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More Students With Disabilities Heading to College



Andrew Van Cleave, 24, and his sister, Lindsey Van Cleave, hug after Andrew's Dec. 8 graduation ceremony at Vanderbilt University.

—Josh Anderson for Education Week

Postsecondary options expanding

When Andrew Van Cleave thought about what he wanted to do after high school, this son of two university graduates came up with the same answer many his age come up with: go to college.

Until the past decade, though, college wasn't much of an option for students, including Mr. Van Cleave, who have significant intellectual impairments. This month, the 24-year-old, who has an intellectual disability and ADHD, became one of the first graduates of a two-year program at Vanderbilt University designed for students with severe cognitive disabilities. He starts a job next month.

[Vanderbilt's Next Steps program](#) is one of many created for this group of students in the last 10 years. The programs have grown in number from about 15 in 2002 to almost 170 now, as tracked by [Think College](#), a Boston organization that does research about this new breed of programs and offers guidance about them for professionals, families, and students.

The growth is due in part to changes in federal law that have increased the expectations of such students in elementary and secondary school.

Photo Gallery



"We've had now 30 years of access for students with disabilities to go to school, and they're coming out of that system with a different expectation: Their education should continue," said Eric Latham, the executive director of [Pathway](#), a college program for students with intellectual disabilities at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Earlier this year, a national study found that six years after high school, students with disabilities were less likely than peers to have attended any college—55 percent compared with 62 percent, though that includes students with all types of disabilities. Among people with intellectual disabilities, the rate of employment is just 9 percent.

The push for creating college opportunities for students with disabilities has also come from parents and advocacy groups, said Stephanie Lee, a senior policy adviser for the [National Down Syndrome Society](#), based in New York.

She is one of those parents: About 10 years ago, Ms. Lee's daughter, Laura, who has Down syndrome, asked her mother if she would attend college at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania like her brother. When Ms. Lee researched what options her daughter had, she found "there was very little out there."

The only real choices were for Laura to stay in high school until she was 21, which federal law allows some students with disabilities to do, or work in a sheltered environment for less than minimum wage, mostly with other people with disabilities.

Ms. Lee, who previously worked for the U.S. Department of Education's office of special education programs, approached administrators at George Mason University, in Fairfax, Va., about creating a program for Laura and similar students. They said yes.

"I was very nervous about dropping my daughter off at this big university campus. It turned out better than I ever could have expected," Ms. Lee said. The program, called [Mason LIFE](#), or Learning Into Future Environments, now serves more than 40 students and has a vocational-internship option.

Successful Transition

As for Laura Lee, today she lives on her own and works at the World Bank, in Washington, two days a week, earning more than \$12 an hour doing office work. She sometimes travels alone from the city's Virginia suburbs on public transportation to get to her job.



Andrew Van Cleave meets with one of his "ambassadors," Aparna Raj, in a common area at Vanderbilt University to get help with his classwork. Ambassadors are Vanderbilt students who are available to help students in the Next Steps program with classwork or just navigating their way around campus.
—Josh Anderson for Education Week

"It is possible for young people with intellectual disabilities to transition into paid, competitive jobs," Stephanie Lee said. "Postsecondary opportunities really give students an opportunity to get on a different path."

Tammy Day, the director of Next Steps—the program at Vanderbilt, in Nashville, Tenn., where Andrew Van Cleave enrolled—said it allows students to attend university-level courses and work on vocational certificates. It also enables them to learn how to keep an apartment near campus—though the program doesn't yet have a housing component—and spend hours a week with Vanderbilt students who don't have such cognitive disabilities.

Ms. Day spent 10 years helping students with disabilities plan for life after high school but had concerns for students who chose to stay in high school.

"It's a pretty rare school system that has found a way to make that plus-four years meaningful," she said. "We found students regress. You're 18, 19, 20, 21 and you're around the 14- and 15-year-olds."

In some ways, the Next Steps program is more rigorous than a traditional college student's schedule, Ms. Day said. It requires students to exercise three hours a week, use university-issued netbooks to send email and keep journals, and take turns shopping and cooking for their peers—in addition to class work.

Enlisting State Support

When Donald Bailey rejected the idea of staying in high school past age 18, his father joined with other South Carolina families to form a small nonprofit group, the [College Transition Connection](#), to create a college opportunity for his son. **The younger Mr. Bailey has PDD-NOS, or pervasive developmental disorder-not otherwise specified, which is a disability on the autism spectrum.**

Eventually, his father, Donald Bailey Sr., persuaded the state legislature to provide seed money to colleges that would establish post-high-school programs for students with cognitive disabilities; now, there are five separate options statewide, including one at

the University of South Carolina, in Columbia, where Donald Bailey Jr. graduated in May.

His was a four-year program, though he finished it in three. The program involved living in an apartment, with roommates, 115 miles away from his parents. The lessons he learned were invaluable, even those that didn't directly deal with coursework.

"It took him a while to get used to getting up at the right time and get to class at the right time," the elder Mr. Bailey said. "For an 8 a.m. class, at first, he would get up at 8 a.m." Now, at 23, the younger Donald Bailey lives on his own, works for Charleston's parks and recreation department, drives, and reads to 1st graders once a week. "Our goals with these programs are not unlike any other program or that of any other parent," the senior Mr. Bailey said. "We wanted him to have the educational experience in college, be independent, [find] gainful employment."

Federal Financing

Specific changes to federal laws have encouraged more schools to set up programs like those at George Mason, UCLA, and Vanderbilt, and have given students with intellectual disabilities more support to attend.



Andrew Van Cleave gets help with his tie from his mother, Mary Van Cleave, before his graduation at Vanderbilt University.

—Josh Anderson for Education Week

Provisions in the Higher Education Opportunity Act in 2008 permit students with such disabilities, who may not have high school diplomas, to get work-study jobs and receive financial aid, including Pell Grants. The law also authorizes money to create and study programs that could serve as models for other colleges and universities around the country.

Think College, the Boston-based group, is coordinating and studying 27 programs in 23 states that were awarded five-year grants by the federal Education Department and will recommend ways programs can be accredited and what kinds of certificates graduates should be awarded, said Debra Hart, the director of the education and transition team for the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

"We know from the first-year data that there's immense variability regarding everything. This field has not had standards, guiding principles, none of that until recently," she said.

Even so, some of the grantees, including the UCLA program, are already showing promise, according to program data. The UCLA program has graduated 37 students in six years, said Mr. Latham, its executive director. Of those graduates, all but seven are employed, continuing their education, doing an intensive internship, or enrolled in a day program. All but three live apart from their parents.

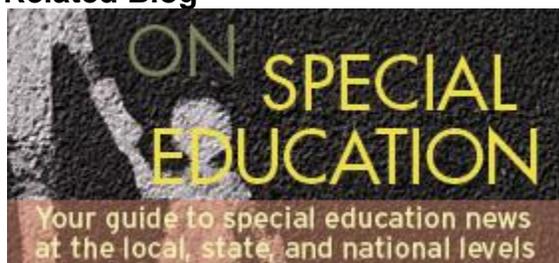
Mr. Latham said students who enroll initially say their primary goal is to learn to live independently. They get that experience living in an apartment building near campus. As they go through the program, Mr. Latham said, students' goals shift to "How am I going to come out of here with a job?"

More federal legislation has been proposed to improve opportunities after high school for students with intellectual disabilities. In November, U.S. Rep. Ander Crenshaw, R-Fla., [introduced a bill](#) that would allow families of people with disabilities to save for housing, education, and medical expenses using the same type of account, a 529 plan, that many families use to save for college. The bill, which has support in the Senate and among lawmakers from both parties, would also allow saving for expenses related to getting and keeping jobs, including job training and assistive technology.

Planning Ahead

Better planning from high school to work or school for students with disabilities could be required by the proposed TEAM acts—as in Transition toward Excellence, Achievement, and Mobility—sponsored by Rep. Gregg Harper, R-Miss., whose son has Fragile X syndrome, a form of mental retardation. The laws would require schools to start working with students at age 14, as well as their families, on goals for life after school.

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Although transition planning has long been required by federal law, "there's no monitoring, no accountability," said Barbara Trader, the executive director of TASH, formerly The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps, in Washington. "The expectation for students leaving high school is ... that they will be college-ready. That expectation isn't clear for students with intellectual disabilities."

Recognizing the need to coordinate and link students with disabilities with information about their options after high school, the Washington-based HSC Foundation [opened a](#)

[center](#)  last month on the George Washington University campus, in Washington, devoted to just that. More than 40 health, education, and social-service organizations are now under one roof, and their information and meetings are available online to anyone in the country.

The transition from high school to college or work "is a challenge for everybody," said Thomas Chapman, the foundation's president and chief executive officer. "When you lay on top of that a physical, mental, or emotional challenge, you need a significant amount of expertise to address that properly."

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