



A Longitudinal Study of Illinois High School Graduates with Disabilities: A Six-Year Analysis of Postsecondary Enrollment and Completion

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

This study highlights the postsecondary pathways of students with disabilities from the Illinois high school class of 2002 (N=7,598) and provides comparisons to the students from the same cohort without a disability (N=105,537). There is a wealth of higher education information on these students, including information regarding enrollments and the completion of certificates and degrees. Also, a sufficient amount of time has passed to adequately explore bachelor's degree completion patterns, as the study period runs from the fall semester of 2002 to the end of the spring semester of 2008. The current study has two parts: 1) an analysis of the differences between students with disabilities and students without a disability in terms of demographic and academic characteristics, in addition to characteristics of the students' respective high schools; and 2) an analysis of the students' initial level of enrollment in higher education and the attainment of an intended outcome, for instance, obtaining a bachelor's degree for those initially enrolling at a four-year institution.

The results of the following study can be used to help identify some of the problem areas along the educational pipeline for students with disabilities in an effort to inform the work of policymakers and practitioners. Such information could be used to improve key transition points in the pipeline and reduce disparities that exist between students with disabilities and those without.

Key Findings

Student and School Characteristics

Students with disabilities relative to students without a disability were significantly more likely to be: male, within one of the non-Asian minority groups, and from families with limited financial resources. Concerning academic characteristics, students with disabilities were significantly less likely to: be well-prepared for college, have participated in a college preparatory program, and have taken three or more years of mathematics. In terms of school characteristics, students with disabilities were slightly more likely to be from a high school in the low funding and low teacher academic capital quartiles, in addition to being slightly more likely to be from an urban area and coincidentally, Chicago.

Based on the demographic and academic characteristics of students with disabilities and some of the overall characteristics of their high schools, one would expect a lower likelihood of postsecondary enrollment and degree completion relative to students without a disability. When the differences between students with disabilities and students without a disability regarding most of the previously mentioned student and school characteristics are controlled to determine the relative impact of having a disability holding everything else constant, students with disabilities had a significantly lower likelihood of enrolling at a four-year institution, and earning a bachelor's degree if they enrolled (Smalley, Lichtenberger, & Brown, 2010).

Postsecondary Pathways

The postsecondary enrollment patterns of students with disabilities were generally different from those of students without a disability, as students with disabilities were significantly less likely to enroll in postsecondary education overall and slightly more likely to delay their postsecondary enrollment. More notably, students with disabilities who initially enrolled in the fall semester of 2002 were significantly more likely to enroll at a two-year institution rather than a four-year institution, while the opposite was true for students without a disability.

Sector

The sector enrollment patterns varied greatly between the college-going students with disabilities and students without a disability. Among those enrolling, students with disabilities were slightly more likely to enroll in-state (85% vs. 82%) and among those enrolling in-state, students with disabilities were significantly more likely to enroll at an Illinois community college (58% vs. 39%); as a result students with disabilities who enrolled in-state, were much less likely to enroll at a public four-year institution or a private not-for-profit institution.

Outcome Attainment

When compared with students without a disability, students with disabilities had a significantly lower bachelor's completion rate within the six-year timeframe of the study (53% vs. 68%). On the positive side, a slightly higher proportion of students with disabilities were still enrolled at either a two-year or a four-year institution at the end of the study. Students with disabilities also had lower rates of attaining one or more of the outcomes—earning a certificate, earning an associate's degree, or transferring to a four-year institution—at a two-year institution (37% vs. 52%).

Differences between the Disability Subgroups

In terms of the postsecondary outcomes, there were some differences between the various disability subgroups and in certain instances some of the

subgroups had higher completion rates than students without a disability. Among the students with disabilities, those in the other orthopedic and multiple disability categories had the highest overall and initial four-year enrollment rates. They also had the highest bachelor's completion rates (among four-year starters) and the highest rate of attaining at least one of the three goals at a two-year institution.

Recommendations for Further Investigation

Employment Outcomes

Analyzing the employment outcomes for all students with disabilities, college-going and not college-going alike. In doing this it can be determined if there are employers in key industries that are more likely to hire students with disabilities and provide them with opportunities for career advancement.

College Success

Conducting a qualitative study to better determine what is related to the college success of students with disabilities. For example, are successful college-going students with disabilities more likely to receive disability support services from their respective institution? Furthermore, what are some of the characteristics of those support service programs leading to the increased likelihood of success?

Institutional Characteristics

Determining the impact of select characteristics of the postsecondary institutions in which the students with disabilities enrolled on bachelor's degree completion, namely the sector and selectivity of those institutions. Additionally, exploring how those institutional characteristics interact with student characteristics, particularly the alignment between college readiness and the selectivity of a student's given institution.

The full report is available at <http://ierc.siue.edu/iercpublish.asp>

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