

Inclusive Postsecondary Education Programs and Centers for Community Living: A Partnership Worth Pursuing

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Centers for Independent Living (CILs) are private, non-profit organizations mandated to be led by people with disabilities to serve people with disabilities and make systems change. CILs provide support to people of all ages, with all types of disabilities, to equip them with the skills to live independently in their communities, advocate for their needs, and develop disability pride. They work to make sure communities are built and operate with people with disabilities in mind. CILs' base federal funding was established by Title VII of the Rehabilitation Act and reflects congressional findings that Americans with disabilities form one of the most disadvantaged groups in society. The Rehabilitation Act sets a national goal of providing individuals with disabilities the tools they need to make informed choices and achieve equality of opportunity in education, economic and personal self-sufficiency, civic involvement, and participation in community life.

CILs exist to ensure people with disabilities have the support and services to live meaningfully active lives in their communities. Although people with disabilities have advocated hard to ensure all people with disabilities are included in society, higher education is a field where,

historically, many staff and faculty members are not a part of the disability community. Inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs for students with intellectual disability are housed in colleges and universities, some over 200 years old, that weren't built with accessibility as a priority. Here's where CILs come in as valuable, yet underutilized, partners for IPSE programs.

[It is important to note that the independent living \(IL\) movement started with disabled student activists combating discrimination on college campuses.](#) Youth and adults with disabilities spearheaded and led efforts to pass all primary disability rights legislation, such as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (The Act), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). People with disabilities should be valued members and leaders in higher education spaces. While higher education professionals may have the best intentions, people with disabilities are the true experts who are deeply connected to disability culture through their own lived experiences. CILs and IPSE programs should be natural partners; college and university personnel would benefit from understanding the importance of consulting with the disability community.

CILs can assist students and programs in identifying and eliminating common barriers so that programs and campuses can be more inclusive and accessible for students with disabilities. This includes physical or program alterations and considerations that must be made for students with disabilities to fully access campus life. CILs can help students advocate for their support needs and provide training to staff and faculty on the history and

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rights of students with disabilities on campus. This advocacy can extend into the community as students choose to live in post-graduation, as CILs continue to support students long after IPSE programs.

Sometimes, students do not want to identify as having a disability because of the social stigma. CILs can help students work through this internalized ableism. Working with mentors from a CIL can help to instill a sense of recognition and pride in students with disabilities, who, like other college students, are trying to figure out their own identity and place in their communities. Students enrolled in IPSE programs likely come from segregated K-12 settings with very little to no disability representation. Because they've likely felt different for most of their lives, college is the time to work through the trauma associated with experiencing ableism and gain the confidence to be successful and accept themselves. Exposure to successful people with disabilities can allow students to see that disability is not something to be ashamed of, which could increase their self-confidence and post-college outcomes. CILs can help students understand that they fit in the world. Rather than feel "othered," they can be part of a larger community.

CILs can also be valuable partners in providing instruction around tricky topics, like sexuality. The stereotype that people with disabilities aren't interested or can't have sex is still strong. CILs can assist with and provide much needed representation and experience in this area. Their effective approach to sexuality education is based upon their individualized approach to consumers' needs. This support includes Title IX case navigation and ensuring that the campus community is prepared to support students through a Title IX investigation from providing accessible services at the scene, to providing resources in plain language and ensuring that accommodations are honored throughout the process.

What Does this Partnership Look Like for a CIL/IPSE Program?

Mentorship on Self-Determination and Advocacy

Able South Carolina is a CIL in Columbia, South Carolina. Staff from Able South Carolina provided students enrolled in IPSE programs with targeted peer mentorship, self-advocacy, and building self-determination skills. Through their Capable and Ready program, Able South Carolina staff facilitate a self-advocacy course that is six weeks in the fall semester and covers pre-employment transition services with topics such as self-awareness, effective communication, problem-solving, school accommodations, and other related topics. Able South Carolina also holds a work readiness course for six weeks in the spring semester. Work readiness covers topics such as résumé writing, interviewing, disability disclosure, ADA rights, professionalism, and workplace ethics. Advocacy is one of CILs' core services, at both the individual and systems levels. Able South Carolina provides advocacy to assist with campus accessibility and reminding the college of their responsibilities under the ADA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended.

Supporting Students in Navigating College Systems

Because CILs are staffed by people with disabilities, they have first-hand experience in navigating higher education systems and spaces that are historically inaccessible. Able South Carolina staff have conducted physical accessibility assessments and provided students with physical disabilities the tools, resources, and understanding that they need in navigating campuses. Additionally, they have supported consumers in understanding their rights in accessing academic and physical accommodations and navigating universities' student conduct or Title IX procedures.

Building Leadership Skills Among Young Adults with Intellectual Disability

Able South Carolina hosts several Community Leadership Academies throughout the year aimed at increasing the participation

of individuals with disabilities on boards, committees, and councils. Able South Carolina has held campus-specific Community Leadership Academies to develop leadership skills for campus and community organizations so that students aren't only joining, but also leading organizations that can impact their daily lives.

Action Items for Collaborating with your Local Center for Independent Living

1. Reach out to your local CIL. [Find your local CIL in this directory!](#)
2. Meet with your local CIL to learn more about disability culture, ableism, disability rights, and the trauma that people with disabilities experience. Learn how people in the disability community can be part of your program to help change the mindset throughout the entire institution and support students to thrive.
3. Invest in CIL programming. CILs are required by law to diversify their funding within the community. Not all CILs have a lot of funding. Consider CILs as a viable option that includes disability representation when you are looking to hire instructors or mentors, or contract other services.
4. Consult with CILs to make sure your classrooms and facilities are accessible. Learn from experts with disabilities about the barriers around campus that students are experiencing.
5. Learn about anti-ableism efforts from CILs and get your college/university on board with getting rid of ableist practices, sayings, and policies.
6. Consider adding a CIL representative to your advisory board to include perspectives from the disability community in your program planning and development.

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Able SC is a disability-led organization seeking transformational changes in systems, communities, and individuals. Since 1994, they've remained a consumer-controlled, community-based, cross-disability nonprofit that seeks to make South Carolina a national model of equity and inclusion for all people with disabilities.

They are an organization of people with disabilities leading the charge to:

- Equip people with disabilities with tools to foster pride and to direct their own lives;
- Educate the community to challenge stereotypes and eliminate barriers; and
- Advocate for access, equity, and inclusion at the individual, local, state, and national level.

Able SC's staff and programs are state and national leaders in creating innovative and effective youth programming. In 2020, Able SC ranked #1 for serving the most youth nationwide compared to other CILs, as they know what's possible with the key partners, including IPSE programs.

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