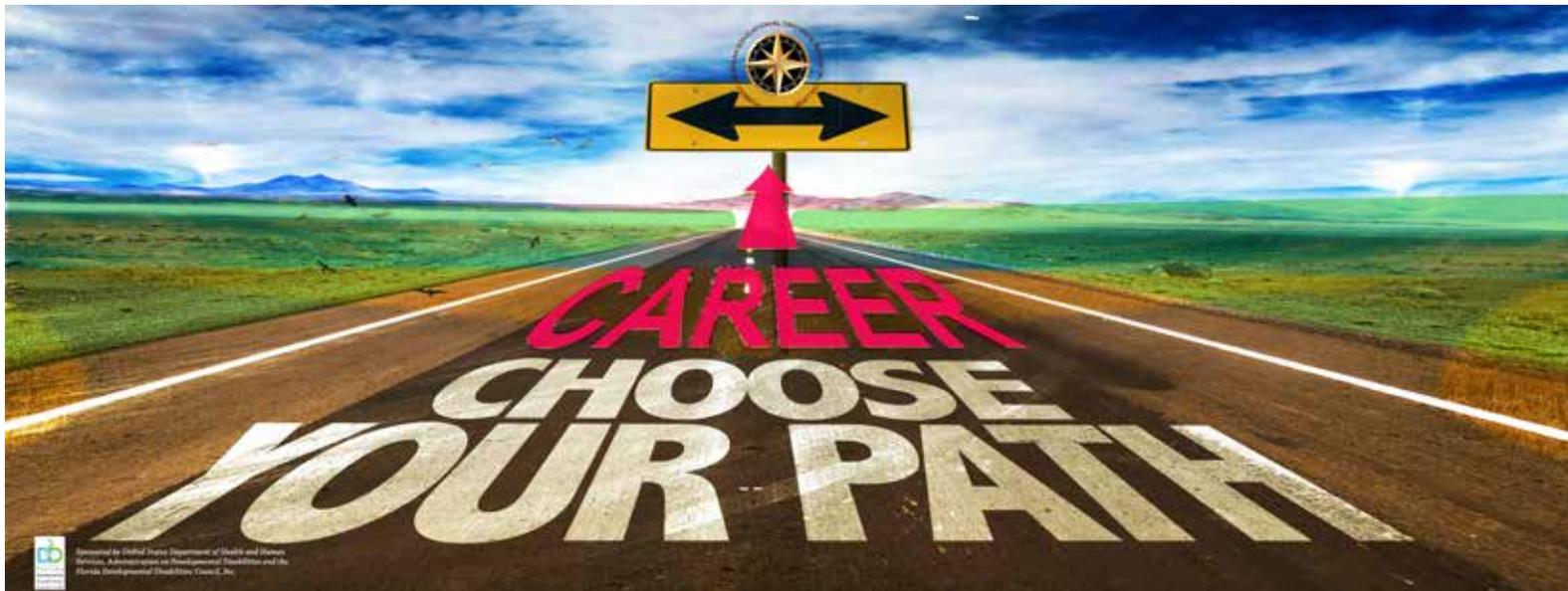
Career and technical education programs have many features that may make them a good fit for students with a disability. They typically involve hands-on training, require a relatively short period of training (often one year), are low cost, do not heavily emphasize traditional academic skills such as reading and writing, and enable students to earn a credential that qualifies them for a position in an in-demand occupation. Having such a credential can help students with a disability break through the barrier of low expectations that often traps individuals with a disability in dead-end jobs with low pay, no job benefits, and few opportunities for growth.

Historically, postsecondary education has provided very limited access to students with an intellectual and developmental disability. However, momentum has shifted in recent years, with increasing interest and increasing investment in postsecondary education opportunities for students with an intellectual disability. In fact, by the summer of 2020, there were 295 college programs for students with an intellectual disability nationwide—almost double the number just 10 years earlier.

Part of this momentum has come from the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, which includes the following provisions:

- Provides grants to institutions of higher education to create comprehensive, inclusive model postsecondary programs for students with an intellectual disability called Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSIDs)
- Supports needs-based federal scholarships for students enrolled in programs approved as Comprehensive Transition Programs (CTPs)
- Supports a national center that fosters the development of these programs (i.e., Think College)

In alignment with this important trend, in 2015, the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council, Inc., funded a program to provide support services for students with an intellectual and developmental disability enrolled in postsecondary CTE programs at Robert Morgan Educational Center and Technical College, part of Miami-Dade County Public Schools. In the intervening five years, Project Transitions to Postsecondary Institutions (Project TOPS) has developed a model of inclusive postsecondary career and technical education that has shown early promise. In its first five years, Project TOPS enrolled 63 unduplicated students. Of those, 57 students earned at least one occupational completion point (an indicator of having demonstrated specific skills in their chosen career field). Twenty-eight students (of 57 students) were full program completers by earning all occupational completion points in their career certificate programs (including two students who completed two programs). Ten remaining students are on track to become full program completers in year six. All eight students who took industry certification exams passed them. In year five, 18 of 19 students earned at least one occupational completion point, and six other students were program completers.



PURPOSES OF INCLUSIVE POSTSECONDARY CTE PROGRAMS

Inclusive postsecondary CTE programs are designed to:

- Give students access to training and individualized supports that allow them to develop specific career skills by earning occupational completion points for jobs embedded within CTE programs, career certificates for full program completion, and industry certifications or licensure
- Help students to secure competitive, integrated employment

The purpose of Project TOPS is to make it possible for students with an intellectual and developmental disability to succeed in one of the CTE programs offered at Robert Morgan that is supported by Project TOPS. To do this, project staff collaborate with faculty and staff at the technical college, in the high schools, in the school district, and in public and private nonprofit agencies to eliminate barriers to enrollment and provide the students with the academic and other supports and customized accommodations they need to meet the requirements of the CTE program.

Project TOPS also helps students access a variety of funding sources to enable them to enroll in and complete their CTE program.

THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Project TOPS students are between the ages of 18 and 26, have a documented intellectual or other developmental disability, and are high school graduates (including graduates who earned a standard diploma through access points instruction).

The selection of a CTE program that is a good match for the student is an important aspect of any successful program. Students must have an expressed interest in one of the CTE programs supported by Project TOPS and must be able to independently perform classroom tasks, access transportation, and provide self-care. They must also be a client of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) or willing to become one, because the Project TOPS model relies in part on students accessing VR funding through their individual plan for employment (IPE) developed with VR. This means VR may be able to cover the cost of tuition for the CTE program and other costs associated with the student's enrollment in the accompanying support program that provides specialized Project TOPS services.

PROGRAMS OPTIONS FOR PROJECT TOPS STUDENTS

- Baking and Pastry Arts
- Commercial Art Technology
- 3D Animation Technology

FUNDING RESOURCES FOR PROJECT TOPS STUDENTS

In addition to the FDDC grant, the Project TOPS model uses multiple funding options to help its students access programs and supports, including the following:

- Individual support for students through Vocational Rehabilitation
- State grant and scholarship funding from the Florida Center for Students with Unique Abilities (for students with an intellectual disability)
- Needs-based financial aid for students with an intellectual disability enrolled in federally approved Comprehensive Transition Programs (such as Project TOPS)
- School district and technical college funds
- Student and family resources

Project TOPS students are full participants in their inclusive CTE program. They attend lectures, complete hands-on activities, do homework, and are assessed to determine how well they are learning the knowledge and skills required for entry-level competence in their chosen career field. They may also participate in career and technical student organization (CTSO) competitions with their peers.

Project TOPS students benefit from a carefully developed system of supports designed to help them succeed. Some students have limited academic skills when they enter the program. These supports for student success include:

- Academic supports, including co-teachers who provide additional support within the classroom
- Support for CTE instructors, including instruction in Universal Design for Learning (UDL), assistive technology, and other topics
- “Pro sessions” in which students receive additional instruction from facilitators, including tutoring, group work, and employability and other soft skills instruction—along with help preparing for and obtaining accommodations for industry certification exams
- Help in learning how to navigate transportation to and from the technical college
- Accommodations, including support to become effective self-advocates in ensuring that they receive needed accommodations
- Natural development of peer mentors for success in class and CTSO competitions
- Case management
- Support for parent and family involvement
- Supports for the transition to employment

Project TOPS facilitators work closely with CTE program instructors to track each student’s progress and respond to any barriers or needs for support. For example, a student and the Project TOPS facilitator might review the week’s program content and, if the student is having difficulties, work out a plan for practicing and mastering the material. The facilitator helps the student learn the material and helps the CTE instructor understand the student’s learning needs and provide customized accommodations to allow the student to be successful, based on a 504 plan between the student and technical college (required by Section 504 of the Americans with Disabilities Act). Often, all students in the CTE class benefit from these accommodations.

These facilitators are experienced in exceptional student education and/or CTE and in effective strategies for helping students learn the technical skills taught in the CTE program. The instructor uses technology and other strategies to provide students with accommodations to help them successfully progress in their program (referred to as Satisfactory Academic Progress) and earn industry certification. Project TOPS students must show mastery of the same skills and knowledge as other program students.

Accommodations are supports for student success—such as specialized instructional software, extended time for taking tests, and alternative formats for delivering information. Accommodations **do not modify** what is taught—they are changes in how the student is taught and how the student demonstrates the skills they have learned.

SAMPLE ACCOMMODATIONS

- Modeling actions and/or steps required for assignments/tasks
- Prompting students to take a photograph or video using a smart phone or tablet to capture an instructor's modeled actions
- Repeating oral instructions
- Rewording oral and written instructions
- Providing visual samples of a completed assignment in both print and digital formats
- Providing electronic versions of the textbook on students' computers so they can make annotations, highlight important points, type notes, or use other strategies
- Providing step-by-step video tutorials that accompany each activity assigned to students
- Using print, digital, and classroom calendars
- Developing an individual assignment schedule
- Providing visual examples of completed assignments and/or products
- Using professional emails for daily/weekly communication
- Using student demonstrations of learned concepts
- Employing electronic and printed study guides, outlines, vocabulary
- Having students review and self-correct written exams/quizzes
- Integrating instructional tools through technology
- Using verbal and non-verbal cues to assist with strategies for on-task behaviors, communication, and self-advocacy

To provide students with a more complete college experience with nondisabled peers and to further develop their career and technical skills, Project TOPS supports their students' participation in CTSO competitions. Project TOPS students have had great success in CTSO regional, state, and national competition. One student earned a bronze medal in national competition, and three students swept all three places in one state employment preparation competition.

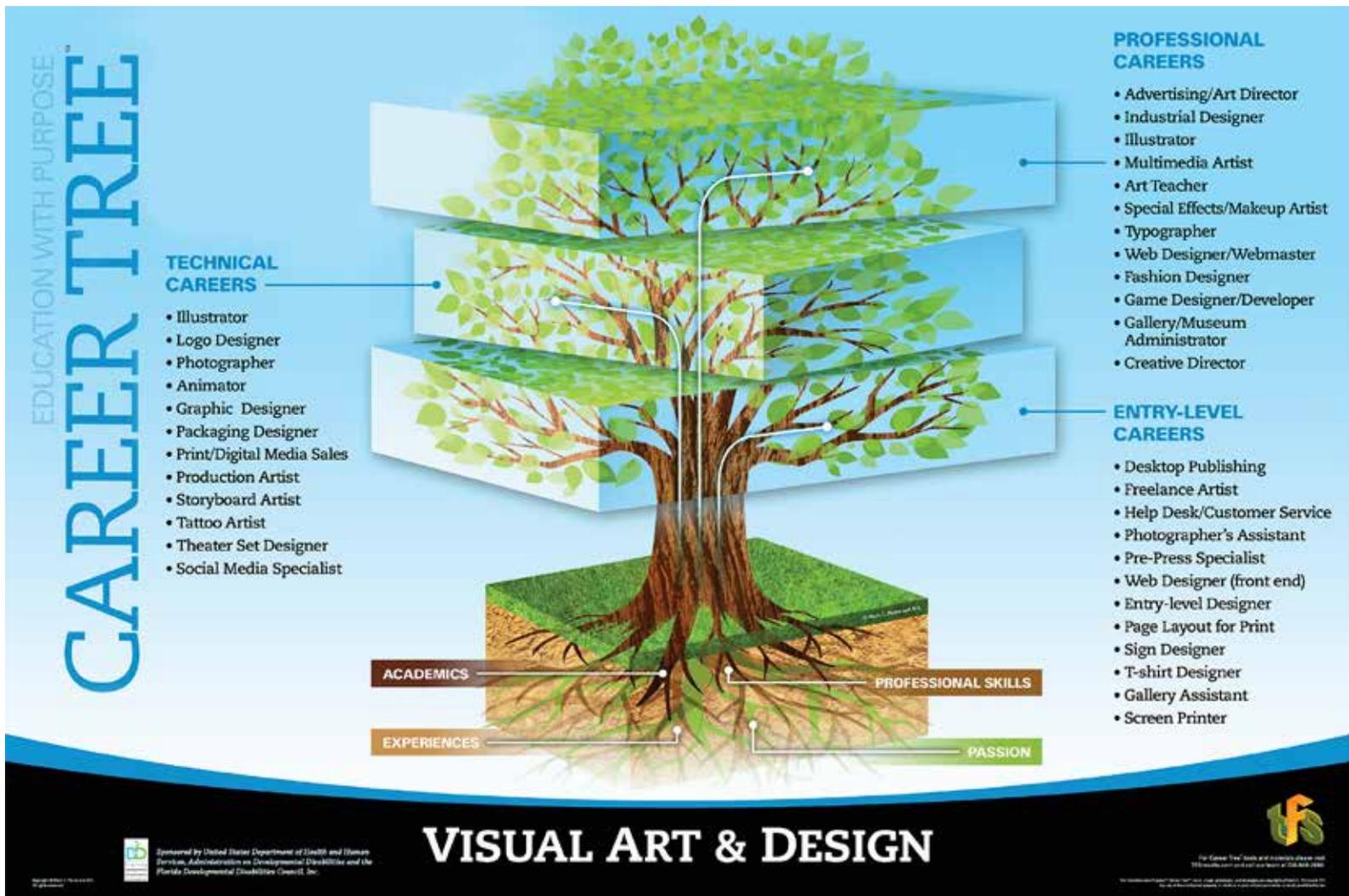
The students are active members of the college community and have access to all the technical college's facilities and resources. This includes a Student Center that was developed as an outgrowth of Project TOPS and that makes available to technical college students a center coordinator, computers, and a speaker series.

Students receive supports designed to help them pass industry certification exams, along with assistance in developing a portfolio, identifying job openings, applying and interviewing for jobs, and acquiring other employment-related "soft skills." In addition to earning the same credentials as any other student, Project TOPS students must have an end goal of obtaining competitive integrated employment and should understand this before program acceptance. In addition to soft skills instruction, they are exposed to work-based learning experiences including job shadowing, job fairs, internships, and employment-related program activities such as preparing and serving food at a community event or creating posters or flyers for the technical college.

Programs such as Project TOPS must address the basic skills exit requirements for career certificate programs of 450 or more clock hours. The essence of these requirements is that students must meet the literacy exit standards in their particular CTE program in reading, math, and language to earn a career certificate for program completion. Technical colleges may need to consider if a student meets the local school district's waiver of exit standards policy for students with a disability. All school districts must develop such a policy under state law. Students who earn industry certification or licensure are considered to have met this requirement. This topic is addressed extensively in Section 2 of this replication guide.

Most CTE programs typically take two or three semesters to complete. However, Project TOPS students may continue to receive support from project staff while they take extra time to finish program requirements and to prepare for an industry certification exam. They may also access support through VR as they seek employment.

Project TOPS staff work with offices and individuals all across campus (e.g., admissions, student services, financial aid, administration, and more) to break down barriers to student participation and success in their CTE program.





KEYS TO SUCCESS

Planning, developing, and implementing an inclusive postsecondary CTE program cannot be the work of one person or even one institution. It requires meaningful and ongoing collaboration among program staff, instructors and administrators, school district staff, VR staff, and staff of departments across the technical college.

Here are some additional features that Project TOPS staff have found to be keys to success:

- Implementation teams must gather information about the systems and structures of their specific technical college, participating school districts, and other involved agencies and adapt the program to meet local systems and needs.
- Technical colleges may receive extensive support to develop their programs for students with an intellectual disability from the Florida Center for Students with Unique Abilities, including development of an online plan that will be continuously refined as the program matures through attendance at biannual institutes.
- In addition to addressing accommodations, each student's 504 plan should address any other strategies that relate to barriers to success.
- The feedback loop must be kept open, with the CTE instructor providing feedback to the program support staff on the student's progress, the student providing feedback on his or her own perceived progress, and the staff providing feedback to the student on his or her progress. Ongoing and regular communication with VR is also critical.

WHERE TO BEGIN

Are you ready to learn more? Are you ready to become an advocate for an inclusive postsecondary CTE program in your community? It is vital to get off to a good start during the early planning phase. That means finding committed partners at the technical college, local school district(s), VR, and other organizations. Here are some ways to begin your journey:

- Identify statistics about the postsecondary education options and unemployment rates of students with an intellectual and developmental disability in your community.
- Visit the website of the Florida Center for Students with Unique Abilities (FCSUA) at the University of Central Florida to find contact information for already existing inclusive postsecondary CTE programs at Florida technical and state colleges. Reach out to program staff for more information and consider a visit to a program to gain deeper insight.
- Start small—perhaps by serving five students in just one CTE program, with one instructor who seems especially open to the possibilities of an inclusive program.
- Consult Section 2 of the replication guide to learn about the many sources of information on starting a program, working within the rules of the Florida Department of Education and other agencies, accessing funding resources, and serving students effectively.
- Establish a team to develop a plan to get started and to build your program. FCSUA provides extensive support in this area. Review online Florida and national resources on how to develop an inclusive program to minimize the need to “reinvent the wheel.”

CREATING A SUSTAINABLE PROGRAM

Enthusiasm and aspirations will not sustain an inclusive postsecondary program for the long term. Even once you’ve established an effective collaboration in your community, even after your program has begun to serve students, you must be making plans for sustainability. Here are some important steps you can take to put your program on a sustainable path:

- Complete an application to become an approved Florida Postsecondary Comprehensive Transition Program by the FCSUA and apply for startup or enhancement grant funding and scholarships for students with an intellectual disability. The grant funding can be renewed.
- Apply for and obtain approval from the U.S. Department of Education as a Comprehensive Transition Program, so students with an intellectual disability in your inclusive postsecondary CTE program can pursue certain needs-based federal financial aid.
- Maximize existing resources and services. For example, VR offers education and employment-related support for students. This is especially critical for students with a developmental disability other than an intellectual disability, because FCSUA grant and scholarship funding can only be used to serve students with an intellectual disability.
- Create and continue to refine a sustainability plan as a component of an online plan with ongoing support from FCSUA as your program is being developed.

A unified vision, hard work, and dedication are needed to launch an inclusive CTE program for students with an intellectual and developmental disability. But the benefits can ripple far beyond a small segment of students. Just as strategies that make instruction more accessible benefit both students with a disability and students who do not have a disability, your whole community can benefit from having a highly trained workforce that engages the full participation of all its members.



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