

# Building Accessible and Inclusive Community College Environments for Students with Disabilities

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## Two Experiences in Capacity Building and Institutional Change

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### STUDY BACKGROUND

This issue brief provides findings from an implementation study of the Evaluation of Community College Interventions for Youth and Young Adults with Disabilities, funded by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), Chief Evaluation Office. In 2014, DOL's Office of Disability Employment Policy awarded two community colleges with 5-year grants to increase their capacity to provide inclusive integrated education and career development and training services to young adults with disabilities.

In 2014, the Department of Labor Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) initiated its *Pathways to Careers: Community Colleges for Youth and Young Adults with Disabilities* (Pathways) demonstration project. The project is a response to longstanding concerns about inaccessible education and work experiences for youth with disabilities transitioning from

secondary education to post-secondary education and employment. A primary aim of the project is to increase community college capacity to provide students with disabilities opportunities for an inclusive, integrated college education and career development. A second aim is to effect institutional change that will pave the road to more inclusive environments for students with all types of educational, social, and career needs. With the project, ODEP seeks to build evidence for project models that will benefit other community colleges.

*Two grantees provide useful lessons in capacity building and institutional change within projects that serve students with disabilities at community colleges. One grantee's strategy highlights the usefulness of administrative support in building institutional change that could help provide lasting change in serving students with disabilities. Another grantee efficiently met students' needs through data collection and student level support. Adapting these strategies could help instruct other community colleges on ways to meet the needs of student with disabilities.*

In late 2014, ODEP awarded five-year cooperative agreement grants to two community colleges: Pellissippi State Community College in Knoxville, TN, for their project entitled Universal Pathways to Employment Project (UPEP) and Onondaga Community College in Onondaga, NY, for their project entitled Onondaga Pathways to Careers (OPC). In its initial year, each college developed a multipronged capacity-building approach to serving students with disabilities through a combination of new services, restructuring existing services, faculty training, and partnering internally across departments, and with community services, employers, and their local workforce system. The colleges initially worked through plan development and project building with guidance from ODEP and ODEP-provided ongoing technical assistance. In the second year, both colleges began modest outreach, recruitment, and enrollment of students with disabilities into their projects. During years 2 through 5, both colleges continued to recruit and enroll students while improving and expanding services and linkages to partner organizations. As year 5 winds to a close, ODEP has extended both grants another 9 to 10 months to continue activities through June 2020.

The purpose of this brief is to describe the capacity building and institutional change efforts attempted by each college and to review the resulting experiences of each grantee, including factors that both impeded and facilitated change, and to identify lessons to be learned from this demonstration.

## **Community needs: the weak link between secondary education and career development opportunity**

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Youth and young adults with disabilities struggle with the transition process to college and employment due to low student expectations of those around them, limited awareness of available options, lack of appropriate training and work opportunities, and lack of access to quality education and career development. These ongoing challenges lead to lower educational attainment for these students compared to their peers without disabilities (Oertle and Bragg, 2014)<sup>1</sup>. Students with disabilities face barriers at community colleges that lack inclusion and equity policies, lack coordinated services and practices (e.g., trained faculty/staff on inclusion and equity), and offer classes that are not accessible to different learners. In addition to these institutional barriers, students

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<sup>1</sup> Oertle, K.M. and Bragg, D.D. (2014). Transitioning students with disabilities: Community college policies and practices. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*. 25(1), 59-67.

with disabilities face individual-level barriers such as a lack of awareness of transition assistance and availability of disability services or a lack of career goals in an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). ODEP initiated the Pathways project to begin the conversation about strategies for changing community colleges to be more accessible and supportive of students with disabilities.

## **Grant goals: Enhancing the link to quality career development opportunities**

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Pathways responds to the current weakness in access to transition opportunities and supports for education and career development. It aims to create community college environments that (1) foster high rates of credential and job attainment, (2) increase career-oriented job placements, and (3) eliminate the earnings differential between students with disabilities and those without disabilities.

A critical aspect of the Pathways project is the new education and career training programs developed under the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant program. Pathways leverages and builds upon recent colleges' experiences in developing infrastructure needed to expand and improve education and career development programs. TAACCCT grants were intended to build and expand the capacity of community colleges to meet the needs of workers who lost their jobs or are threatened with job loss as a result of foreign trade, and others workers seeking skilled training for jobs in demand. TAACCCT grantees follow a career pathways framework that includes several common principles and approaches to vocational, academic, and soft-skills training.

The value to the Pathways grantees of having been a TAACCCT grant recipient in previous years is the newly developed career orientation of the school. Each college realigned their academic curriculum to better match particular careers, developed partnerships with business, and provided job experiences (including apprenticeships in some disciplines). ODEP perceived this career orientation as a positive benefit for students with disabilities.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an ODEP-required design component of the Pathways project. UDL “is a framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn.”<sup>2</sup> It makes learning accessible regardless of ability, disability, age, gender, or

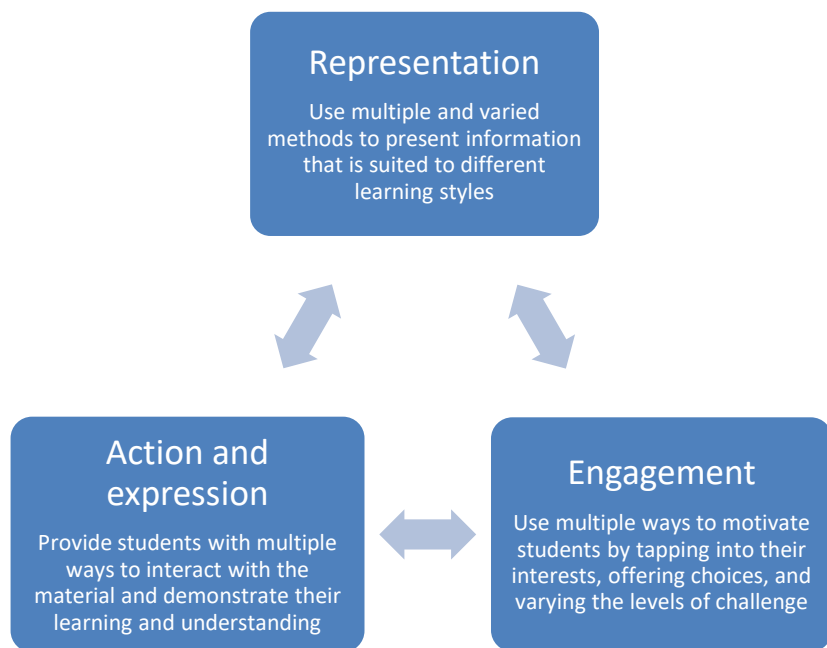
## Principles of Universal Design for Learning

cultural and linguistic background. The approach incorporates flexibility and variety in how students access and engage with study materials, as well as the use of different formats to assess knowledge and understanding.

While the focus of research on implementation of UDL principles has been at the elementary and secondary school levels, research suggests applicability to the post-secondary education environment. Davies, et al (2013)<sup>3</sup> provided group instruction for higher education teachers on the strategies and principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). The results showed that instructors

implemented those strategies and principles and students reported positive change in learning.

The Guideposts for Success framework is another ODEP-recommended design component. Originally developed to promote quality secondary education, the Guideposts offer sound advice on how best to meet the needs for student with disabilities, and are applicable to all educational settings.



<sup>2</sup> CAST. <http://www.cast.org/our-work/about-udl.html#.XWVUwChKhPY>

<sup>3</sup> Davies, P. L., Schelly, C. L., & Spooner, C. L. (2013). Measuring the effectiveness of Universal Design for Learning intervention in postsecondary education. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 26(3), 195-220.

The Guideposts for Success provide a statement of principles and directions that lead to better outcomes for all young people, and offer a strategy to organize policy and practices:

- 1) School-based preparatory experiences. All youth need to participate in educational programs grounded in standards, clear performance expectations, and graduation exit options.
- 2) Career preparation and work-based learning experiences. In order to identify and attain career goals, youth need exposure to a range of experiences.
- 3) Youth development and leadership. All youth need opportunities that allow them to exercise leadership and build self-esteem.
- 4) Connecting activities. Young people need to be connected to programs, services, activities, and supports that help them gain access to chosen post-school options;
- 5) Family involvement and supports. All youth need the support of parents, family members, and other caring adults.

With support from ODEP, the Pathways grantees developed models unique to their institutions to improve the transition experiences of their students. The grantees designed approaches that shift practice and policy across their institutions. These efforts involved transforming the community college's approach to providing services, as opposed to a single division, and enlisting support from and engagement of administrators, deans, department chairs, faculty, student services, and other divisions that have a role in ensuring students' success.<sup>4</sup> The community colleges leveraged their relationships with local partners, national affiliates, association members or business organizations, and a variety of other entities including the public workforce system. Both projects engaged area high schools on how to connect students and special education teachers with transition resources.

## **Project model design**

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### **Student services and staffing**

OPC and UPEP differ in their approach to the development and delivery of services in their respective project models. At Onondaga, three primary staff – the Recruitment Specialist, Educational Coordinator, and a Career Readiness Coach – essentially operate the project at the student level, handling recruitment, academic support, and career support. The Recruitment Specialist transitioned in fall 2018 to a role in the college's Advising department; the expectation is that the Recruitment Specialist will still be involved in recruiting students with disabilities but will have less of a day-to-day role in OPC. Once enrolled in OPC, students are predominantly in the care

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<sup>4</sup> Oertle and Bragg (2014) offer a Transition to Community College model as a tool to assist in the development and evaluation of disability transition policies and practices. The foundation is continuous planning, with internal and external communication and collaboration as primary components.

of the Educational Coordinator and Career Readiness Coach. The Educational Coordinator resides in the Office of Accessibility Resources. The Education Coordinator arranges testing, accommodations, and provides and coordinates academic supports. An Academic Advisor, who reports to the Educational Coordinator, also provides individual counseling. When the student wants career support, the Educational Coordinator refers s them to the Career Readiness Coach for career services. The Career Readiness Coach was initially located with the Educational Coordinator. Since 2018, he resided in Career Services, in an effort to expand Career Services knowledge base on serving students with disabilities.

By contrast, UPEP employs more staff, some of whom are part-time, to provide student services. These staff are not embedded in any other department but work exclusively with students affiliated with UPEP. The Community Liaison Specialist works on outreach and on connecting students to resources—primarily those provided by UPEP, but also connecting students with disabilities to other resources on campus, including student groups, aid organizations, and other groups. Two Career Specialists and five academic coaches (with each student assigned to one academic coach) provide intake and academic supports to students. Career advisement is coordinated through three career coaches who work with students on developing resumes and cover letters, job searches, as well as interview and soft skills. UPEP assigns a career coach to each student. Students work with career coaches to identify potential types of work-based opportunities of interest, and then work with the Business Liaison to contact particular employers.

### **College services and staffing**

At the college level, OPC includes UDL training for faculty and efforts to improve technology and accessibility. UDL training is carried out through the UDL Academy, summer training sessions for which faculty and staff that attend receive stipends. The UDL Academy is a joint effort between the former OPC project director (who left the project director role after 3 years), a faculty lead, and the head of the Office of Accessibility Resources. These three developed the UDL Academy in consultation with the college administration. They coordinate applications to the Academy, training sessions and speakers, stipends for those attending, and presentations on UDL by attendees in the academic year following the Academy. The former project director and the head of the Office of Accessibility Resources also lead accessibility efforts, helping to identify areas on campus with need for greater accessibility as well as available technology. OPC worked to ensure all college web-based

technology and resources college comply with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0<sup>5</sup> and added a policy to ensure captioning of video in classrooms.

At Pellissippi, the Community Liaison, Career Specialists, Business Liaison, and project director are all involved in college-level UDL efforts. These include developing training materials and presentations and securing experts to speak on the topics. These training sessions are less intensive than Onondaga's UDL Academy. Rather than multi-day sessions, the training sessions and presentations are typically 1-2 hours. UPEP has also provided written materials on UDL to faculty and staff. UPEP also acquired UDL-compatible career investigation software and increased the purchase of UDL-compatible textbooks and training equipment.

## Impacts on college capacity

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### Onondaga: Student recruitment and UDL

*"The development of the Scholars program [has had] very positive results... That bridge program where high school students are giving up their one Saturday a month to participate and get to know Pathways to Careers and what it has to offer and who's involved" ~ OPC Staff*

OPC's greatest impacts on capacity during the period of the grant are the OPC Scholars program and development of the Summer UDL Academies. The OPC Scholars program created a new pipeline to the college for students with disabilities. Incorporating the Guideposts to Success, the OPC Scholars program recruits students with disabilities in their senior year at area high schools. Over the course of a year through once a month workshops, high school students learn about Onondaga Community College, OPC, and broader transition skills. About 30 Scholars have

enrolled at Onondaga each year since the project's inception. The movement of the Recruitment Specialist to the Advising department at Onondaga may increase capacity for advising and recruiting students with disability.

The UDL Summer Academies, meanwhile, have increased capacity at the college through instruction in UDL. Twenty faculty and staff attend each session, with up to two sessions per summer. Faculty and staff learn what UDL is, where its value lies in engaging students, and how to incorporate UDL

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<sup>5</sup> The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines are part of a series of [web accessibility](#) guidelines published by the [Web Accessibility Initiative](#) of the [World Wide Web Consortium](#). See <https://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG20/>

principles in their own work. All attendees must “report out” on their learning to their department or the college as a whole through a presentation the following semester.

The acquisition of new assistive technology also represents an increase in college capacity to serve students with disabilities. Training materials developed to help students learn to use assistive technology are also crucial for allowing both OPC students and non-OPC students with disabilities to access more resources.

OPC developed a “modified model of embedded tutoring” for developmental math classes. This model allows students to receive tutoring on specific classes on a regular basis from tutors who attend class meetings. For other subjects, OPC organized course-specific study groups to serve students with disabilities.

Outside of tutoring, there has been less movement at Onondaga in increasing capacity for serving students directly. As previously mentioned, there are few student-facing staff in OPC, and the allocation of resources has focused more on recruitment and changing pedagogy.

### **Pellissippi: Student services**

In contrast to Onondaga, Pellissippi has emphasized increasing capacity through student services. With its larger staff, all UPEP students receive extensive one-on-one support, with individualized counseling tailored to their own needs and aspirations. UPEP students are required to meet weekly with their academic coaches in their first year, and regularly with their career coaches from their second year onward. They must also attend workshops, with specific topics or sessions chosen based on their needs. Staff continue to tailor project requirements to the needs of students on an ongoing basis. Project leaders point to this individualized, intensive approach as the key to success in student outcomes, including increased student persistence. Project staff have tracked these outcomes through detailed data collection. Their Data Specialist tracks both project offerings (and attendance at offerings) and student outcomes, allowing the project to be responsive and easily adapt to project requirements and resources based on data. For the length of the grant, college capacity to serve students with disabilities directly has increased greatly. UPEP has also acquired assistive technology and aided students in learning to use it.

While project staff have expressed frustration with low faculty engagement with UDL, they have conducted at least eleven trainings and presentations on UDL, with dozens of faculty and staff attending each. UPEP staff have also created a handbook for faculty on how to create accessible



class materials. UPEP structured its approach differently than Onondaga's UDL Academies, using a mixture of webinars, outside speakers, and departmental trainings. On average, the OPC UDL Summer Academy trains 20 faculty and staff (or about 120 in total) during intensive one-week programs focused on the implementation of a post-academy project. UPEP held over a dozen UDL professional development sessions attended by about 350 faculty and staff.

## Institutional change

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### **Onondaga: OPC Scholars and UDL Academy**

Because of its college-level focus, Onondaga has experienced significant institutional change. While we cannot assess the ultimate sustainability of the projects (the grants will continue one more academic year), Onondaga administration officials speak positively of sustaining several elements of OPC. There is strong interest in maintaining the OPC Scholars program, perhaps by opening it up to all students, not just those with disabilities, and UDL Academies, again perhaps by broadening them to faculty at other colleges (for a fee). Changes to the physical campus, through new signage, push plate doors, and ramps represent lasting institutional change.

This institutional change would not be possible without significant support from college administration. Members of college administration are leaders of the OPC project team and staff speak of working collaboratively with administration. Several staff members describe OPC as changing the college as a whole:

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*"Knowing that we have really highly-trained specialists in working with students with disabilities in a number of departments and not just within my division, but again it's across the college, I think is really valuable. To me, that is probably one of the best outcomes that we've had because those specialists are not only highly trained, they're transferring that knowledge to their peers and they're enhancing the whole area's ability to serve students." ~OPC Staff*

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The project has administrative buy-in and as a result, the college has been willing to change the way it conceives its capacity to serve students with disabilities.

At the same time, Onondaga might not be able to sustain the same level of intensive support for participants after the grant. In particular, the positions of Recruitment Specialist, Educational Coordinator, and Career Readiness Coach are grant-funded. Although Onondaga is moving to

embed these staff in other departments—and the Recruitment Specialist has been embedded in the Advising Department—these staff are not likely to devote the same amount of time advising OPC participants, as some staff told us during our interviews. Their responsibilities will include more than serving OPC participants. In addition, it is not apparent that these positions will have funding at a level to support the same intensive support after the grant.

### **Pellissippi: UDL Policy**

Pellissippi, in comparison to Onondaga, has struggled more with producing institutional change and project staff attribute this to lack of support from college administration. Staff express the belief that while the administration generally supports the project, and its outcomes in terms of increased student persistence, the college is not willing to provide funds to continue with the project activities beyond the end of the grant. Staffing costs represent the vast majority of project expenses, and the college has not indicated that it would help find permanent positions at the college for any project staff. Other college funding priorities, including capital improvements, have also prevented project staff from soliciting funding from many local and regional philanthropies. Although staff continue to search for outside sources of funding, most believe that direct service provision to students with disabilities of the sort provided by UPEP will end after the 2019-2020 academic year.

This is not to say that Pellissippi has not achieved any institutional change. UPEP project staff drafted a policy statement on behalf of the college (and its five campuses) committing all campus information and technology be fully accessible for all persons with disabilities. The plan calls for Pellissippi to provide UDL training to all faculty and staff, and, as part of the Tennessee Board of Regents' required five-year accessibility plan, develop a learning environment that provides accessible informational materials and technology. Pellissippi adopted the UPEP policy statement in 2015.<sup>6</sup> This is a concrete change in college policy accomplished thanks to the project. The project developed materials for the project that are available for the college at large to use beyond the grant period, such as the accessibility handbook discussed earlier, employer contacts, workshop materials, toolkits for employers and for external partner organizations, career assessment guide, and the contract to use inclusive career assessment software (the Educational and Industrial Testing Service system). Further, Pellissippi also made physical changes to its campuses to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

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<sup>6</sup> Tennessee Board of Regents policy: <https://www.tbr.edu/student-success/accessibility-initiative>  
UPEP policy statement: <http://www.pstcc.edu/ppm/pdf/00-04-00.pdf>

## **Lessons learned on capacity building and institutional change**

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The experiences of Onondaga and Pellissippi with capacity building and institutional change provide interesting contrasts. OPC has allocated resources toward college-level change, leading to greater institutional change but has been weak on student outcomes.<sup>7</sup> UPEP has had less support for institutional change, suggesting that significant increases in the college's capacity to directly serve students with disabilities may disappear when the grant ends. There is no indication that there must be a tradeoff between capacity building and institutional change in Pathways-like projects. Rather, the experiences of Onondaga and Pellissippi highlight the roles of administration support and priorities in developing projects to serve students with disabilities at community colleges.

OPC's and UPEP's efforts at institutional change draw attention to the role of administration support in finding ways to imbed needed improvements in staffing, programs and policies resulting from grant-oriented opportunities. Without administration support, enacting lasting policy and programmatic change becomes extremely difficult. However, administration support on its own does not guarantee effective capacity building. Improving the capacity to serve students with disabilities requires accurate identification of student needs and this may will require intensive, individualized services. UPEP, with its greater focus on collecting data and on student-level support, is in a better position to meet these needs. OPC, with its priorities on recruitment and faculty training, has struggled to achieve strong student outcomes.

Ultimately, the intent of the Pathways grants was to provide community colleges with support for building their capacity to serve students with disabilities and to effect institutional change to support these efforts. Both grantees made important strides to achieve these goals. As the colleges near completion of their grant, enrollment is steady, many students are successfully transitioning to college and some have graduated and entered employment related to the degree program. For other community colleges seeking to adapt themselves to the needs of students with disabilities, both OPC and UPEP are instructive guides.

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<sup>7</sup> Please see the Final Report for full information on student outcomes. Three-year college persistence rates (fall 2015 to fall 2018) were 29.3 percent at Pellissippi and 3.3 percent at Onondaga.