



CREATING ACCESSIBLE CAREER CONNECTIVITY FOR LEARNERS WITH DISABILITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Executive Summary

Today's postsecondary landscape reflects an increasingly diverse student population. Among today's learners, an estimated 64% work while going to college, 49% are financially independent from parents, 40% attend college part-time, 37% are over the age of 25, and 24% are parents (Center for Higher Education Policy and Practice [CHEPP], 2023). Additionally, roughly 21% of undergraduate students and 11% of graduate students self-identify as having a disability (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.), which is nearly double the number of undergraduates identifying as disabled two decades ago (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2024). This increase is likely driven by growing confidence in disability identity, expanding self-advocacy, and shifting post-pandemic health realities.

Even with more disabled learners seeking higher education and many institutions striving toward more accessible systems, postsecondary learners with disabilities are encountering new hurdles (often more than they may have faced in high school) to get the support they need. These hurdles include having to self-identify, to proactively request accommodations, and to work directly with faculty and staff to access the accommodations they are eligible for (Coalition on Accessibility in Higher Education, 2026(b)). When these learners enter the workforce, they are presented with yet another set of challenges. Thus, there is a critical need to create more accessible career-connected opportunities for learners, which we define as the full range of activities, services, and experiences that help learners select, prepare for, and pursue their career path (CHEPP, 2025).

The need to create accessible connections from college to career is striking when considered alongside the broader challenges of accessibility in the workforce. Despite the legal protections of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, workers with disabilities face employment disparities. In the fall of 2026, the unemployment rate for disabled workers stood at 7.8% compared to 3.9% for nondisabled workers, while the labor force participation of those with disabilities hovered at just 43.8% compared to 78.1% for those without disabilities (U.S. Department of Labor [DOL], n.d.(b); U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2026). Although research shows disability inclusion is an economic driver (Accenture et al., 2018), learners with disabilities encounter systemic barriers when trying to access work-based learning, internships, apprenticeships, and career coaching. A literature review and interviews with subject matter experts conducted for this report reveal that data and information regarding learners with disabilities and their access to career-connected activities are significantly lacking. The insufficient data is a significant barrier to fully understanding the scope of the issue.

To bridge the disconnect, higher education leaders, employers, and policymakers must collaborate to build intentionally designed, accessible career-connected pathways. Below, we outline barriers that learners with disabilities face when trying to engage in career-connected activities as well as strategies that can be deployed to help overcome them.

Barriers to Accessible Career Connectivity

Disability Disclosure. The transition from K-12 (where schools proactively coordinate academic support under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA]) to postsecondary education and the workforce requires students to self-disclose and self-advocate. Fear of stigma and lack of clarity around essential job functions cause many learners to hesitate when requesting workplace accommodations during work-based learning experiences and future employment.

Siloed Disability and Career Services. Career services and disability services offices frequently operate in isolation. Disability services office staff specialize in academic accommodations rather than workforce accommodations, while career services teams often don't have disability expertise, leaving students to navigate this knowledge gap.

Lack of Early Engagement in Career Connectivity. Career-connection activities often begin too late in the academic journey and fail to reach learners early in their programs. Higher education must establish ongoing career advising and exposure from enrollment through graduation rather than treating career advising as a final semester checklist item.

Employer Interest, Training, and Capacity. Many employers do not have the training, recruitment, or internal processes needed to host accessible work-based learning experiences.

Policy and Cultural Barriers. Many people across the country still hold the view that people with disabilities cannot go to college or work. Learners with disabilities seeking career-connected opportunities may not be hired or may be denied accommodations if they encounter supervisors with this antiquated view.

Key Elements of Accessible Career Connectivity

Career-Connected Programming That Is Fully Accessible and a Strategic Priority. Career-connected activities should embed accessibility from the beginning, including by utilizing the universal design for learning (UDL) framework to improve access to all career-connected programming.

Strategic Collaboration Between Disability Services and Career Services Offices. Creating opportunities to collaborate, share resources, and partner across disability services and career services offices can better support both professionals and students. Establishing this coordination early in a learner's academic journey is vital to ensuring smooth transitions and inclusive career-connected experiences.

Training and Professional Development. Disability services offices can help learners understand how disclosure works both in higher education and with employers. For the former, this entails coordinating with career services and providing training to staff and students. For the latter, and because employers are a critical component of career connection, it requires expanded training and professional development to include UDL and inclusive practices to create more accessible experiences for everyone.

Accessibility in Employer Recruitment and Onboarding. Accessibility must be included when employers and/or career services advertise internships and apprenticeships.

This report from Southern New Hampshire University's (SNHU) Center for Higher Education Policy and Practice is intended to educate policymakers, higher education leaders, employers, and other stakeholders on the need for more accessible career-connected activities and the practices and strategies that can help build them.

Introduction

Completing a college degree often leads to higher rates of employment and higher paying jobs. A recent study from the Center on Education and the Workforce found that individuals with bachelor's degrees had lower unemployment rates and made 70% more at the median than those with only a high school diploma (Morris et al., 2025). Driven by the pursuit of economic opportunity, higher education grew from 2 million learners in the 1940s to over 20 million learners in 2023 (CHEPP, 2023). Today's learners are more likely to be older than 25, working full-time or part-time, parents and caregivers, and learners with disabilities (CHEPP, 2023).¹ Instead of adapting, higher education systems have largely replicated the existing model, which has persistent accessibility barriers for today's learners, including students with disabilities. Higher education must adapt to meet the needs of a more diverse learner population, providing hybrid and online options, making teaching more applicable, and supporting connectivity to careers and skills.

Thus, among today's increasingly diverse learner population in higher education, learners with disabilities and the accessibility of programs are coming into focus. With nearly a quarter of today's undergraduate learners (approximately 21% based on the most recent data) and 11% of graduate students identifying as having a disability, creating an accessible learning environment is critical (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). These numbers mark a substantial increase in the last 20 years driven by growing confidence in disability identity and deeper self-advocacy for accommodations (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2024). To inform better accessibility practices, a cross-sector coalition co-convened by CHEPP and the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) recently released a [playbook on making higher education more accessible](#). It covers, among other things, instruction, accommodations, physical spaces, digital spaces, procurement, and belonging (Coalition on Accessibility in Higher Education, 2026(a)). The coalition also released a resource identifying the different barriers learners with disabilities face when transitioning from high school to a college environment. This includes a new process for accessing accommodations and relying on students to self-identify their disability and seek out supports (Coalition on Accessibility in Higher Education, 2026(b)).

Accessibility now needs to extend to career connectivity, encompassing work-based learning, internships, apprenticeships, and practicums. Unfortunately, the employment rate of people with disabilities is low (43.8% labor participation rate for disabled individuals compared to 78.1% for nondisabled individuals) (Department of Labor [DOL], n.d. (b); U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2026); and the unemployment rate is nearly double that of nondisabled workers (7.8% unemployment rate for disabled workers compared to 3.9% for nondisabled workers in September 2026.) (DOL, n.d.(b)). This gap is not merely attributed to shifting economic conditions. The employment-to-population ratio for workers with disabilities has minimally improved in the last 15 years, despite major federal legislation. In 2009, the employment-to-population ratio was 29.7% and in 2026 it rose to 38.3% (DOL, n.d.(b); see also Kessler Foundation & University of New Hampshire Institute on Disability, 2026).

¹ This report uses person first and identity first language. This choice was made to honor the preferences, cultures, and identities within the disability community.

In 2025, CHEPP released a [report about career connectivity in higher education](#). The report identified work-based learning opportunities, particularly paid opportunities, as improving outcomes but indicated they are unevenly distributed and significantly underutilized (CHEPP, 2025). The report also highlights the need for a more robust research and evidence base on career connectivity in higher education across learner populations.

The labor participation rate of people with disabilities is 43.8% compared to 78.1% for nondisabled individuals.

Sidebox 1. Disability Rights, Higher Education, and Employment

People with disabilities have the right to not be discriminated against in employment, education, community living, and public spaces. These rights are codified in law by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504). These two laws have the broadest definition of disability, ensuring that any individual with a physical or mental disability that substantially limits one or more major life activities is protected.

Institutions of higher education (IHEs) cannot discriminate against learners with disabilities, as required by these laws. Any IHE that receives federal funding is bound by both Section 504 and the ADA. These policies apply to physical spaces, learning spaces, and student activities. [Learn more about the ADA and higher education here.](#)

Employers cannot discriminate against people with disabilities in recruitment, interviewing, hiring, or employment. Title I of the ADA is specifically dedicated to employment, making clear the rights of employees with disabilities. [Learn more about the ADA and employment here.](#)

Today, employers are viewing accessibility as a business imperative, not merely something that is the right thing to do. A 2018 survey of companies with high disability inclusion found them to have 28% higher revenue than similarly situated companies (Accenture et al., 2018). The same study estimated that the U.S. gross domestic product could get a boost of \$25 billion if more people with disabilities joined the labor force. In a follow-up study in 2023, companies that led on disability inclusion saw 1.6 times more revenue and 2.0 times more economic profit compared to companies without such disability inclusion (Accenture et al., 2023). Recent data released from the Access Coalition, a coalition of retailers focused on improving the accessibility of retail environments, demonstrated that accessibility impacted dwell time and other key metrics for determining a business's economic success (Stanford Medicine & The Access Coalition, 2026).

Despite the business imperative of hiring disabled people and creating accessible environments, learners with disabilities still face significant barriers to career exploration and activities while in college. The pathway to work from college is not accessible, and the employment rate of disabled people remains low. The following sections of the report explore the challenges learners with disabilities face as they move from college to career and present suggestions for improvements to create more accessibility. The report is intended to give practitioners and policymakers a starting point for building better systems that support learners with disabilities, and in turn, the potential to increase future graduation and employment outcomes.

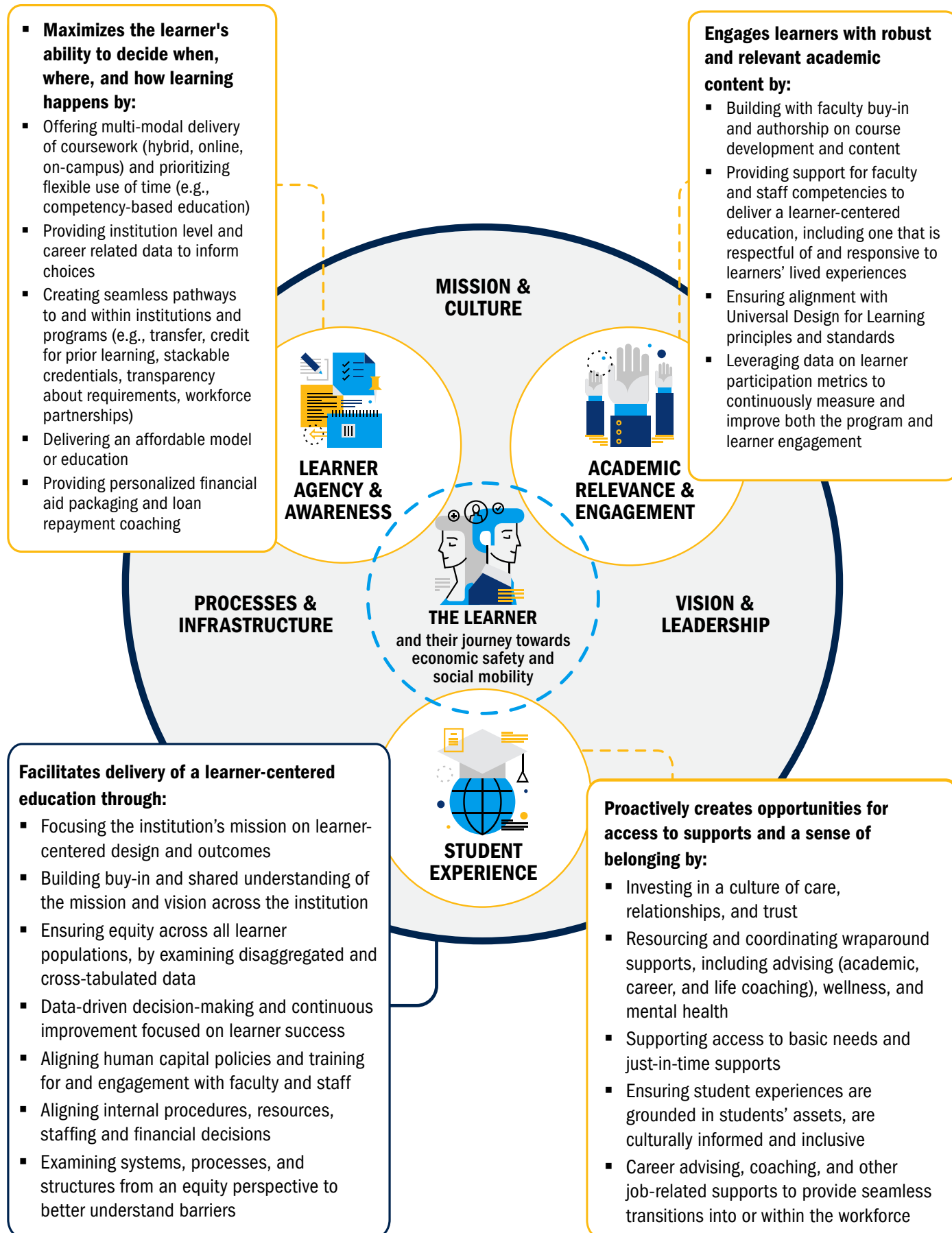
The Systemic Gap Between Career Connectivity and Accessibility in Higher Education

We have defined career connection strategies as the full range of activities, services, and experiences that help learners select, prepare for, and pursue their career path (CHEPP, 2025). Throughout this report, we will use the term “career connectivity” to capture these activities. Specifically, we are focused on career connectivity beginning in higher education and supporting learners as they transition into the workforce. As higher education systems evolve to create and expand career connectivity for learners, it is imperative to consider how to make those opportunities fully accessible for learners with disabilities (CHEPP, 2024; Coalition on Accessibility in Higher Education, 2026(a)).

Creating accessible, career-connected programs is also integral to learner-centered design, whereby postsecondary systems are intentionally structured to fully meet the needs, interests, and future goals of every learner. CHEPP’s learner-centered design framework (see [Figure 1](#)) demonstrates how institutions can design systems to center the learner in the institutional mission, vision, and processes. The framework also details the key components of a learner-centered experience—academic relevance and engagement, learner agency and awareness, and student experience.

With higher unemployment rates (7.8% vs. 3.9%) and lower labor participation (43.8% vs. 78.1%) (U.S. DOL, n.d.(b); BLS, 2026), learners with disabilities stand to benefit immensely from higher education programs that are aligned with workforce needs. This report aims to provide important guidance to embed accessibility at a time when the higher education sector is just beginning to expand career-connected opportunities. For example, [recent changes to federal law](#) establishing the Workforce Pell Grant program (effective July 20, 2026) are driving workforce training aligned with postsecondary pathways. This new program presents an opportunity to push for accessible design at the federal level.

Figure 1. A Learner-Centered Design Framework



Sidebox 2. Career Connection Strategy Taxonomy (CHEPP, 2025)

Workforce-Aligned Curriculum. A curriculum delivered in a higher education program that aligns with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in a specific career or the workforce. Learning outcomes are typically mapped to the competencies that are mastered throughout the curriculum.

Skills Assessment and Mapping. Assesses the skills and experiences that learners have and maps them to their career interests to help design the right program and course of study to meet their needs and aims.

Career Exploration. Encourages learners or job seekers to explore their career options and understand what industries or careers they can pursue with their degree/credential.

Career Exposure. Raises awareness about careers and specific jobs, helping job seekers gain understanding about their careers or industries of interest.

Career Services. Traditional career services found at most higher education institutions, including but not limited to resume development, interview preparation, and workshops on professional development topics.

Career Advising. Personalized coaching that tailors advice to the learner's desired career, aimed at helping job seekers navigate career options and the job market, and land a career in their desired field.

Work-Based Learning. Real world applications of learning, where learners can build practical skills through workplace training or experiential learning, including through apprenticeships, internships, project-based learning, co-ops, and job simulations.

Barriers regarding accessibility begin early for learners with disabilities. According to estimates from the Civil Rights Data Collection, approximately 17% of K-12 students are students with disabilities served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504 (U.S. Department of Education (ED), 2024). The most recent data estimates that approximately 74% of students with disabilities served under the IDEA graduate from high school with a regular diploma compared to 87% of all students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). When students with disabilities are ready to enter higher education, they encounter a shifting and disconnected landscape requiring them to solely navigate rights, accommodations, and services. In K-12, parents are the primary advocates, and schools are required to identify and provide services to students. In higher education, the responsibility shifts solely to the student to self-disclose, ask for what is needed, and advocate for themselves with faculty. When seeking accommodations in higher education, learners with disabilities may have to get additional, costly testing if their documentation from doctors or a K-12 school is not accepted (Coalition on Accessibility in Higher Education, 2026(b)).

The most recently available data demonstrates that approximately 21% of undergraduate students have self-identified as having a disability (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). This data is widely viewed as an undercount due to it being based on a limited sample survey relying on students self-disclosing their disability to the college or university in order to be counted. For example, a recent study found that while more than 40% of students with autism enroll in higher education after high school, only approximately 0.3% to 4.7% of all undergraduate students are self-identifying as autistic (Cox et al., 2026).

Due to the rise in Long COVID from the COVID-19 pandemic and increased awareness about mental health, more students are aware of their own disabilities and are advocating for their needs. Faculty and student support services should expect to have more students with disabilities in their courses and programs than those that receive accommodations. Despite an increase in the number of students with disabilities attending college, degree completion rates continue to be significantly lower than for peers who do not identify as having a disability. In 2023, about 42.6% of adults aged 25 to 34 without a disability had a bachelor's degree or higher, yet only about 22.2% of adults aged 25 to 34 with a disability had a bachelor's degree or higher (Welding, 2025).

In a survey from the American College Health Association, the most commonly reported disabilities among college students were attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (17.2%) and learning disabilities (5.7%) (Welding, 2025). Since 2010, programs that support students with intellectual and developmental disabilities in accessing and thriving in college have expanded. Inclusive Postsecondary Education (IPSE) programs support students with intellectual and developmental disabilities in higher education. Some IPSE programs have received funding and support from an initiative called the Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability (TPSID), a model demonstration program authorized by the Higher Education Act aimed at developing or enhancing inclusive postsecondary programs. These programs have a high rate of completion and employment for graduates. For example, one year after graduation from a TPSID program, 65% of graduates with an intellectual disability were employed (Grigal et al., 2026). Many IPSE programs, including those with TPSID support, have also sought to receive approval as Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary (CTP) programs, a Title IV program that allows financially eligible students with an intellectual disability to receive certain forms of federal financial aid.

Although the TPSID and IPSE programs are demonstrating high rates of employment, as evidenced by the data described previously, not all learners with disabilities are able to access pathways to employment. Outside of these particular programs, a large proportion of opportunities that are designed to create connectivity from college to career are not designed to be accessible or are not widely available to individuals with disabilities, despite clear requirements not to discriminate. Other career-connected activities can learn from the registered apprenticeship program. Only 23% of organizations offer apprenticeship programs; but of those that do, 84% report that the programs help address talent shortages (SHRM, 2026). The Department of Labor (DOL) has made clear that registered apprenticeship sponsors must provide accommodations to individuals with disabilities, while they are applying and while in the apprenticeship (The Council of State Governments, n.d.). In addition, at least 18 states have enacted a range of laws to create more inclusive apprenticeship programs, including to (The Council of State Governments, n.d.):

- Establish state government as a model employer for people with disabilities.
- Establish diversity and inclusion requirements.
- Create agency collaboration.
- Develop pre-apprenticeships to teach necessary skills.
- Create tax incentives to encourage businesses to hire apprentices with disabilities.
- Offset costs such as transportation and childcare.
- Encourage data collection.
- Require digital accessibility for platforms regarding apprenticeship programs.

In contrast to registered apprenticeships, ADA protections for learners with disabilities in other internships and apprenticeships may depend on whether the learner is considered an employee for the duration of their experience (Moynihan & Bezyak, 2024). As such, Title I of the ADA may not protect a learner through their unpaid internship, volunteer position, or clinical experiences for academic credit. However, it may be the case that the college or university is responsible for providing accommodations to a learner in an internship that is considered part of the academic program and required for their degree.

Filling the systemic gap between college and career for learners with disabilities will require policymakers and practitioners to understand how to make improvements. The following sections highlight specific barriers and the key elements for building more accessible career-connected activities in higher education. The barriers and elements were identified through interviews with practitioners, policy experts, and students conducted for this report.

Barriers to Accessible Career Connectivity

Career-connected activities are varied and unequally distributed among all higher education students. Through a review of the limited literature and in interviews with experts on the accessibility of career connectivity in higher education, several themes emerged:

- Disclosing disabilities to career support or employers is stigmatizing and difficult for learners.
- Career services and disability services operate within siloes.
- Career-connected activities often begin too late in a student's academic journey.
- Employers lack interest and capacity to meet the needs of this population.
- Policy and culture—such as the lack of coordination between systems and preconceived notions about the employability of disabled people—contribute to inaccessibility.

Similar to higher education, career-connected activities also vary significantly in physical and digital accessibility. College and university campuses should be physically accessible, at minimum compliant with the ADA (Coalition on Accessibility in Higher Education, 2026(a)). This requirement is also applicable to employers and other locations for career-connected activities, such as practicum sites. Unfortunately, many employers and locations for career-connected activities are not physically accessible, pushing some disabled learners to prefer remote options. Yet remote options are not always viable either, as, similar to colleges and universities, employers and career-connected activity digital components do not always follow the widely accepted standards for digital accessibility Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (Coalition on Accessibility in Higher Education, 2026(a)). Taken together, these barriers make clear that much more work is needed to improve accessible career connectivity for learners with disabilities.

Sidebox 3. What Are Reasonable Accommodations?

The ADA and Section 504 use the term “reasonable accommodations” as key to ensuring access for people with disabilities. The goals of reasonable accommodations differ in higher education and the workforce.

In higher education, reasonable accommodations are modifications or adjustments to tasks, the environment, or other aspects of learning that enable a student the equal opportunity to engage and participate (American Psychological Association, 2012). Reasonable accommodations are individualized and specific to reducing barriers for the student with a disability (Gould et al., 2019). Reasonable accommodations in higher education do not guarantee success; rather, they are about access.

In the workplace, a reasonable accommodation is specific to the worker with a disability and aimed at reducing barriers for their essential job functions (ADA National Network, 2018). Essential job functions are the job duties for that specific position, often outlined in a job description. The process for requesting reasonable accommodations in the workplace should be interactive, in the form of a dialogue to determine the best accommodation to reduce barriers for that employee. The [ADA National Network](#) and the [Job Accommodation Network](#) are excellent resources on this topic.

Disability Disclosure

Students with disabilities entering higher education have a choice: to disclose their disability and receive accommodations or to not disclose their disability. The K–12 education system places the responsibility for advocacy on the parents of students with disabilities. The IDEA requires students to start attending individualized education program (IEP) meetings to determine services at 16 years old, but the role of ensuring the accommodations and supports which are provided typically falls to parents and guardians. As a student with a disability enters higher education, they become wholly responsible for getting the support they need, including finding the disability services office, disclosing their disability, helping select reasonable accommodations, and advocating to individual faculty to receive their accommodations (Coalition on Accessibility in Higher Education, 2026(b)). Traditional-aged college students are increasingly more comfortable and open about identifying and disclosing their disabilities—pushing back against stigma—while adult learners tend to be more reluctant to disclose due to fear and concern about judgment.

Disclosure of a disability to a college or university occurs through the disability services office. This office identifies the paperwork needed to determine if a student has a disability and works with the student to establish accommodations. The disability services office then provides the student with paperwork for them to provide to faculty in each of their classes. The disability services office is focused on access to academics and co-curricular activities across the college or university, including dorms.

As a student moves through their studies and seeks career-connected opportunities such as work-based learning, practicums, internships, or career coaching, the disclosure process begins again, with a workforce focus (DiBiase & Hoff, 2023(a)). Changes in the accommodations process between college and job settings are often unknown to students. While accommodations in higher education provide access to a student’s learning, extracurricular activities, and college environment, accommodations on the job are limited to what is necessary to complete essential job functions.

With career-connected opportunities hovering between academics and employment, it can be unclear to the learner, the career counselor, the disability services team, and the employer what accommodations are appropriate. Further complicating this process is that even when students have been comfortable with disclosing their disabilities across their college experience, they may choose not to seek accommodations or to share their disabilities with their career counselor, internship supervisor, or employer for fear of losing the opportunity or being treated differently.

Despite these concerns, employee accommodations can enable an individual with a disability to complete their essential job functions. When learners are hesitant to disclose their disability for fear of it impacting their career prospects, they may face other challenges getting needed support for success in the workplace. Unfortunately, learners often do not have the support they need to understand these trade-offs. Additionally, career-connected opportunities are often not structured to adequately prepare learners for self-advocacy to future employers.

Siloed Career and Disability Services Offices

Colleges and universities of all sizes have career services and disability support offices. Career services are focused on supporting students as they prepare for jobs through resume building and mock interviews, as well as connecting them with internships, practicums, and work-based learning. Career services tend to have large caseloads and are a bridge between the learner and employers. While any student may seek out and engage with career services at any time, career services may only engage with a student in the last semester of their final year or not at all. Disability support offices provide specific support to eligible students with disabilities. Disability support offices are responsible for engaging with students who identify as having a disability from the time of their entry to the college or university, establishing the need for accommodations, creating documents describing the accommodations, and ensuring accommodations are provided. A recurring theme from those interviewed was that these two essential components in a student's life are often disconnected and have no formal coordination.

Disability services are often very structured and focused on the student experience directly related to providing accommodations. Disability services have expertise in accommodations in higher education, but not necessarily in relation to the workforce or transition to the workforce. Disability services support for students is learning focused, and the accommodation letters rarely carry over to career-connectivity activities. Further, disability services cannot reach out to career services regarding individual student needs due to confidentiality, and career counselors often don't feel comfortable asking students directly about disability needs because of privacy concerns. All of this places the onus on the student to disclose their disability to career services in order to get support.

The need for a student to disclose their disability again creates a barrier to services. Some career services entities have established best practices such as creating more accessible documents, making clear they support students with disabilities, and building relationships across offices. If a student chooses to disclose, career services rarely have the expertise to determine what accommodations are appropriate for the student in the workplace. The lack of early and continuous coordination from disability services and career services creates disjointed support for students with disabilities seeking career-connected activities.

In addition to the disconnect between career services and the support provided, there is often confusion about a learner's eligibility, the kinds of accommodations they may need, and who is responsible for providing them. Disability services at colleges and universities often excel at providing accommodations in learning environments and helping students understand and advocate for what they need in those environments. Career services do not have expertise with accommodations and disability services do not have expertise regarding accommodations in the workplace. Thus, students may be left without support to identify accommodations, advocate, and engage with employers. Since career-connected activities range from embedded activities within an academic program to more formal paid internship and apprenticeship opportunities, it can be unclear whether an institution or an employer is obligated to provide accommodations.

Interviewees shared a range of strategies to address this disconnect, but conveyed that students largely end up relying on specific individuals in career counselor or disability services roles who have created better connections between accessible higher education and accessible career opportunities. Without clear responsibility and a lack of systems support, learners are often left without the accommodations they need when engaging with career-connected activities. Not having this support can impact their overall experience and even jeopardize their ability to complete their degree when an internship or other work-based learning experience is required to graduate.

Lack of Early Engagement in Career Connectivity

Students with disabilities are supposed to begin career exploration in high school, according to IDEA, with transition goals starting no later than 16 years old. However, the law does not require reporting of post-graduation outcomes, resulting in little to no accountability around the quality of these systems. Once a student with a disability makes the transition to higher education, the support in terms of connecting academics to career and providing engagement in career exploration activities ends because IDEA does not provide support beyond high school. Students with disabilities in higher education have the option of seeking out career services, but, as noted previously, career services teams do not typically have expertise in supporting students with disabilities. As one interviewee noted, there should be a system supporting students with disabilities that spans secondary, postsecondary, and career transitions. They described an existing patchwork where learners and their families are given minimal guidance in high school and left to piece together a career pathway working across under resourced community-based organizations, inconsistent vocational rehabilitation (VR) support, and postsecondary systems that are not designed to meet the needs of learners with disabilities.

Career support and engagement is not only significantly lacking for students with disabilities. Career services often do not engage with all students in higher education until their last semester—instead of throughout their programs of study—leaving students without support or understanding of how their degrees may translate to a career. They may also need more robust career connectivity to gain employment or pursue their career goals in a professional field. An interviewee noted that internship programs may not engage with students until junior year or at the end of their programs—even when completing an internship is a requirement to graduate. To set students up for career success, career services should be promoted as an essential resource for students throughout their college enrollment, rather than positioned as a necessity to meet graduation requirements at the end of their studies.

Although nearly every individual interviewed noted the need to begin career services earlier for all students, career-connectivity activities are significantly lacking outreach, accessibility, and support for students with disabilities. With barriers to disclosing and receiving accommodations, students with disabilities find themselves without opportunities to participate in internships, practicums, or clinical experiences, further hindering their future career options. One example of a positive and successful internship focusing on students with disabilities is from the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD) (AAPD, n.d.). The AAPD operates a summer and a fall internship program specifically to enable students with disabilities to “explore career opportunities, gain leadership skills, and connect to the broader disability community.” The AAPD internship program provides skills-based training and ensures all participating interns have appropriate and reasonable accommodations to support their job placement. This type of program is unusual, but it has been highly successful in supporting students and recent graduates with disabilities in gaining the career support they needed to be successful in the workforce.

Employer Training, Interest, and Capacity

Evidenced by persistent under- and unemployment of people with disabilities generally, employers often fail to recruit, support, and retain disabled employees. This disconnect in the workforce exists across higher education career-connected opportunities as well. College and university career services conduct employer outreach to find work-based learning opportunities. Internships, for example, benefit employers by serving as an important part of their talent pipeline. SHRM’s research found that 67% of organizations offer internship programs and, among organizations with internships, 77% say they help address talent shortages (SHRM, 2026). However, employers typically do not explore the accessibility of these opportunities—or they believe that they are not obligated to do so because an intern is not an employee. When colleges design work-based learning opportunities, they can make them accessible and provide accommodations directly. While some colleges, in particular two-year community colleges, are putting significant investment behind work-based learning programs, to ensure local employment opportunities and career relevance, employers play a key role in developing career-connected activities.

Employer interest, training, and capacity all impact the availability, accessibility, and success of career-connected activities. Some companies have launched their own internship programs specifically focused on people with disabilities. One company reported hiring about 50% of the interns that move through its specific program that have disabilities. However, more broadly, there not being training of employers on the importance of accessible and inclusive internship and work-based learning programs is a significant issue. Employers are often not equipped with the capacity or understanding of how to develop and maintain an inclusive pipeline. If accessibility and inclusive recruitment practices are not an inherent part of the culture, training, and enforcement, internships and work-based learning will also suffer.

In addition to a lack of training, employers often do not understand the value of creating an inclusive and accessible workforce and college-to-career pipeline through higher education partnerships. While research on the return on investment of accessible internships and work-based learning is limited, the data presented at the beginning of this report demonstrates the business imperative of hiring disabled workers. Companies that have developed specific internships have seen the benefits of creating a more inclusive workplace and requiring accessibility training for all staff.

Although building systems to be more accessible will benefit all employees and those they serve, employers often view these changes as burdensome with minimal payoff. The same is true when providing accommodations to workers with disabilities and creating challenging work environments where employees are unable to fulfill their job to their greatest ability because they are not given the necessary support to do so. It is difficult for students and career coaches to fully understand employer practices related to disability access, so access is often determined through word of mouth and trial and error. With the next generation of learners valuing inclusive and welcoming spaces, employers should take note or risk missing out on talent should they refuse to change.

A lack of processes and understanding of how to support disabled talent contributes to barriers in accessible career connections. While many companies publicly outline goals to hire a diverse workforce, they do little more than post and hope for the best when advertising job or internship opportunities. Job descriptions may not include information about accommodations or may list unnecessary physical requirements to the job, immediately excluding some people with disabilities from even applying. Disconnects occur between where opportunities are advertised, as well. For example, employers may advertise roles only on their websites, while students seeking career-connection opportunities and career services utilize wider career networks such as Handshake. This disconnect and lack of process extends to when a student is in an internship or other work-based learning opportunity. Often the work site, career services, and disability services are not coordinating support, sometimes leaving the disabled learner with an inaccessible experience, or no experience at all.

Policy and Cultural Barriers

Although the ADA was signed into law more than 36 years ago, before most students and younger workers were even born, the workforce system and career connectivity are still plagued by systemic and cultural barriers. Many people across the country still hold the view that people with disabilities cannot go to college or work. Learners with disabilities seeking career-connected opportunities may not be hired or may be denied accommodations if they encounter supervisors with this antiquated view. As learners with disabilities disclose their disabilities to career services, assumptions are made about what they cannot do compared to what they can and want to do. This bias can inhibit opportunities and prevent access.

Assumptions about disability have led to the significant unemployment and underemployment of people with disabilities. Unemployment rates of people with disabilities are about double those of people without disabilities (DOL, n.d.). Similarly, the labor force participation rate, or the rate of people aged 16 years and older who are either employed or actively seeking employment, has hovered at about 40% for people with disabilities as compared to nearly 80% for people without disabilities (DOL, n.d.). People with disabilities are also underemployed or in jobs where their skills, education, or availability to work are unused. Some estimates suggest that about 35% of people with disabilities are underemployed (Jorgensen et al., 2023).

The legal use of subminimum wage for people with disabilities contributes to underemployment. Many learners with disabilities are unaware of subminimum wage and may be funneled into or offered jobs at a subminimum wage due to stigma about disability and work and not even realize it. One interviewee shared they have had college students and recent graduates considering these roles, meaning individuals with a college degree could be making less than federal minimum wage. These realities also contribute to some disabled college graduates choosing to enroll in another degree program, even if they would rather join the workforce.

Sidebox 4. Subminimum Wage for People with Disabilities

In 1938 when the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) was drafted, a provision, Section 14(c), was included that allowed payment of a wage less than the federal minimum wage to workers with disabilities. Thought to be an incentive to hiring people with disabilities, the provision has never changed or been revoked. The 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) defined “competitive integrated employment” as desired employment for people with disabilities and prohibited moving youth with disabilities directly from high school to subminimum wage placements.

As of September 2026, more than 30,000 workers were employed across nearly 600 entities that pay subminimum wage (DOL, n.d. (a)). Many states have taken action to eliminate or phase out subminimum wage at the state level. As of January 2025, 17 states have enacted legislation to eliminate the use of 14(c) certificates, and Vermont, DC, and Wyoming have eliminated the use of subminimum wage through other efforts (Government Accountability Office, 2025). A report in 2024, updated in 2025, ranked states on the use of subminimum wage, policy engagement with subminimum wage, employment initiatives, and support of financial security (Knackstedt & Silva, 2025). States with the most positive engagement to reduce subminimum wage and increase financial security for workers with disabilities included:

- Alaska
- California
- Colorado
- DC
- Delaware
- Maine
- Maryland
- Oregon
- Vermont
- Virginia

Sidebox 4. Subminimum Wage for People with Disabilities (continued)

States with the least policy engagement to reduce subminimum wage practices were:

- Alabama
- Arizona
- Idaho
- Missouri
- Montana
- New Jersey
- North Dakota
- South Dakota
- Texas
- Wisconsin

These rankings were impacted by state policies and their use of subminimum wage, as well as state initiatives on employment and financial security. Such initiatives included proactive employment policy, funding, ABLE accounts (tax-advantaged savings accounts for people with disabilities), Medicaid expansion, and more. States such as California, Colorado, Kentucky, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Virginia all scored high on both employment and financial security initiatives for people with disabilities.

Another significant systemic challenge to providing more accessible career connectivity is coordination with Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) programs. The VR program was authorized in the 1973 Rehabilitation Act and updated in WIOA (U.S. ED, n.d.). The goal of VR is to provide “services for individuals with disabilities, consistent with their strengths, resources, priorities, concerns, abilities, capabilities, interests, and informed choice, so that they may prepare for, and engage in, competitive integrated employment or supported employment and achieve economic self-sufficiency” (U.S. ED, n.d.). For some students with disabilities, the connection to VR may begin in high school when career exploration begins. Since the goal of VR is to advance employment opportunities for people with disabilities, supporting learners with disabilities in college may be an option. However, there is often little coordination with VR from high school to college and career, and VR services vary significantly by state and funding. Career services in higher education rarely know about VR and how to connect learners who have disclosed a disability to their state VR program. Further, only some state VR programs will utilize funding to support learners with disabilities in college, including supporting learners in the IPSE programs, which are focused on employment outcomes and credentials. And VR programs are often excluded from traditional workforce programs, siloing support and opportunities.

Key Elements of Accessible Career Connectivity

Despite the lack of research on accessible career connectivity, the barriers and experiences of students and people with disabilities are stark, demonstrating a strong need to revisit how to support learners moving from college to career. While a significant evidence base of what works to improve accessible career connectivity does not exist, interviews and data clearly demonstrate a path toward more accessible practices for all learners. Key elements for successful accessible career connectivity include:

- Ensure career-connected programming is fully accessible and a strategic priority for employers, IHEs, career services, and disability services.
- Strategic collaboration between disability services and career services offices.
- Develop or expand training on disclosure and the different systems of accommodations available to learners with disabilities.
- Develop or expand training for employers on providing accommodations and creating inclusive environments.
- Ensure accessibility is part of recruitment and onboarding for learners with disabilities engaging in career connectivity.

Ensure Career-Connected Programming is Fully Accessible and a Strategic Priority

Accessibility in college and career can support all learners and workers, not just those with disabilities. Look no further than the curb-cut effect, a phenomenon in architecture that has shown that when things are designed to be more accessible, like with curb-cuts, ramps, and elevators, accessibility features often solve problems for people who were not the original target audience. Despite accessibility being critical for many, it is often an afterthought in planning and development. For many employers, accessibility is considered only after an employee requests accommodations. For colleges and universities, accessibility might be considered after a complaint or when a student requests accommodations. Retrofitting activities are much more challenging and may not deliver the intended outcomes. Instead, career-connected activities should embed accessibility as a strategic priority to support all learners and workers. The highly researched, evidence-based universal design for learning (UDL) framework is intended to support access for all learners (CAST, 2024; Coalition on Accessibility in Higher Education, 2026(a)). Career-connected activities should utilize the UDL framework to improve access to all programming from the beginning.

The IPSE programs (described previously) are an excellent example of considering accessibility from the start. As the programs are specifically designed for learners with intellectual and developmental disabilities, the programs include accessibility from the application process to course enrollment, as well as within student living and career-connected activities. Internship and work-based learning sites must be accessible and in some cases IPSE programs develop a memorandum of understanding between their program and the employer to clarify expectations and commitments (University of Louisiana UL Life, n.d.). Ensuring accessibility in career-connected activities has enabled 95% of the students in TPSID programs to engage in at least one career awareness and exploration activity (Grigal et al., 2026).

Embedding accessibility into career connectivity is the responsibility of colleges and universities as well as employers. The National Governors Association developed a playbook for creating state governments as a model for employers of people with disabilities (National Governors Association, 2025). Included in the playbook is the importance of developing a strategy for ensuring workplace accessibility. This is beneficial not only for future hires but also for those engaged in internships and work-based learning opportunities, as it strengthens the pipeline of disabled workers.

Accessibility should be an anchor of all career-connected activities. Accessibility enables many learners to better engage in career exploration, ultimately supporting goals of exiting college with a career.

Strategic Collaboration Between Disability and Career Services Offices

As noted in this report, disability services and career services offices tend to be siloed at colleges and universities. The programming they offer and their goals for students differ, making collaboration challenging. Further, students must initiate conversations about their disabilities with both offices, which is a further barrier. At Florida International University (FIU), students formed the Disabled Student Union (DSU) to increase inclusivity and collaboration across campus, including between disability and career services offices. While student advocacy can play an important role, it can't be relied on to close the gaps perpetuated by siloed higher education systems. Collaboration between the two offices is essential to support learners with disabilities in their career-connected activities. The National Career Development Association recommends aligning career and disability services to better support students through the following steps (Pirpich & Morgan, 2025):

- Generate buy-in.
- Identify barriers to collaboration.
- Develop more inclusive mindsets and processes.
- Create inclusive events and resources.
- Solidify partnerships for ongoing collaboration and inclusion.

Further evidence of the need for collaboration came in the form of a study of three universities that were providing support through a community of practice to increase collaboration between the two offices (Parker et al., 2024). The outcomes were very positive with all parties (offices and students) reporting benefits including students being engaged in more accessible internships. As shared by interviewees, often only one individual within the various offices is personally invested in more collaboration. Rather than relying on one person, creating opportunities to collaborate, share resources, and partner across both offices can better support both professionals and students. Establishing this coordination early in a learner's academic journey is valuable to ensure smooth transitions and inclusive career-connected experiences.

Training and Professional Development

A strong theme across interviews and conversations with experts and learners with disabilities was the need for training for both learners, higher education staff, and employers. Training is a key element in creating and sustaining accessible career-connected activities.

Disability services offices can provide training to help learners understand how disclosure works in higher education and, in coordination with career services, in the workplace. A workbook developed by TransCen Inc. for the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth provides youth with disabilities activities and information as they learn about disability disclosure in higher education, on the job, and when in the community (National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth, 2005).

Employers often do not have knowledge or training on how best to support employees with disabilities, including interns. As employers are a critical component of career connection, expanding training and professional development to include UDL and inclusive practices creates more accessible experiences for everyone (DiBiase & Hoff, 2023(b)). Microsoft has taken a company-wide approach by creating an employer guide to providing accommodations (Microsoft, n.d.). The guide provides information about why accommodations are important and a checklist to improve accessibility across hiring of workers with disabilities.

Since career-connected opportunities live in both the postsecondary education space and the workplace, it is not uncommon for one entity to presume, or prefer, that the other is responsible for meeting accommodations needs. We suggest that, instead of offloading the responsibility, colleges and employers work together to ensure that learners have the support they need to access and complete career-connected activities. In cases where both the college and the employer are proactive, learners will be better supported, and new and growing programs will be more likely to be accessible.

Accessibility in Employer Recruitment and Onboarding

Embedding accessibility as a strategic priority and developing training are critical elements for all employers, career services, disability services, and learners with disabilities. Building on these key elements is ensuring accessibility during recruitment and onboarding for career-connected activities. During the interviews conducted for this report, students with disabilities shared that inaccessible recruitment and job interviews contributed to their seeking primarily remote roles where disabilities could be masked and they wouldn't have to deal with persistent place-based inaccessibility. This example makes clear that accessibility must be included when employers and/or career services advertise internships and apprenticeships.

Several programs and resources support employers and learners with disabilities with transitions from higher education into career-connected activities. First, the Workforce Recruitment Program (WRP) managed by the U.S. Department of Labor helps federal agencies hire interns and workers with disabilities (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2023). The program accepts students enrolled (or accepted) at a college or university and helps expedite their hiring. Federal agencies can search the WRP's database of resumes based on interests and skills. Some career services offices are aware of the program, but not all encourage learners with disabilities to enroll or understand how the program can support interns. A second program is VR, which specializes in accessible career connections and directly supports individuals with disabilities to help them access career opportunities. Third, the Talent Acquisition Portal is an online system of individuals enrolled with VR who are looking for employment. This system supports a more accessible recruitment process and can support employers in connecting with VR business consultants to support their workplace accessibility (Talent Acquisition Portal, n.d.). Finally, the National Governors Association has created key strategies to foster inclusive apprenticeships for people with disabilities, supporting employers in considering how to develop more accessible opportunities for learners with disabilities (Yager, 2022).

Conclusion

Today's learner populations are diverse and have complex lives that they are juggling alongside their studies. More learners are identifying as disabled and seeking accommodations to improve their access to the campus, classroom, and learning. Yet significant barriers exist when learners are ready to engage in career-connected activities and move into the workforce. Creating more inclusive and accessible practices is a shared responsibility among K-12 educators, higher education disability services and career services offices, employers, and learners themselves. The most significant takeaway from this report: Get started. Systems change is possible, but it takes time. Begin by identifying one barrier and trying to implement a key element outlined in this report. Even small changes can make a big impact.

This report is only the beginning of the conversation. Significantly more research and data are needed in the area of accessible career connectivity and students with disabilities in higher education. In the meantime, personal stories and perspectives should be shared on what strategies and practices create more accessible experiences, including the reasons why they are effective. Learners with disabilities have a right to, and deserve, equitable, accessible career-connected activities to support their transition to the workforce.

Contributors

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