

The State of Transition in Utah | CPD

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Transition from high school to work or higher education for young adults with disabilities is a complicated subject, but the state of Utah is taking on the challenge on several different fronts. From youth leadership conferences, to an action team that meets quarterly, to programs at several institutions of higher education—here's an overview of what's happening in Utah.



Participants measure the height of a tower built with uncooked spaghetti noodles and marshmallows as part of a leadership breakout session

NINJA Conference

The NINJA Conference started three years ago as an attempt to engage young people with disabilities in advocacy work. The lighthearted name comes from a game that was played at the first conference, but the acronym's meaning has a serious message: New Ideas to Network Junior Advocates.

"It was fantastic," said Jeff Sheen of the third annual conference that wrapped up in mid-June. Sheen is a post-secondary education specialist at Utah State University's Center for Persons with Disabilities, a member of the youth

subcommittee of the Utah Statewide Independent Living Council and one of the organizers of all three conferences.

"We went from the CIL (Centers for Independent Living) directors being a little uncertain about what we wanted to do with the conference the first year, to this year sending extra staff and being extremely supportive."

Participants, who were chosen from the youth groups connected to the state's six CILs, experienced a much more involved application process than in previous years. This time around, each participant had to write an essay, get references and provide proof that they had worked on a policy issue during the previous year.

"It raised the bar," Sheen said. "They all wanted to be here, to put in the effort and the work. The leaders also knew more how to focus the participants, what we wanted to get out of it."

Notable achievements by the youth conference participants include a participant who currently serves on the USILC board and testified before the Utah legislature, another participant who serves on her local CIL board, and another participant who advocated to her local legislator to underwrite her participation in last year's conference. This year, USILC and other contributors picked up the tab, resulting in no cost for the participants to attend.

Breakout sessions during the four-day conference were led by teams of youth leaders and participants, CIL staff and representatives from other agencies, like the Disability Law Center and the Legislative Coalition for People with Disabilities. Topics included disability history, voting, law and policymaking, advocacy, goal-setting and leadership.

Heavy stuff, yes, but there were many opportunities for fun built into the schedule. The conference, which was organized through USU's Conference Services, included the Ropes Course, Aggie Games on the Quad, an impromptu dance party outside Old Main, Aggie Ice Cream and an improv comedy night.

As one participant noted, "Everything was my favorite thing!"

Sheen noted that the NINJA conference is a favorite among all the summer youth groups hosted by Conference Services and program coordinator Tyler Johnson.

"Staff that don't even work here anymore purposely came back to visit," Sheen said. "Tyler's staff requests to work with this group. It speaks well of Tyler's group, as well as our conference."



Keynote speaker Sachin Pavithran challenges NINJA participants to advocate for themselves

Sachin Pavithran, director of the CPD's Utah Assistive Technology Program and chair of the U.S. Access Board, gave the conference's keynote address, titled "Responsibilities of a Person with a Disability." Pavithran received his undergraduate and graduate degrees at USU and is currently a doctoral student.

Pavithran explained that he lost most of his vision as a 'tween' and had never known a person with a disability. There were no services for people with disabilities in Dubai, where he lived, so his mother read his school textbooks to him.

His dad found out about the variety of disability services available in the United States, so Pavithran got on a plane and came to Utah, where he majored in information systems and marketing at USU. He found a variety of services for people with disabilities, such as assistive technology, and ran into several situations where he was told that people with disabilities could not and should not be at college.

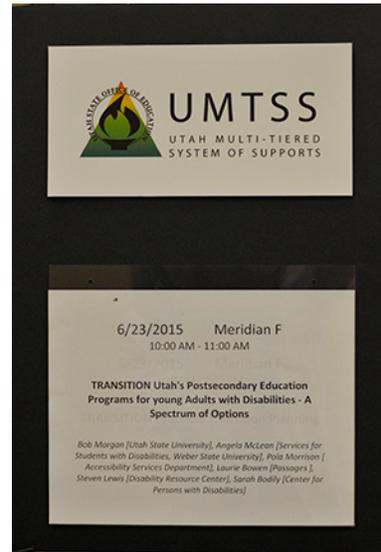
Despite that, Pavithran said, "I enjoyed college. I had a great time. But I knew how to fake really well--I did a lot of things to hide that I was blind. I was ashamed for most of my undergraduate years."

It's not an uncommon occurrence for students with disabilities, he said.

"I started seeing how people avoided me because they didn't know how to interact with me," he said. "As soon as I had a guide dog, everybody wanted to talk to me, because they wanted to talk to the dog. But I haven't let blindness stop me from doing things. When I started seeing what needs to change, that's when I started getting more passionate about advocacy."

Pavithran encouraged the conference participants to pursue their interests and to continue to get involved in advocacy work.

"Don't let your disability be a hindrance or an obstacle to what you want to do," he said. "Who can talk about your disability better than you? You have personal experiences and examples you can give. Don't wait for others to come and fix your issues. Don't wait for others to do it for you. Become the person who makes the change. Be the strongest self-advocate you can be."



Higher Education

There is a movement across the United States to include transition students in higher education, fueled in part by a series of TPSID (Transition Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities) demonstration grants that were awarded beginning in 2009.

USU launched its own program, Aggies Elevated, in the fall of 2014, but that is not the only program on a college campus in Utah. A symposium at a recent UMTSS (Utah Multi-Tiered Systems of Support) conference brought four such programs together to answer questions from parents, educators and administrators about who these programs are for and what they do.

Bob Morgan, a professor in the special education and rehabilitation department at USU's Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services, introduced the topic and the participants at the symposium.

"Students whose characteristics impede learning—intellectual and developmental disabilities—those students are now attending college," Morgan said. "These opportunities should be available to everyone, but this is a relatively new concept. There are closed doors and closed minds—plenty of reasons why they should not go to

college. But there are programs that have been developed to address Utah students with disabilities.”

Symposium participants were Pola Morrison and Laurie Bowen from Utah Valley University’s Passages program, Sarah Bodily from USU’s Aggies Elevated, Shirley Dawson from Weber State University’s as-yet-unnamed program, Angela McLean from Weber’s Services for Students with Disabilities office, and Steven Lewis from Salt Lake Community College’s Disability Resource Center.

“Real change happens when we come together as a collaborative group,” said Bowen, whose Passages program is focused on the autism population.

“Our mission focuses on encouraging and supporting those with autism spectrum disorder to more fully realize their potential and utilize their strengths for enriched lives through higher education, social experiences, independent living and career guidance,” she said.

The focus of the program is to develop skills including self-awareness, independence and self-advocacy through classes, workshops and labs, including sessions for parents. Potential participants will be at least 17 years old, a high school graduate and able to academically succeed in college-level classes with support.

For more information, visit <https://www.uvu.edu/autism/>.



Aggies Elevated program director Sarah Bodily presents during the UMTSS symposium

Aggies Elevated is a two-year residential college experience for young adults with intellectual disabilities that will result in a certificate of completion. Students are fully included in campus housing, classes and extracurricular activities and receive additional supports through mentors and tutors.

Bodily noted the program’s use of volunteers as additional supports for the students. Volunteers logged 1,271 hours during the 2014-2015 school year.

For more information, visit <https://aggieselevated.usu.edu/>.

Dawson is working with Patrick Leytham at Weber to create a part-time college experience for people with cognitive and intellectual disabilities in the 22-35 age range.

“You shouldn’t have to go somewhere else to be included,” Dawson said. “If you live near Weber and want to go to Weber, you should be able to go. We held a round of focus groups last year and the parents were overjoyed. There were so many parents who literally wept for joy.”

The program is in the brainstorming stage, but Dawson said one thing has become clear from the information they have already gathered: “It’s important for them to be real Wildcats.”

Since Weber is an open-enrollment campus, there are already many students with disabilities already on campus, McLean said. She said the Services for Students with Disabilities office provides legally mandated accommodations, including assistive technology, curriculum adaptation, reading, testing, interpretation, tutoring, registration assistance and cooperative education placement.

CATT (Creating Achievement Through Transition) is a support group for students with disabilities at Weber, organized and run by those same students. They meet regularly, with experienced students acting as peer guides for new students

For more information, visit <http://www.weber.edu/ssd>.

“It’s an issue of access,” said Lewis. “The student support system at SLCC is about success.”

Developmental programs at SLCC are free of charge and all students can access them, Lewis said. Tutoring in every subject is available, there is a learning enrichment program.

“We have tons of supports,” he said. “We are focused on what students need to do to get into the work world. We want to get students into the DRC sooner rather than later.

For more information, visit <http://www.weber.edu/ssd>.

After the symposium, Bodily said, “This was the first time all those different services had come together in the same room to answer questions. It’s a huge step in making transition services available for students with disabilities.”

UTAT

Momentum is building around post-secondary education in Utah. The TPSID funding was made available to figure out how to do inclusive post-secondary education for students with intellectual disabilities, something that had never been an option, Sheen said. When the recession hit and the money went away, he and others wrote a strategic planning grant in 2011 to start the conversation in the state.

“It forced us to start with sustainability as the priority, because we didn’t have the false luxury of all that money to start,” he said. “We asked what could we do with what resources we had.”

Out of that experience, the Utah Transition Action Team was born. Headed by Morgan, it now numbers more than 100 members coming from special education, higher education, vocational rehabilitation, state agencies, parent organizations and other interested parties. Quarterly meetings are well-attended, and work groups tackle issues related to employment, higher education, family involvement and agency collaboration.

“We have reached a critical mass regarding transition in this state,” Sheen said after the UMTSS conference. “We just had a panel discussion including representatives from four universities all talking about what’s available. That was a big shift, it has never happened before.

“The momentum has been building for a while,” he continued. “Opportunities in this area are accelerating, and now we’re in a place where things can happen.”

After the symposium, Bodily said, “People need to know these things so students have better outcomes. There’s a lot going on in this state!”