For the past decade, educators, parents, and others have shown a sustained interest in developing viable postsecondary education and other life-long learning opportunities for young persons with intellectual disabilities after they leave high school settings. These efforts are reflected through a number of endeavors, such as collaborative high school-community college partnerships, 18-21 postsecondary programs supported under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and parent developed programs focused upon providing the least restrictive and most age appropriate learning setting for young persons with intellectual disabilities. These activities have received little exposure or attention in the disability or learning literature. Further, little attention has been focused upon documentation of these efforts or toward generating data that provide evidence of the value or impact of such programs upon the quality of post-school life for persons with intellectual disabilities. This special topical issue includes seven peer-reviewed articles. The overall intent is to provide the reader with a clear picture of the current status of diverse approaches to prepare and transition youth with intellectual disabilities for postsecondary education settings. The articles have been organized to provide the reader with an overview of this field of work, present a range of approaches and models currently being used by persons in the field, and share current status data on types of programs underway and their impact upon the quality of post-school life for young persons with intellectual disabilities. We have reviewed and selected articles that represent diverse perspectives on the topic as well as articles that provide a range of quantitative and qualitative data and information for the reader.

In the first article, “Postsecondary education and persons with intellectual disabilities: An introduction,” Robert A. Stodden and Teresa Whelley provide an overview and introduction to work underway in this area of study and present them to the field. The purpose of this issue of ETDD is to present an organized collection of peer-reviewed articles focused upon issues faced by young persons with intellectual disabilities and those who support them as they prepare for and transition to postsecondary education and other life-long learning activities.

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school systems serving students with significant disabilities ages 18-21 in 13 postsecondary settings. Information is presented on students’ access to college courses, employment training, activities in the community and on college campuses, and interagency linkages with adult services. The article provides a discussion of outcomes experienced by young persons participating in such programs, as well as information concerning the roles and outcomes experienced by educators, parents, adult agencies and others participating in the efforts. They conclude with unique questions that need to be asked in order to continue to study and evaluate activities and outcomes that transition services facilitate in postsecondary settings.

Transition years have been studied extensively by researchers in their quest of methods to assist young adults with disabilities in the transition from mandated educational services to the less structured, often frustrating, world of adult services. Current research reveals continued poor outcomes for individuals with developmental disabilities underscoring the need for transition program review to determine whether or not the current system of delivering services is meeting legal mandates, as well as preparing individuals for the quality of life to which they aspire. In “Transition services model: Partnership for student success,” Elizabeth Pearman, Twila Elliot, and Lucinda Alborn describe a successful alliance established between the Southwest Special Education Local Plan Area of the Los Angeles County School District and El Camino Community College to serve students with disabilities on the community college campus. Area students receiving special education services have an opportunity to pursue postsecondary education while completing high school requirements. Students attend college classes, participate in social activities, and learn life and employment skills. The authors use a transition services program theory model to evaluate this partnership involving secondary and postsecondary educators, aligned with the wishes of parents and the supports and services provided by adult service agencies. Positive outcomes experienced by those involved are shared and discussed.

Studies have indicated that interagency collaboration is a primary factor leading to successful transition outcomes for students with significant disabilities. The next article, “Changing systems for transition: Students, families and professionals working together,” describes a project designed to address the fragmentation of these service delivery systems. The Point of Transition Service Integration Project was initiated in 1997 in California as a three-year model demonstration grant funded by the Department of Education. The project goal was to improve levels of cooperation and collaboration among public schools, the State Department of Rehabilitation, and the State Department of Developmental Services related to efforts assisting students with severe disabilities who are transitioning from school to adult life. David A. Noyes and Caren L. Sax describe the benefits of interagency collaboration when planning for the preparation for transition of young persons with intellectual disabilities to postsecondary education and employment settings. Through a case study approach, roles of family members, adult service agencies, secondary school educators and postsecondary educators are shared in support of young persons with intellectual disabilities as they participate in this process.

Postsecondary education has become an increasingly important prerequisite to independent adult living. Completion of nearly any type of postsecondary education significantly improves an individual’s chances of securing meaningful employment, a hallmark of successful adult life. Cynthia Zafft, Debra Hart, and Karen Zimbrich report there is limited research that addresses youth with intellectual disabilities regarding successful outcomes of participation in postsecondary education. In “College career connection: A study of youth with intellectual disabilities and the impact of postsecondary education,” the authors present findings from a matched cohort follow-up study conducted with 40 youth with significant disabilities who did and did not participate in postsecondary education. Findings focused upon positive benefits and outcomes of postsecondary education experiences for youth with intellectual disabilities. The article also provides recommendations for “promising practices” supported by the findings.

Traditionally, youth with learning, cogni-
tive, and intellectual disabilities have not been given the option of participating in and thus benefiting from a postsecondary education. There is a dearth of information on postsecondary programs and services for youth with learning, cognitive, and intellectual disabilities and minimal data on the effectiveness of options that do exist, in relationship to postsecondary outcomes. The next article reports on a national survey of 25 postsecondary education options that support youth with learning, cognitive, and intellectual disabilities in postsecondary education while still enrolled in secondary school as an empirical foundation for future research on these service models. The article begins to provide a picture of the national scope of work under way in this area. In “Community college: A pathway to success for youth with cognitive, learning, and intellectual disabilities in secondary settings,” Debra Hart and colleagues present and discuss survey results. Main findings indicated that although most programs provide some combination of “life-skills” training and community-based instruction combined with employment training, some innovative service models focus primarily on inclusive postsecondary educational services. Detailed profiles of six programs and recommendations for future research are presented.

Recent studies of innovative supports and services in postsecondary education reveal more effective and cooperative mechanisms with which to provide supports to individuals with disabilities. Colleges and universities can design supports that permit consumer choice while avoiding establishment of isolating parallel “service systems.” The final article provides a description of young persons with intellectual disabilities succeeding in postsecondary education when provided with individualized and personalized supports and service. In “Person centered and collaborative supports for college success,” Cate Weir presents a participant observation, discussing individual and collaborative supports, providing a discussion of and recommendations for effective strategies, and presenting successful students who have pursued their dreams of postsecondary education.

It is our hope that each article reviewed and presented in this special topical issue of ETDD will contribute to the research and knowledge base in this field. Further, it is also hoped that the articles will be of interest and assistance to educators, family members, and other service providers as they seek to support young persons with intellectual disabilities as they prepare for and transition to postsecondary education and other life-long learning settings.