

Paying for College: Exploring Funding Sources for an Inclusive Postsecondary Education Program

By Cate Weir

A college education is an investment in the future of every student who pursues one, but it does not come cheap!

College expenses include tuition, fees, books, equipment, and room and board, if a student chooses to live on campus. These all add up, and every student must determine where the funding for college will come from.

Students with intellectual disability (ID) are likely to use many of the same resources as other college students to pay for college. There are some resources specific to individuals with disabilities to consider as well. Students are using numerous approaches to pay for college, often braiding together several different funding sources to cover the costs.

Here is some information about a variety of possible funding sources that students and their families can consider as they determine what will work for their specific situations:

FEDERAL FINANCIAL AID

As of May 2022, over 125 college programs for students with ID have been [approved as Comprehensive Transition Postsecondary Programs \(CTP programs\)](#), and this number continues to grow. These programs offer access to federal student aid for eligible students with ID, even if they do not have a regular high school diploma or are not working toward a degree. Students who meet the income eligibility requirements may be eligible for Pell Grants, Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants, and Federal Work-Study. Students in non-degree CTP programs are not eligible for federally subsidized student loans. [This Think College Federal Financial Aid Brief](#)

shares details on accessing federal student aid for students with ID attending approved CTP programs.

To access federal student aid, students will be required to complete a Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA. This is the same form that all college students use to determine eligibility for aid. Learn more on the [FAFSA website](#).

SCHOLARSHIPS

Scholarships typically do not cover the full cost of attendance for any student, but they can be an important part of financing education. Think College publishes a [list of scholarships](#) (updated annually) that are possible resources for students with ID attending non-degree programs. Read this resource to learn about state level, program level, and disability-specific scholarships.

MEDICAID WAIVER FUNDS

An increasing number of states allow students with ID to use Medicaid Home and Community Based Services (HCBS) waivers to support participation in postsecondary education programs. Medicaid waivers have been used to fund a variety of supports and services for college students with ID, as well as tuition or fees in some cases. Think College has published [a brief that describes how Medicaid waiver funds are being used to support college attendance](#). Students who are eligible for Medicaid waiver services can pursue this source of funding to see if Medicaid can help pay for college costs as well as related support services such as transportation, peer support, or independent living instruction while in college.

VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION

Students with ID may be able to access support from vocational rehabilitation (VR) services to help cover college costs while working to achieve their employment goals. In addition to employment counseling, guidance, and disability related interventions, VR may provide funding for tuition, fees, books, housing, and other education related services. Funding options and amounts vary based on the individual needs of each student as well as policies and practices of each state. VR may also use information about access to Pell Grants and other grants, as well as a financial needs assessment, to determine how much they will pay and which services the money can be used to pay for.

Students must be eligible for VR services to receive any VR funded services, including college. For VR to consider supporting a student's college attendance, the program they are enrolled in needs to relate to an identified vocational goal that is part of an Individualized Plan for Employment, or IPE. The decision to support a student to attend college is based on this IPE and the belief that attending college will result in the student becoming competitively employed with career advancement opportunities. If there is a disagreement related to what VR will pay, students have the right to have the funding decision reviewed. You can contact your state's Client Assistance Program or ask the agency for their due process policy.

VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA) EDUCATION BENEFITS/GI BILL

Some students have been able to access dependent Veteran's benefits when attending a college program for students with ID. This requires the program to be approved by the VA, and for the student to be eligible for dependent benefits. If these conditions are met, then students may be eligible for funds to help pay for college.

Funding options vary depending on several factors, such as what state you live in and what services you are eligible for.

LOANS

Federal loan programs, such as Direct Student loans or Parent PLUS loans are **NOT available** to students with ID attending a college program. As previously mentioned, while federal student aid is available to students in approved CTP programs, this only includes Pell Grants, Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants, and Work-Study, not federal student loan programs.

Some, but not all, private student loan lenders have options for non-degree seeking students. To be eligible for these loan programs, the student must be "enrolled at a degree-granting school and pursuing a certification or an associate or bachelor's degree." It is not completely clear if "certification" includes credentials awarded by an approved CTP program. However, there are a few known instances of students in CTP programs being able to obtain a private student loan to help pay for college. Review requirements of each lender to determine if non-degree programs for students with ID will qualify.

Learn more about non-degree student loan programs in this blog post, [Non-Degree Seeking Student Loans](#).

SOCIAL SECURITY

Families often have concerns about how going to college will impact their student's Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI). The key thing to know is going to college does not automatically make someone ineligible for social security benefits. Some students use their social security benefits to help pay for school-related expenses. In addition, it is important to note that financial aid should not impact SSI.

The [Plan for Achieving Self-Support \(PASS\) program](#) is a social security program that allows Social Security beneficiaries to exclude income that is being used to assist the person in returning to work. Under a PASS program, income is set aside for current or future expenses for training, equipment, services, or supports—including college—if it is related to a specified employment goal.

INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES EDUCATION ACT (IDEA)

The preamble to IDEA 2004 regulations, as well as 2019 guidance from the US Department of Education, allows for the use of IDEA funds under certain circumstances to pay tuition and other costs of college attendance for students who are still eligible for IDEA services. School districts in several states are partnering with local colleges or universities to establish college-based transition programs and supporting students aged 18–21 to complete their educational program in a college setting.

FAMILY FUNDS

Students and their families are often called upon to fund at least part of the expenses associated with a college education. For families, this can be difficult without a savings plan in place for college. [ABLE Accounts](#) offer a relatively new way to save for college expenses without negatively impacting benefits. If your family has a 529 College Savings or Prepaid Tuition account, these may be a source of funding for students attending a college program as well. It is important to look at the options for how to use these funds when attending a non-degree college program. Families and students should review the specific rules for ABLE and 529 College Savings plan accounts in their state.

STUDENT CONTRIBUTIONS

Many college students contribute toward their own college expenses. This can be the same for students with ID and should not be overlooked as another option for paying for college. Student contributions could be from income from jobs during the school year, summer employment, or even income received from Social Security. This will look different for each student, but it is something to keep in mind as you are thinking about all the ways to pay for college.

Most students and their families use a combination of personal resources and supports from other funding sources to pay for college.

RELATED RESOURCES

Benefits Counseling

Benefits counseling is a service that helps individuals with disabilities and their families understand how employment and other life decisions, like going to college, will impact their benefits (e.g., Social Security Disability Insurance, health insurance, housing assistance). Benefits counseling addresses the fears and concerns many individuals and their families have about a reduction in benefits if they start to work. [Learn more about how to access benefits counseling.](#)

Learn more by reviewing additional resources related to Paying for College: [Paying for College Resources on the Think College website.](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CATE WEIR is Project Coordinator for the Think College National Coordinating Center.

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