

**Emily's Story:
A Quest for Independence**

This series of stories aims to shed light on the transformative power of higher education credentials for students with intellectual disability. Through real-life examples, we explore how earning credentials in various fields has not only equipped these individuals with essential skills but has also paved the way for meaningful employment opportunities.

4-year university

Dog Training/Hospitality

North Carolina

Emily always had a vision to live life to the fullest. She was determined to live on her own and have a career working with animals. To make that future happen, Emily explored several different inclusive postsecondary education programs, finally deciding to attend the University Participant (UP) Program at Western Carolina University (WCU).

The WCU UP Program provides an inclusive, 2-year, on-campus living and learning experience for college-age students with intellectual disability. The program is accredited by the Inclusive Higher Education Accreditation Council (IHEAC). The goal of the program is to facilitate students' transition from secondary school to adult life with education, employment, and independent living. Students enrolled through UP live on campus, take 3-4 inclusive classes with their peers, work at least 10 hours per week, and get involved with campus activities that are open to all students.

While in college, Emily quickly realized she specifically wanted a career training dogs to work in law enforcement. Although WCU is in a small community with limited animal jobs nearby, Emily was dedicated to gaining as many skills as possible. She found jobs to help her hospitality and customer service skills and then she moved into learning more about law enforcement and working with police dogs through her job with WCU Parking Services.

Alongside these jobs, Emily took several classes with to help her gain more skills to prepare for her future. Emily chose her classes by looking at her future goals and by looking at what the university had to offer to give her the most well-rounded education possible. After her two years, Emily had taken a total of 44 credit hours of college classes.

After her two years at WCU, Emily graduated in 2024 with her Certificate of Accomplishment. Then, she was ready to take her dreams to the next level, enrolling in an official dog training school for a 6-month, full-time training program to get direct experience working with and training dogs to become a certified dog trainer.

Once she completes dog training school, Emily will be able to move into her own apartment. Thanks to the classes, skills, and work experiences she gained at WCU, she has built the confidence to live the independent life she has always dreamed of.



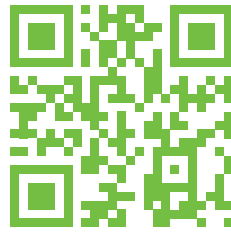
Emily graduated in 2024 with her Certificate of Accomplishment and then went on to dog training school, thanks to the classes, skills, and work experiences she gained at WCU.

Why are postsecondary education credentials important?

Earning a postsecondary education credential creates a better starting point for students with intellectual disability entering the job market and adult life. Those who access higher education are more likely to be employed, earn higher wages, and have stronger social and professional networks. There are more than 350 colleges and universities in the US with various credential options providing college students with intellectual disability opportunities for better employment outcomes and more successful adult lives.



Read more credential
pathway stories



Learn more about inclusive
postsecondary education



See the data on employment
outcomes of students with
intellectual disability



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The Inclusive Higher Education Network is a national technical assistance and dissemination center, funded by the US Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education. The Network is tasked with increasing regional and state capacity, building awareness, creating strategic partnerships, and supporting expansion and improvement of higher education for students with intellectual disability through resource and training development.

Learn more about TCN at thinkcollege.net/projects/tcn

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