

Five Steps for Building a Public Awareness Initiative About the Value and Impact of College

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Introduction

Across the United States, students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) have been traditionally excluded from college. While significant progress has been made, there continues to be a substantial need to highlight the value of inclusive postsecondary education and the positive impact it can have on this population. Funded by the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council, the [College Matters Florida](#) project implemented a public awareness initiative in which we delivered the message that inclusive postsecondary education is a viable and transformative experience for transitioning youth and young adults with IDD in Florida. This public awareness initiative was developed to target a range of audiences to expand the number of college options for students with IDD across the state, as well as the number of youths with IDD accessing those options.

Over the course of this work, the College Matters Florida project documented its strategies and lessons learned to prepare this how-to guide. The guide is designed for inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs in Florida, as well as other invested stakeholders who wish to prepare and execute a public awareness initiative for the purpose of promoting college opportunities for youth and young adults with IDD. This guide offers a step-by-step process for implementing such an initiative based on our experience.

What do we mean by a “public awareness initiative?”

A public awareness initiative is a set of activities that increases the community’s understanding about a specific topic. The College Matters Florida project sought to build awareness of postsecondary education options for youth and young adults with IDD throughout the state of Florida by informing our target audiences about the value of such options.

The College Matters Florida project identified five key steps that can be used to develop a streamlined public awareness initiative to get the word out that students with IDD can and are going to college, and to increase the number of institutions of higher education in Florida who open their doors to support students with IDD in going to college. The five steps include:

1. Establishing your purpose, target audience, message, and “go-to” entity
2. Planning for the nuts and bolts
3. Building and managing your outreach partners
4. Collecting and selecting content
5. Preparing and sharing content

The following provides more details on the five steps and recommendations for implementation of each one. This toolkit can be used by higher-education program staff to disseminate information about their program.



This toolkit was developed by College Matters Florida. College Matters Florida is comprised of staff from the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston and the University of South Florida, and represents a collaboration with the Florida Center for Students with Unique Abilities.

FIVE STEPS FOR BUILDING A PUBLIC AWARENESS INITIATIVE

STEP #1

Establishing your purpose, target audience, message, and “go-to” entity

Good public awareness initiatives have a mission and a vision. Prior to implementing any awareness initiative, it's critical to identify what the purpose is, who the campaign seeks to reach, and what change you seek to achieve. As individuals engage with the campaign, they need to consistently hear the campaign's message and know where to go if they want more information. All of this should be mapped out prior to planning for the nuts and bolts (see Step #2).

Establishing the purpose of the campaign

While the central purpose of the College Matters Florida public awareness initiative was to increase demand for postsecondary education for youth and young adults with IDD throughout the state, your purpose will likely be different. Your goal may be less complex — for example you may just seek to increase enrollment in your program. As you clearly define the purpose of the campaign, you should concurrently consider who you seek to reach at the same time.

Identifying your target audience

Prior to additional planning or engaging with collaborators, you should identify the target population you want to reach. In the case of College Matters Florida, we were attempting to reach multiple stakeholders. This included:

- youth
- parents
- transition professionals
- postsecondary education personnel

Since our purpose was to create an increase in the demand for inclusive higher education programs for students with IDD across Florida, we sought to engage a range of individuals and curated the content accordingly (see Step #4). Certain target populations may require certain types of content for the campaign to have an impact. For example, youth with IDD and their families may resonate with personal stories or user-friendly tools and graphics that are shared in an easy-to-read format. Instead of prioritizing one target audience, the College Matters Florida project ensured its campaign targeted multiple audiences, and as a result, we shared an array of awareness materials.

Determining your central message

While the purpose of College Matters Florida was to expand demand for postsecondary education in Florida for youth with IDD, we determined we needed to achieve the goal by conveying a central message across a series of communications delivered at specific intervals during the initiative. We sought to achieve the goal of increased demand by sharing the following message: Postsecondary education options not only exist throughout the state of Florida, but such options are viable and transformative for transitioning youth and young adults with IDD. As we curated the content in preparation for sharing (see Step #5), we reflected on this purpose and message to ensure our content aligned with our goals.

Establishing a “go-to” entity

A final, crucial aspect of conceptualizing your campaign is the identification of a “go-to” entity. A “go-to” entity is where you will direct people if they are interested in what you have shared and would like more information. In some cases, you will be the go-to entity. If it is someone other than you, be sure — in advance — the go-to entity understands the nature of the initiative and agrees to this role. A specific contact should be identified as the go-to entity, including contact information and the website address, and should be provided with every content message disseminated.

The College Matters Florida public awareness initiative's go-to agency was the Florida Center for Students with Unique Abilities (FCSUA). Since the purpose of FCSUA is to provide support to students, families, and higher education institutions to promote opportunities for college attendance, we directed all interested traffic to their website.

STEP #2

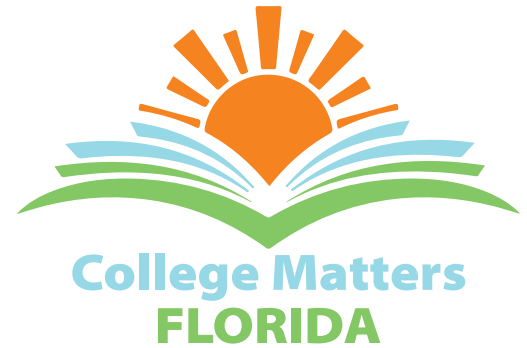
Planning for the nuts and bolts

Developing an entire awareness initiative is a big task, so it is important to plan. Now that you have conceptualized the purpose, audience, and message, you need to determine not only what your audience will see, but also how often they will see your content, for how long, and in what format. This step is crucial to the effectiveness of your marketing campaign and will guide your team as you begin implementation.

Naming and branding your initiative

A title is so important! It needs to convey your purpose (what you seek to achieve) and who you are doing it for (your target audience), but it also needs to be short and perhaps even catchy. Sometimes keeping it short is challenging. It's hard to keep titles short when the topic is, as in our case, "promoting college for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities." Good public awareness initiatives also have a strong visual identity. If you are an established program, you will already have a brand, style guide and a logo. This should be integrated into all posts and content as part of your initiative.

For College Matters Florida, we wanted our branding to convey the message of learning and opportunity, and be Florida-specific. We wanted to brand the idea that college is a viable and transformative option for youth with IDD in the state.



Determining the duration of your initiative, launch date and frequency of output

It's important to begin by identifying an official start and end date for your public awareness initiative. In addition, you need to consider how often you want to share output within this established duration. This will give you and your outreach partners a better idea of what to expect, when to expect it, and how often (see Step #3). It's important to strike a balance between delivering a consistent and coherent message to your target audience, and not overwhelming them.

Map out your scheduled posts on a calendar or spreadsheet. Prepare to share this calendar with your outreach partners at the time of recruitment. This will keep them more informed and clarify their commitment to the endeavor.

The College Matters Florida project was a six-month initiative with two outputs per month.



TIP

Now is a good time to create a one-page summary for your initiative!

Prepare a one-page summary describing the initiative, being sure to brand it and include your go-to entity's contact information. The summary should include all the decisions you have made to date, including the initiative's purpose and central message, target audience(s), launch date, duration, and the intended commitment of dissemination partners. The summary will be invaluable when reaching out to partners to engage them in your public awareness initiative (see Step #3).

STEP #3

Building and Managing your Outreach Partners

Inclusive postsecondary education programs have limited resources, so engaging invested partners in the public awareness initiative just makes sense. Now that you have identified your target audience(s) and decided on your purpose, message, and implementation calendar, the next step is to build a team of outreach partners who want to participate in the initiative and will commit to disseminating information on your behalf.

Building your team of outreach partners

Inviting existing partners and allies

Review a list of your current partners and supporters. You should be thinking about partners who have communication with your intended target audiences. Do any of these groups meet this criterion?

Since the College Matters Florida project had the primary target audiences of youth and their families, as well as transition professionals and postsecondary education professionals, we had to ensure we had parent organizations, the Department of Education, and others represented as part of our team of outreach partners.

Recruiting new partners

Now that you have created a list of those you already know, who else do you need to reach? Brainstorm a list of who is missing and begin searching for those groups.

Using an invitation letter

It is important to formally invite each outreach partner to join your public awareness initiative and get their consent to disseminate on your behalf. Individualized emails to specific contacts are advised. In the body of the email invitation letter, clearly lay out what you are asking of them and what you will be supplying. Make it clear they are responsible for distributing prepared content and not required to create content on their own.

See Appendix A for a sample email used to recruit outreach partners for the College Matters Florida public awareness campaign.

Creating a database

As outreach partners commit to participating in your initiative, it can be helpful to collect basic contact information, as well as their primary target audience(s) and the range of communication mechanisms they have in place (such as newsletters and social media channels).

Now you have a database of who communicates with whom, where they communicate, and how!

Managing your team of outreach partners

Now that you have a team of invested outreach partners established, an Initiative Kick Off meeting is suggested. This kickoff can provide details on the public awareness initiative's message and goals as well as the roles and expectations of your outreach partners.

Most of all, the kick-off meeting should provide clear step-by-step instructions for copying and pasting information provided by the initiative into their own communication mechanisms.



TIP

Make it a point to stay connected with your outreach partners throughout the duration of the public awareness initiative.

In addition to the kick-off meeting, you may consider check-in meetings every other month to ensure your materials are being sent and create a platform for troubleshooting. While participation by your partners may vary, it is important to keep everyone informed and connected to the mission.

STEP #4

Collecting and Selecting Content

What type of information should you share?

Share materials and resources that are most appropriate and most interesting to your target audience members. Is this for parents? Make a list of what you think parents want or need to know. Is it for teachers? Make a list of the content you think they need most.

You may already have a library of resources and won't need to create new content from scratch. If this library is limited, ask your outreach partners to share resources they may have that might meet the public awareness initiative's goals and purpose. Keep in mind content should be easy to digest and not burdensome for the reader to consume. If you are disseminating awareness materials geared toward youth with IDD, be especially aware to ensure the content is in plain language.

What content formats should you use?

- factsheets
- FAQs
- guides
- infographics
- maps
- photos
- podcasts
- stories
- surveys
- timelines
- videos
- and more!



TIP

In addition to making sure your content short and easy to read, it is helpful to vary the format as well. In the College Matters Florida project, we included a range of content including written stories, videos, infographics, and tools.

Create a content inventory list

Keep a list of content you intend to share or are considering sharing in spreadsheet form. Use this inventory to track the content you currently possess or the content that may be available from one of your many dissemination partners. For each piece of content, document the media type (video, graphic, written, etc.) so that you can easily identify gaps. You may want to curate or prioritize content based on the extent to which it clearly demonstrates your purpose and your message.

In addition to what is listed above, the College Matters Florida project used our content inventory spreadsheet to track the intended audience for each piece of content as well. This allowed us to ensure we met the needs of multiple target audiences across the duration of the public awareness initiative. See below for a sample content inventory spreadsheet.

Title of content	Type of media (graphic, video, written summary etc.)	Location (website address or who owns it*)	What target audience is it best suited for?	How does it rank against the initiative's purpose and message? (low/medium/high)

*Note: If another entity owns the content you are interested in disseminating, do not forget to obtain permission in advance!

STEP #5

Preparing and Sharing Content

Preparing your content

We recommend the first post announce the public awareness initiative and describes its purpose and goals. It should also remind the dissemination partners about the duration of the initiative and when to expect to receive content. The first post should also provide instructions describing how to copy and paste content into their own information pathways.

For the College Matters Florida project, we consistently shared content with our dissemination partners on Mondays or Tuesdays. The calendar we provided included dates to expect content by email.

Sharing your content

The College Matters Florida project used Constant Contact (www.constantcontact.com), an email marketing platform, as the method to share content for our public awareness initiative. Using Constant Contact allowed us to brand each post, include our logo, and provide consistent instructions related to our go-to entity. It also allowed us to offer an introductory message at the top of each post with additional news or directions.

We selected our content from the inventory list and then created a single email with text that we drafted for our outreach partners. This text can simply be copied and pasted into the outreach partner's newsletter or social media channel.

Conclusion

Following these five simple steps can provide inclusive postsecondary education programs and other invested stakeholders a roadmap for designing and implementing a successful public awareness initiative in their area. While our purpose was to promote college opportunities for youth and young adults with IDD across the state of Florida, it is our hope that this guide will support IPSEs across the country to disseminate the message that inclusive postsecondary education is a viable and transformative experience for youth and young adults with IDD.



TIP

Keep posts short and be aware of character limits imposed by the social media channel.

Create a single hashtag for the public awareness campaign and use it within each post. We consistently used the hashtag #collegematters. If you are sharing text to include in newsletters, we recommend staying under 70 words.

For more information about **College Matters Florida**, visit collegemattersflorida.org or contact **Jaimie Timmons** at jaimie.timmons@umb.edu



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Additional resources developed by College Matters Florida to promote and expand post-secondary options for youth with IDD

On-line training modules

[Module 1: Secondary Student and Parent Preparation for Inclusive Higher Education](#)

This self-paced learning module is for secondary school staff. The module offers lessons in 4 core areas: promoting college as an option, helping students develop foundational and self-determination skills, supporting families to establish early expectations, and preparing students to pursue a work-oriented course of study in college. Registration is free and open to everyone.

[Module 2: Preparing Youth with IDD for the Transition to College](#)

This self-paced module helps college professionals better develop the knowledge necessary to provide a welcoming and successful college experience for students with IDD. The module has four areas: 1) learning about the range of academic supports, 2) learning about the range of campus supports, 3) orienting campus centers and support services to program/student needs, and 4) fading student supports over time. Registration is free and open to everyone.

Promising Practices

[Implementing an Inclusive Transition Club that Promotes Postsecondary Education for Youth with Intellectual and/or Developmental Disabilities: Lessons Learned from Wakulla High School](#)

Transition clubs can be a successful forum for college and career exploration. This promising practice examines a transition club at Wakulla High School in Crawfordville, Florida, and the positive impact the club had on student participants. The authors provide steps to replicate similar clubs.

[Using a Closed Facebook Group to Engage Families in Discussions about Postsecondary Education: Lessons Learned from the Parent Support Network](#)

Parents of students with IDD have questions about postsecondary education and are unsure how to find answers. This promising practice looks at how the Parent Support Network met this need by creating and implementing a closed Facebook group for parents. The authors look at the implementation process and the positive impact it had on participants and provide steps to replicate.

[Promoting Individualized Education Plan Goals and Activities for Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities in the Transition to Postsecondary Education](#)

As opportunities to attend college increase for students with IDD, individualized education plans (IEP) must include goals that prepare students. This promising practice shares the process that retired transition coordinator Karla Wade used to develop transition-focused IEP goals in six critical domains.

[Expanding Disability Services with Peer Mentor Support: Strategies and Recommendations from THRIVE at the University of North Florida](#)

Students and parents often find navigating campus resources for non-academic issues to be challenging. This promising practice looks at how staff from the University of North Florida's Student Accessibility Services developed and implemented a mentoring services program to help students better navigate campus resources and the positive impact it had on students.

[Leveraging Peer Supports to Include Students with Intellectual and/or Developmental Disabilities in Non-Academic Campus Resources: The University Participant Program at Western Carolina University](#)

The University Participant (UP) program at Western Carolina University (WCU) created and implemented a peer mentoring program to help students with IDD have access to all the campus offers, including the residence halls, cafeteria, clubs, and campus events. This promising practice shares how UP implemented the program and offers ways for other inclusive college programs to replicate.

Archived Speaker Series

[Session 1: Preparing secondary students and parents for higher education including financing, changing roles, and FERPA](#)

Former co-director of Project 10: Transition Education Network, Danielle Roberts-Dahm shares strategies for preparing secondary students and parents for higher education including financing, changing roles, and The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).

[Session 2: Promoting inclusive postsecondary options with transition stakeholders including students and families, IEP team members, and adult service entities](#)

Presenters from Think College, the Florida Center for Students with Unique Abilities, and the Parent Support Network provides strategies and resources to promote inclusive postsecondary options with transition stakeholders including students and families, IEP team members, and adult service entities.

[Session 3: Developing IEPs that support college-based services including transition assessments, measurable postsecondary and annual goals, and Summary of Performance](#)

Program manager and transition specialist with Think College, Maria Paiewonsky shares strategies for developing individual education plans that support college-based transition services including transition assessments, measurable postsecondary and annual goals, and summary of performance.

[Session 4: Orienting students, parents, and professionals to academic and campus supports including disability and academic support services, the role of peer mentors/tutors, and other resources](#)

Kathy Becht, from Think College, and son Peter present on academic and campus supports and accommodations. Tools and devices are shared.

[Session 5: Acquainting students, parents, and professionals to non-academic campus resources including residential life, student life such as extracurricular activities, and work options to support student success](#)

Dr. Kelly R. Kelley, from Western Carolina University shares strategies for including students with IDD in non-academic campus resources including residential life, student life such as extracurricular activities, and work options to support student success.

Other Examples of Public Awareness Toolkits

National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM) Social Media Kit

The US Office of Disability Employment Policy created this toolkit to provide the community an opportunity to celebrate employment for people with disabilities. Pre-prepared social media materials, including sample social media posts, graphics, and hashtags, are provided.

<https://www.dol.gov/agencies/odep/initiatives/ndeam/resources/social-media-kit>

Building Public Awareness Toolkit

Created by the city of Red Deer, the toolkit includes a planning template for public awareness activities including developing a marketing campaign to raise the profile of your group or program. The tool kit provides a step-by-step planning template to easily guide the user.

<https://www.reddeer.ca/media/reddeerca/recreation-and-culture/community-programs-and-information/Public-Awareness-Toolkit.pdf>

Appendix A: Sample invitation letter

Dear xx,

College Matters. It is the name of the project but also a statement. College for students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities (IDD) matters a lot!

The College Matters Florida project is funded by the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council to implement a multi-media public awareness initiative to expand postsecondary options for students with IDD throughout Florida. I have attached a project abstract that describes this important endeavor.

We are contacting you to request your assistance to disseminate information to your constituents.

Please take a moment to add your name to the database of dissemination partners [insert a link here]. The database includes a few questions that will allow us to understand the range of information pathways your organization uses. In addition, it will allow us to understand how and where to share relevant information and materials and better serve interested stakeholders.

Thank you in advance for supporting the College Matters Florida public awareness initiative and for your efforts to expand postsecondary options for students with IDD in Florida!

Sincerely,

Name

Contact information