# Building an Inclusive Postsecondary Model of Services

*By Tina Raeke, Maria Paiewonsky, and Shahrzad Sajadi*

Since 2011, Bridgewater State University (BSU) has received funds through the Massachusetts Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment Initiative (MAICEI) to support students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) to attend college. This BSU–MAICEI partnership, named EXCEL (Extraordinary Expectations for Career, Education and Life), offers up to 30 eligible students from partnering school districts the opportunity to share the same experiences as their college-age peers in the areas of academics, socialization, career development, and residential life.

Nationally, this kind of initiative is known as inclusive postsecondary education, or IPSE. In this brief, we focus on the work EXCEL program staff have accomplished to build an IPSE model, department by department, at BSU.

## EXCEL PROGRAM BASICS

To be eligible for the EXCEL program, students must be between 18 and 22 years old, still be in high school and be identified with a severe or intellectual and developmental disability (IDD). Their educational team must also determine the student is eligible for postsecondary transition services and is not likely to meet the local requirements for a high school diploma.

Students in the EXCEL program and other MAICEI initiatives enroll in typical college classes, use campus resources, complete campus internships, and socialize with peers. In 2016, the EXCEL partnership expanded to launch the first residence life program in the state for students with IDD who wanted to include dorm life in their college experience.

MAICEI is built on practices outlined in the Think College Standards for Inclusive Higher Education (Weir, Papay & Hanson, 2019), which

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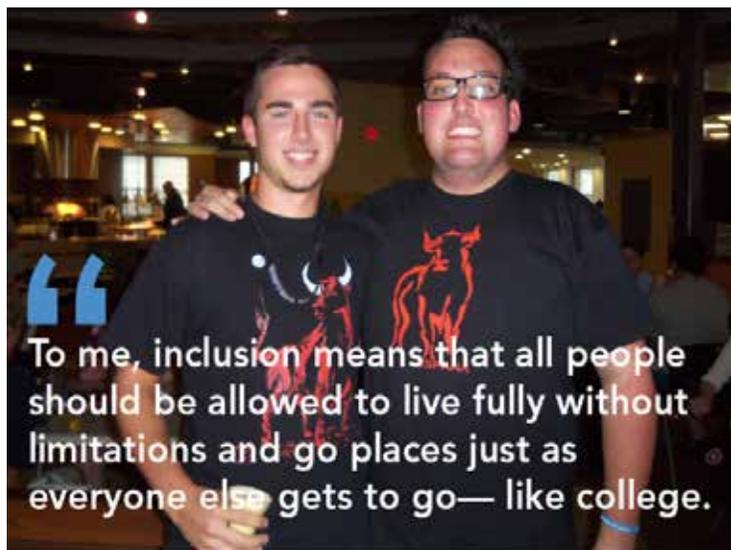
promote a fully inclusive college experience for students in the classroom and throughout the campus. The standards, currently under review (Weir, et al., 2019) recommend that IHE program developers take numerous actions to establish IPSE programs. The first of these is to align with college systems and practices.

While EXCEL staffers are working toward all eight of these points, this brief is focused on aligning an IHE initiative with existing college systems and practices.

## WHAT IS INCLUSIVE POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION?

Jones et al. (2015) define inclusive postsecondary education as follows:

> *"… inclusive communities in higher education that embrace a shared commitment to value all people and to provide equal and authentic opportunities for individuals with various differences to interact, collaborate, and learn from one another. An inclusive campus generates natural supports within the community to meaningfully involve all students in campus life. It provides students with disabilities the same opportunities and choices available to those without disabilities, never relegating students with IDD to separate or segregated experiences."*

"To me, inclusion means that all people should be allowed to live fully without limitations and go places just as everyone else gets to go— like college.

More directly, graduate Kenneth Kelty who attended college with inclusive supports stated

*"To me, inclusion means that all people should be allowed to live fully without limitations and go places just as everyone else gets to go— like college!"(Kelty & Prohn, 2014).*

Using this framework, program developers for IPSE have a primary goal to capitalize on resources that exist on campus and collaborate with colleagues to ensure that these resources are available, accessible, and useful for all students, including those with IDD. This means orienting campus colleagues on services and supports that follow principles of universal design, preparing staff with the training and knowledge to apply these principles to their work with students, and ensuring that students benefit from these resources.

## PROGRESS TOWARD FULL INCLUSION

Since the start of the partnership in 2011, BSU staff have continuously addressed Think College Standard 1: Alignment with College Systems and Practices. The corresponding Quality Indicator 1.1 has guided their work: *Students have equal access to IHE facilities and services.*

To accomplish this, program staff focused on staff and faculty training and working with individual campus departments over time to enhance their services to be fully inclusive. Taking a long-term approach toward inclusion is important because the EXCEL program, like many IPSE initiatives, has become more inclusive over time.

Ideally, new IPSE programs establish an inclusive foundation for their work from the start. When this occurs, every decision related to student participation in college assumes that the college students' experiences do not differ from their peers without disabilities (Elks, et al, 2019). Although this takes focus and commitment, the result is that these programs are providing students effective education and work experiences that lead to competitive employment. A recent study indicates that 228 students with IDD attending college showed that those students who only took inclusive classes, participated in campus events, had prior paid work experience, and participated in volunteering and/or community service were more likely to earn at or above minimum wage during their most recent year in college (Quian, Johnson, Smith, and Papay, 2018).

At the launch of the EXCEL program, the program could have been described as *access to college with conditions.* This is a common starting place for IPSE initiatives. In the case of EXCEL, conditions included separate advising procedures, a restricted course catalog, a cap on the number of courses students could enroll in, and separate tutoring and career services. EXCEL staffers even found themselves negotiating for students to use a recreation room that happened to be on the first-floor lobby of a dormitory.

At first, this level of access was acceptable. EXCEL staff members were getting their students engaged in typical college activities, and BSU leadership was pleased to have the program, which highlighted their mission for a diverse student body and inclusive campus climate. The EXCEL staff ultimately wanted to offer more inclusive experiences to the students, but they thought that helping the BSU community adjust to students with IDD on their campus might be the appropriate first step.

Eventually, thinking about the big picture of inclusion over time, EXCEL staff decided against the parallel path they were taking to ease the college into an

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>
> —Jones, Boyle, May, Phohn, Updike & Wheeler, 2015

inclusive model. Instead they chose to pivot, opting to establish full inclusion experiences, even if this meant renegotiating access department by department. Over the last eight years, program staff have collaborated with colleagues to create broad access and inclusive practices. This has involved intensive collaboration with BSU's Academic Achievement Center, Residence Life and Housing, Career Services, Instructional Technology, Wellness Center, College of Continuing Studies, Registrar's Office, Outreach Education, and New Student and Family Programs.

## STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESSFUL IPSE SERVICES

### Envision meaningful inclusion.

Sometimes new college programs are inclined to create parallel services for students with IDD. Program staff might feel they have the best expertise to provide accessible information or services, or perhaps they develop them because they have been directly told by mainstream college departments that those departments are not prepared or qualified to work with students with IDD.

However, one of the first steps in creating meaningful inclusion is to shift our thinking from generating separate paths for students with IDD to making existing services accessible for all students. One example of this was efforts by EXCEL staffers to ensure students had access to Career Services. Initially, Career Services staff felt the students would likely benefit more from the specialized instruction EXCEL staff could provide. Career Services suggested that students with IDD might have difficulty keeping up with and understanding feedback during their fast-paced consultations.

Accordingly, for the first few years, EXCEL staff created their own career workshops and met with students to replicate what they would have received from BSU's Career Services. As time went on, though, EXCEL staff concluded that having separate career programming for students with IDD did not constitute inclusion. They returned to the Career Services staff, had a candid conversation about the goal of full inclusion for program students, assured staff the students would have extra support from their education coaches when needed, and offered training to make the services accessible and meaningful for all students.



Establishing inclusive residential life experiences at BSU took hard work and perseverance.

Over time, EXCEL program staff learned to presume inclusion across departments rather than assume they needed to ask permission for students to access their services or activities. Their initial approach was to introduce themselves to each department and be prepared to negotiate access. However, eventually they realized they should start from the assumption that colleagues in other departments might already be prepared to support students with diverse needs.

In fact, BSU offers faculty and staff trainings on Universal Design for Learning through the Office of Teaching and Learning and the Disability Resource and Student Accessibility Office. Some support from EXCEL staff is often helpful to make the campus accessible for students with IDD, but it should not be presumed that an activity is off-limits unless negotiated ahead of time. As opportunities for campus engagement arise, program staff feel more confident that all students are welcome and that the college community is ready to make accommodations if necessary.

One small but important example of EXCEL staffers' initial efforts to assume inclusion was to work with the registration and IT departments to have students supported by EXCEL coded as BSU students into the different departmental systems within the university. This coding allows BSU students access

to campus resources (e.g., tutoring, career services, fitness center, residence hall, library). The students supported by EXCEL who were initially flagged as dual enrollment students omitted them from the system, and this erroneously contributed to the sense that the university resources were not fully accessible to them. This small coding change opened the campus more fully to them.

### Communicate program goals and find allies.

An important first step in establishing inclusive practices across the campus is identifying allies who can help program staff communicate what the goals of the program are and how important inclusion is to the campus. At BSU, the dean of the College of Education, where the EXCEL program is housed, understood and believed in these inclusive principles. She used her position to leverage a meeting between program staff and a department that was resistant to serving the students. The dean listened to concerns about services for matriculated versus non-matriculated students and also about disability services staff's understanding that students with IDD had sufficient supports from their education coaches.

In response, the dean outlined how the mission of BSU aligned with the EXCEL program goals and reinforced the students' rights to services with the department in question. In addition, she reminded them that the program fees that their schools were paying for was intended to include the support that BSU had the expertise to provide.

Finding allies throughout the campus is an ongoing task that requires the EXCEL director to be aware of staff changes across campus departments and make appointments with new staff to introduce the program and statewide initiative. Although this is time consuming, it benefits the program to have all staff, including new staff, as allies. It contributes to the acceptance of students' membership on campus and also to program sustainability. Staff turnover can impact the status of innovative programs, especially during budget planning, so building allies across departments is critical. A study of college administrator data indicated that the average turnover rate of college was 12% (Higher Ed Publications, 2018). College presidents and chancellors had a turnover high of 18% and provosts had a rate of 21%. College deans, who often one of the first critical allies

for IPSE programs had a turnover rate of 6%. For program staff who rely on the advocacy and budget resources of college administrators to promote the program model with faculty and their consideration to earmark budget and department resources to sustain their program requires vigilant communication about the program.

### Offer expertise.

An opportunity arose for EXCEL staff to share their expertise in training using Universal Design principles when the Residence Life team found themselves short-staffed for a training for new Resident Assistants (RAs). The EXCEL program funds a peer mentor position to support students with IDD engaged in residential life and had already supplemented the training with additional resources and practices. The EXCEL director, along with other EXCEL staff, offered to assist with the training for all new RAs. The success of that training led the Residence Life staff to ask for assistance with other trainings that would benefit from a Universal Design approach, including the college orientation.

This expertise in inclusion and Universal Design eventually led to an invitation to join a campus-wide neurodiversity and inclusivity focus group. This opportunity filled a training gap and provided EXCEL staff a new venue to share their expertise.



Full inclusion is the goal.

**Commit to perseverance and compromise while staying true to the long-term vision.**

Establishing truly inclusive programing for students with IDD requires time, funding, and additional resources, which might not be readily available to all college departments. Despite a department's willingness to make their programs inclusive and accept professional development, it might take some time and perseverance before that goal is realized. EXCEL staff continue to highlight the importance of understanding resource limitations and working with each department to create inclusive experiences, knowing that true inclusion is a process that happens over time but also requires constant attention.

**Take advantage of campus and department social events.**

An important consideration is not to underestimate the power of personal connections and networking in facilitating inclusion. Many of the steps toward creating inclusive options happen when program staff take time to create personal connections across departments and introduce the program personally to other department heads. To achieve this, EXCEL staff recommend taking advantage of social events and other campus-wide functions to create these in-person relationships that can cultivate collaboration. This can include participation in campus events such as Health and Wellness Week, the annual Spring Fling, and even small events such as ice cream socials and informal meet and greet opportunities to talk with college administrators.

EXCEL staff indicate that ultimately it is important for program staff to present their ideas and vision for inclusive postsecondary education to colleagues through a variety of opportunities. In turn, staff are more likely to accept new ideas if they are being presented by someone they have a personal connection with. These social events and campus functions create an opportunity for program staff to make the model more visible, as well as raise awareness about its importance.

> **Make an effort to attend campus events. Be part of the community.**

## Tips for creating inclusive postsecondary education models

- Envision inclusion from the start
- Communicate program goals and identify campus allies.
- Offer expertise.
- Commit to perseverance and compromise.
- Take advantage of networking and opportunities for collaboration.

## CONCLUSION

BSU EXCEL Program staff have made long-term efforts to create and maintain inclusive postsecondary education experiences for students with IDD. These efforts are always in development as staff and department changes occur at the university and as EXCEL personnel work toward achieving inclusive standards and practice highlighted in the Think College Standards for Inclusive Higher Education. As highlighted in this brief, their focus on inclusion is comprehensive and drives all programmatic decisions. Their strategies include envisioning how inclusion should look for every experience, always taking advantage of opportunities to communicate their goals, offering their expertise to the campus community, and taking advantage of networking and other opportunities to collaborate. Thanks to these sustained efforts, EXCEL students are now enjoying a more comprehensive and inclusive college experience than ever before. As a result, students are well positioned to achieve competitive integrated employment that aligns with their postsecondary goals.



Program staff of the BSU EXCEL program understand the importance of campus engagement. Standing left to right: Mary Price, Tina Raeke, Zack Chipman and Christina Tichacek.

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