



## Framing the Future: A Standards-Based Conceptual Framework for Research and Practice in Inclusive Higher Education

by Meg Grigal, Debra Hart, and Cate Weir

### INTRODUCTION

This brief describes the fiscal, policy, and environmental contexts of the current state of practice and research in the field of inclusive higher education for students with intellectual disability (ID). It also introduces a validated, standards-based conceptual framework that provides a foundation for future research and practice in this field.

This framework reflects our understanding of best practices in employment, community living, and K-12 education for people with ID. However, its scope goes beyond those realms to include the practices and perspectives of postsecondary education (PSE). To successfully access these new higher education learning environments, those implementing research and practice must understand and acknowledge the culture of those environments.

We present this framework to contribute to the fruitful exploration of how to nurture, assess, and advance the field of inclusive higher education for students with ID. Our goal is to strengthen the knowledge base in a way that is grounded not only in theory, but also in practice, while being attentive to its current phase of development within the field of higher education.

### WHAT WE KNOW

#### 1. Research in higher education covers a broad spectrum of issues.

Recent national studies have addressed higher education topics as diverse as distance learning, loan repayment, spirituality, retention, civic engagement, and sub-baccalaureate education. This reflects the diverse structures, issues, purposes, and outcomes of the 6,632 Title IV postsecondary institutions in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011).

Several of the large-scale datasets on higher education currently include people with disabilities (American Community Survey, National Postsecondary Student Aid Study). However, many do not, including the 2011–2012 Common Data Set, which is used as a guiding framework for higher-education data collection by entities such as Carnegie Mellon University, the College Board, Peterson's, and U.S. News & World Report. Very few datasets in higher education research include students with intellectual disabilities.

#### 2. Researching higher education programs and participation of students with ID is a daunting task.

A recent study by the National Center for Education Statistics on students with disabilities at degree-granting postsecondary institutions did include several survey questions regarding students with ID (Raue & Lewis, 2011). However, due to the unreliable nature of the data being reported and the low response rate, the authors were unable to report accurate data about students with ID being served in degree-granting postsecondary institutions or the number of specialized programs that exist. This illustrates the challenge of including this new, atypical college student with the label of ID in the arena of higher-education research. It also demonstrates the need for continued and expanded partnerships with the higher education research community to identify common standards of practice.

#### 3. Few people with ID go to college.

While the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) requires that transition services include post-school goals, only a very small percentage of students with ID have PSE listed as a goal on their IEP (Grigal, Hart, & Migliore, 2011; Katsiyannis, Zhang, Woodruff,

& Dixon, 2005). Furthermore, only 11% of high-school students with ID go on to attend a two-year or four-year college (Grigal et al., 2011).

Students with ID have the lowest percentage of postsecondary enrollment of any category of people with disabilities (Newman et al., 2011). The limited number of students with ID who plan for and attend college may be tied to the pervasive low expectations reflected in transition goals for these students (Grigal et al., 2011; Migliore & Domin, 2011; Papay, 2011). The limited number of PSE options available, and lack of knowledge about these options by professionals and families, may also contribute to low attendance (Griffin, McMillian, & Hodapp, 2010).

#### 4. Postsecondary education options for people with ID are limited and extremely variable.

National surveys on PSE for students with ID have indicated significant variations in the student populations served and the types of institutions providing access (Hart, Grigal, & Weir, 2011; Papay & Bambara, 2010). As shown in Figures 1-5, PSE models vary considerably throughout the country in type of Institute of Higher Education (IHE), enrollment, focus and intent of education, funding, and access to inclusive coursework (Grigal, Hart, & Weir (in press)), as well as access to paid employment and residential options (Grigal & Hart, 2010; Papay & Bambara, 2010).

#### 5. The field of postsecondary education for students with ID has evolved.

Beginning with primarily segregated programs on college campuses for students with developmental disabilities, PSE programs have evolved into age-appropriate transition experiences for students in their final years of secondary education (Neubert, Moon, Grigal, & Redd, 2001). Unlike many other inclusive education practices, access to PSE was not created through legislation or statute, but instead through the grassroots efforts of families and educators. Therefore, little consistency was evident in the educational services provided. Lack of legislation also meant that minimal state or federal funding was available to support the creation of these programs.

Figure 1: Type of Institute of Higher Education

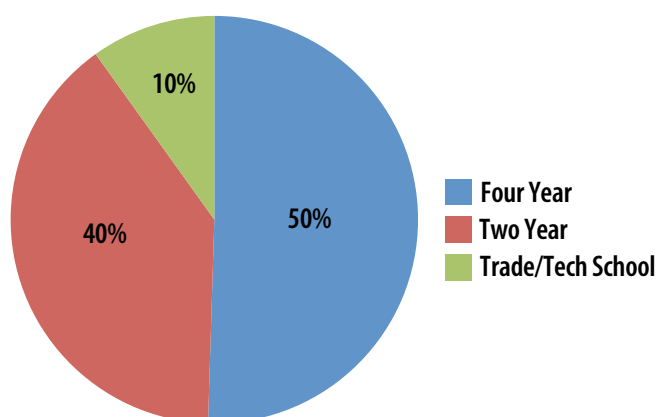


Figure 2: Type of Students Served

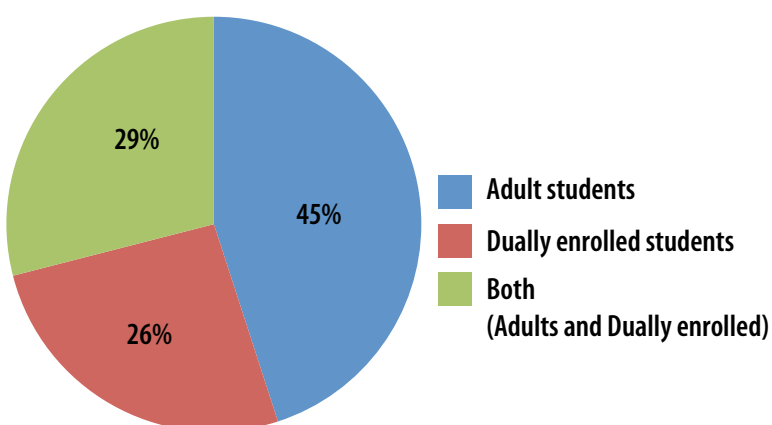
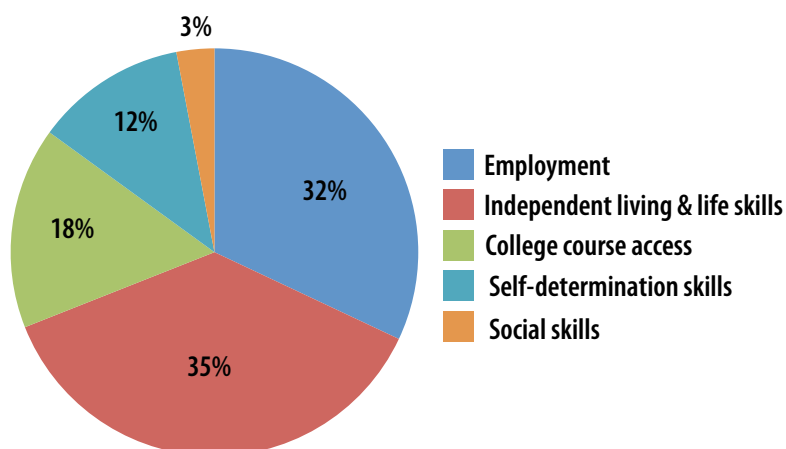


Figure 3: Focal Areas



Figures 1-5 taken from Grigal, M., Hart, D., & Weir, C. (in press). Findings of a national survey of postsecondary education programs for students with intellectual disabilities. *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities*.

Figure 4: Funding

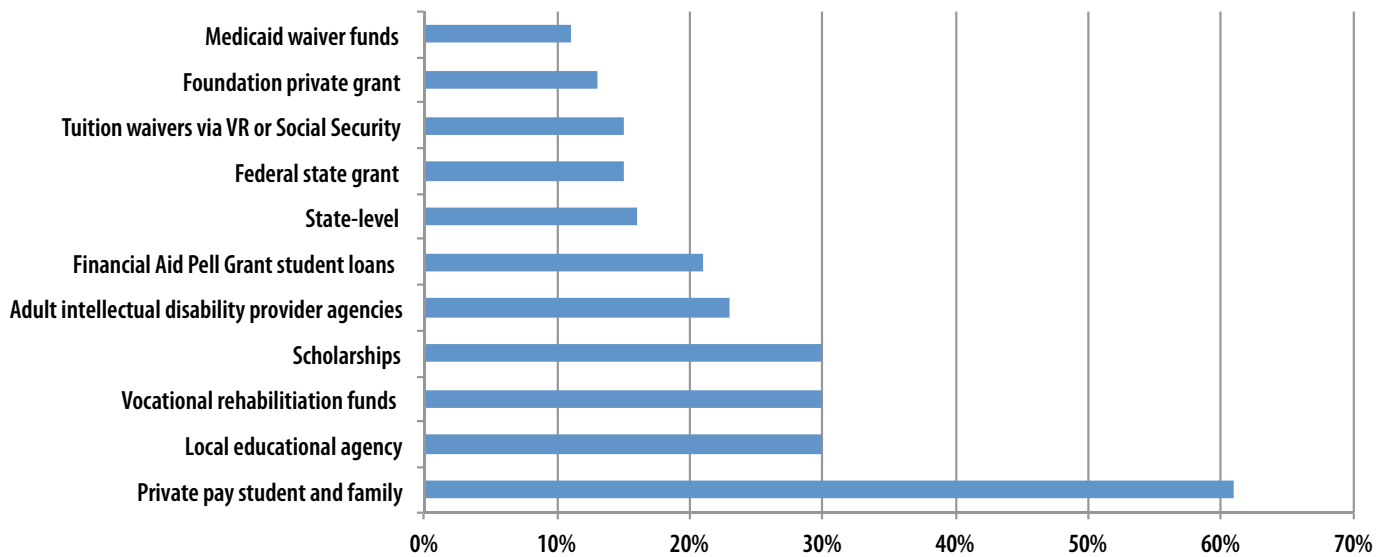
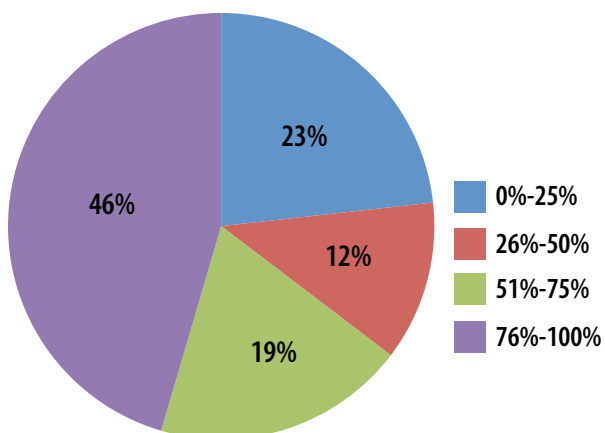


Figure 5: Percent of Instruction Provided Only with Other Students with Intellectual Disabilities



## 6. Minimal funding exists for research and development.

Prior to 2008, the Department of Education had funded only two outreach projects, three model demonstration projects, and two research and innovation projects directed at developing or evaluating PSE for students with ID. The scope of these projects was primarily exploratory and directed at site-based or statewide initiatives. However, these pioneering projects provided some of the first documentation that students with ID were an emerging college population.

The level of funding directed at this area has been minimal compared to other more established fields such as self-

determination, which had 26 model demonstration projects funded by the Office of Special Education Programs and a national synthesis center over the course of a decade. The study of PSE for students with ID is in an embryonic stage, and will need an influx of increased funding for development and research to attain substantive data. The Office of Postsecondary Education's Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) model demonstration programs and its corresponding TPSID National Coordinating Center represent the only federally coordinated efforts to fund longitudinal research in this nascent field.

## 7. Legislation has raised the bar for PSE services and students with ID.

The Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (HEOA) defined for the first time the components that should be present in PSE programs serving students with ID. The HEOA clearly indicated that a prevailing tenet of the programs was inclusive academic access, and that these educational options should result in gainful employment. Additionally, by providing access to certain Title IV federal student aid programs, Congress required approved programs to demonstrate students' capacity to maintain satisfactory academic progress and participate in the academic advising process within their institution of higher education. This level of guidance and

definition for such programs was not available before 2008. While the HEOA raised the bar, it also raised questions about the practices that were established before this guidance was available.

## 8. Standards should guide practice.

As colleges and universities began to offer postsecondary programs, they emerged with no established guidelines as to standards or quality. Each program set its own direction and determined its own standards (Neubert, 2001), but no empirically validated document was available to the field.

To address the need for research on evidence-based practices, Think College developed a standards-based conceptual framework to advance collaboration and improve the understanding of PSE opportunities for students with ID through research and improved practice. The Think College Standards, Quality Indicators and Benchmarks (TC Standards) provide a philosophical and structural framework for planning, implementing, and assessing practice, as well as designing and conducting research.

The TC Standards reflect an applied perspective from higher education professionals with content expertise and researchers and practitioners who have significant understanding of programs for students with ID. This framework supports innovation while maintaining a call for feedback mechanisms on the effectiveness of the partnerships, services, and structures supporting students with ID in higher education.

## 9. Standards must be validated by experts.

The TC Standards were validated using a Delphi process, defined as “a group facilitation technique that seeks to obtain consensus on the opinions of ‘experts’ through a series of structured questionnaires, commonly referred to as rounds” (Hasson, 2000). A Delphi process can be used to develop standards in areas that are just emerging and have a nominal research base. It is therefore well suited for developing standards to guide implementation of and research on PSE for students with ID.

Our goal was to identify and validate practices that could be used by IHEs to create, expand, or enhance high-quality,

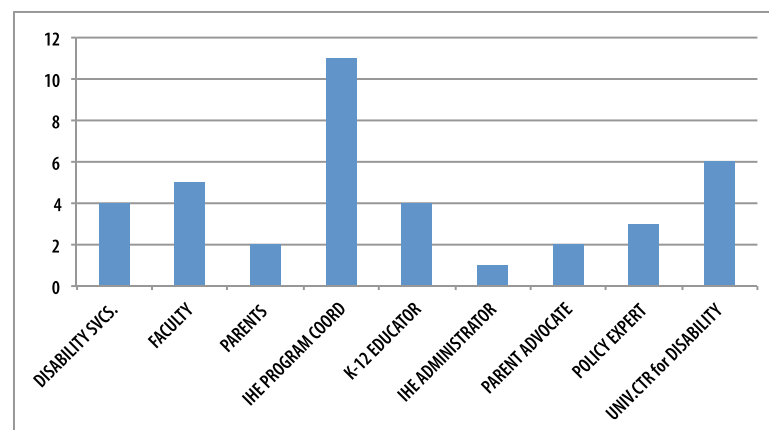
inclusive PSE to support positive outcomes for individuals with ID. Further, the TC Standards were written to align with the definition in the HEOA of a comprehensive postsecondary and transition program for students with intellectual disabilities.

([www.thinkcollege.net/for-professionals/think-college-standards](http://www.thinkcollege.net/for-professionals/think-college-standards))

Experts with at least two years of direct experience in PSE for students with ID were recruited to participate in the Delphi process. The 38 panel participants represented diverse roles in PSE programs (see Figure 6). Expert panelists were asked to participate in a web-based iterative process to rank service components for students with disabilities according to their importance and to provide comments regarding their rankings.

Throughout the process, participants remained anonymous; thus, each responded to group feedback without the influence potentially present in a face-to-face gathering. Essential items were required to have a mean rating of 4.0 or greater on a 5.0 scale. Prior studies of comparable information using the Delphi process have employed similar rating criteria (e.g., Anderson, 1998; Friend, 2000).

**Figure 6. Role of Expert Panelists in Delphi Process**



## 10. Current research literature does not reflect current practice.

Little of the existing practice or research has benefited from the guidance and policies included in the HEOA. The few projects federally funded prior to 2008 are still developing and publishing their findings. It is unknown if their focus is in line with current HEOA guidance, since their work commenced prior to the passage of the statute. Many of the findings of studies conducted post-2008 are not yet available in peer-reviewed journals.

The only large-scale research effort that is certain to reflect the HEOA involves the 27 TPSID model demonstration projects funded in 2010. These are being implemented in 23 states and will serve approximately 6000 students on 53 college campuses by the end of the five-year project period. The TPSIDs, in conjunction with the TPSID National Coordinating Center, will allow the field for the first time to identify the academic, social, employment, and independent living opportunities that IHEs are providing to students with ID, how these measures may vary based on student or program characteristics, and how various program models differ in terms of student outcomes.

## WHAT IS NEEDED

### 1. A Standards-Based Conceptual Framework Reflective of Higher Education.

To ensure that any guiding framework not be seen as “just another special education initiative,” it must operate from the perspective of higher education. Any proposed framework or taxonomy that dictates an organizational structure based upon special education, rehabilitation, and social service systems might be dismissed by those in PSE as not reflective of higher education pedagogy and culture. We must speak the language and honor and employ the constructs of the intended users, in this case, IHEs. The goal of the TC Standards is not to support the creation of parallel special education or rehabilitation programs on college campuses—it is to support the creation and study of authentic, inclusive higher education.

### 2. Stakeholder Input.

Brokering partnerships within higher education requires a willingness to meet with people in this community, seeking out their input and concerns about the efficacy and application of a conceptual framework. Securing buy-in from those in higher education on a framework that has been created without their input during development is unlikely to meet with success. The underlying message in that approach is that the higher education community was an afterthought and their feedback is token rather than essential. Most damaging of all, the higher education community will

not feel any ownership and therefore will not promote any structure being put forth. Therefore, in creating the TC Standards, Think College sought to collaborate with a diverse group of individuals and organizations representing various perspectives in higher education.

### 3. Recognition of the Current Developmental Phase of this Field.

As this fledging field of PSE for students with ID advances, it is important to be clear about the current state of the scholarly work. There are those who pose questions such as “Is there evidence to warrant this transition outcome over others?” While thoughtful and reflective questioning can and should be a part of scholarly work, we need to ask the right questions at the right time. We can proceed thoughtfully and carefully, assuming that valued social roles, high expectations, and inclusive environments will result in good outcomes for people with ID, while continuing the research agenda to flesh out what evidence-based practices will result in the best outcomes.

### 4. A Common Language that Supports Planning, Practice, and Research.

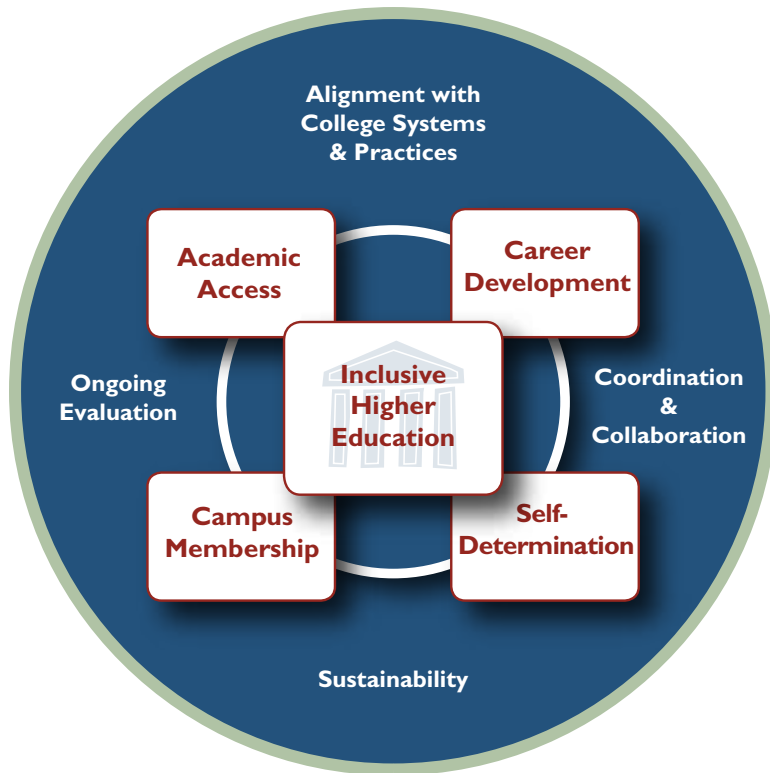
Finally, a common language is needed to communicate about these developing PSE models, as current practices are not consistent across systems and IHEs. PSE is not in and of itself an intervention. Instead, it is a broad array of interventions that can be used to solicit a broad array of outcomes for the diverse population of people with the label of ID.

The depth and breadth of the ways in which PSE is offered will continue to grow and become more complex, reflecting the individuals, institutions, and communities involved. But practices can and should be standardized so that effective measures can be developed and used to conduct high-quality research. To capture and honor this complexity, the TC Standards address the communication needs of practitioners and researchers. The standards provide a communication structure that can assist in planning, implementation, and evaluation efforts for new or existing programs. They also provide a structure for organizing and analyzing data on specific benchmarks of practice to establish a stronger evidence base.

## THE THINK COLLEGE STANDARDS-BASED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The goal of this effort was to identify the standards, quality indicators, and benchmarks that experts on PSE for students with ID perceive as essential to create, expand, and enhance high-quality, inclusive PSE for individuals with ID. The stakeholders rated as essential eight standards, 18 quality indicators, and 87 benchmarks that are listed on the insert.

**Figure 7: Think College Standards-Based Conceptual Framework**



The Think College standards-based conceptual framework for inclusive higher education depicts four standards as cornerstones of practice: Academic Access, Career Development, Campus Membership, and Self-Determination. These standards and associated quality indicators and benchmarks comprise what experts in the field have indicated are essential elements of quality practice.

Another four standards—Integration with College Systems and Practices, Coordination and Collaboration, Sustainability, and Ongoing Evaluation—represent the interdependent elements of service, or programmatic infrastructure necessary for the four cornerstones of practice to occur, be sustained over time, and result in desired outcomes.

Together, these eight key elements represent a cohesive framework that supports the tenets of the HEOA while simultaneously acknowledging the individualized services that may be required by students with ID in PSE.

## Feedback from IHEs Using the Think College Standards

The TC Standards, Quality Indicators, and Benchmarks for Inclusive Higher Education are an important step forward for our field. They provide both the vision and conceptual framework necessary to move the field of higher education forward. Students and families may use the standards to make informed choices and ask informed questions when interviewing on college campuses. Educators and college faculty and staff may use the TC Standards to evaluate their current efforts and create a road map for expansion. Self-determination, person-centered planning, academic access and increased preparation for competitive employment and independent living are the core values evident throughout the TC Standards. They represent what we are striving for in New York State.

—Martha E. Mock, Ph.D., Assistant Professor & Director, Institute for Innovative Transition, University of Rochester

The Next Steps program at Vanderbilt is graduating our first class of students this December. This is quite a milestone for our program. We are immersed in the creation and implementation of best practices for high-quality inclusive PSE to support positive outcomes for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Much of this creation and implementation is being done in real time. The Think College Standards, Quality Indicators, and Benchmarks have served us well in the development of our program in three important ways. First, they have been used to validate plans and strategies we have already developed. Secondly, the Think College Standards are used as a road map in the areas that we are currently developing, or are hoping to implement in the near future. Lastly, most of our colleagues in this new field are also using these standards in the development of their programs, thus giving us common language to use in the development of best practices.

—Tammy Lynn Day, Director, Next Steps, Vanderbilt University

## FUTURE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The TC Standards are a living document that will evolve as PSE options for people with ID grow and change. Future researchers can use these standards to define their Phase One research studies, make comparisons between types of services, and document changes over time.

Think College, in its role as the TPSID National Coordinating Center, has embedded these standards into the TPSID evaluation system. This effort to implement common measures across a wide array of disparate IHEs and capture variations at both the program and student level will strengthen our knowledge base around each of the standards, quality indicators, and benchmarks determined essential by experienced practitioners. Future researchers can take us forward into the next phase of development of this field by focusing on some of the research questions posed in Table 1.

**Table 1: Sample Research Questions**

1. Are practices used in postsecondary education programs for students with ID aligned with the HEOA definition of a comprehensive postsecondary and transition program?
2. Do practices used in PSE programs for students with ID reflect institutional and instructional practices that support a Universal Design for Learning framework, as outlined in the HEOA?
3. To what extent do PSE programs for students with ID adhere to college policies and procedures, schedules, and communications?
4. To what degree are students with ID participating in existing social organizations and facilities at their colleges and universities?
5. How are students with ID directing their choice of courses, activities, and employment experiences?
6. Are the courses and internships that students with ID engage in related to achieving and maintaining gainful employment?

The complete listing of the Think College Standards can be found on the Think College website: [www.Thinkcollege.net/standards](http://www.Thinkcollege.net/standards)

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