

Think College **REPORTS**

THINK COLLEGE POLICY ADVOCATES 2019–2025: A Summary Report

By Rebecca Lazo and Caroline Nawas Jurisich



 ThinkCollege

NATIONAL COORDINATING CENTER

INSTITUTE FOR COMMUNITY INCLUSION, UMASS BOSTON

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ABOUT THE PROGRAM DEVELOPERS

The Association of University Centers on Disabilities (AUCD) was founded in 1963 following President John F. Kennedy’s first President’s Panel that provided guidance on intellectual disability. AUCD’s mission is to advance policy and practice for and with people with developmental and other disabilities, their families, and communities. There are AUCD members in every state and territory.

The Think College National Coordinating Center, grant funded by the US Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education since 2010, provides coordination, technical assistance, training, and evaluation for Transition and Postsecondary Education Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID). It also provides technical assistance, training, resources, and support to all college programs for students with intellectual disability, families, and students.



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Think College Policy Advocates Program

The Think College Policy Advocates (TCPA) program was specifically designed by AUCD and Think College National Coordinating Center (NCC) to:

- educate college students with intellectual disability and college program staff about federal-level disability policy and advocacy,
- emphasize the effect of federal policy on the lives of people with disabilities, and
- support the development of leadership and advocacy skills for its participants.

TCPA participants also gained interpersonal skills and knowledge that extend beyond the program and benefit them in their everyday lives.

The collaboration between AUCD and Think College NCC ensured that the program was based on a deep understanding of disability policy and advocacy. The NCC acted as the source for participant outreach and communication, and provided funding necessary to support the program, while AUCD brought expertise in advocacy and training, policy development, and access to federal advocacy channels.



The TCPA program was launched to ensure that students with intellectual disability and their program staff are active participants in shaping the policies that impact their lives. Too often, policy conversations about inclusive postsecondary education (and disability policy in general), take place without the voices of those who are directly impacted by the policies. The goal of TCPA was to make sure that these students' voices and personal experiences are heard.

As Liz Weintraub, senior advocacy specialist at AUCD and co-trainer of TCPA, often says:

“Nothing about us without us”: “When I hear this quote, I think that whenever there’s a discussion or issue that is about students with a disability, then students should be involved in the discussion. When AUCD and Think College were talking about advocating to Congress about IPSE [inclusive postsecondary education], I asked, ‘doesn’t it make sense to teach students to advocate for themselves to Congress?’”

Between 2019 and 2025, TCPA provided education on public policy, the legislative process, the structure of the federal government, and strategies for effective advocacy. Using a comprehensive training curriculum developed by staff from Think College and AUCD, participants learned the basics of advocacy, the structure of the federal government, critical disability advocacy history, and current issues affecting individuals with disabilities. TCPA created materials in plain language to allow both students and staff to meaningfully engage in the training as equal teammates. While the length, focus, delivery methods, and topics of the training evolved over the years, the training always culminated in in-person meetings with federal congressional members and their staff, where participants could put their advocacy training and knowledge into action to educate on issues that mattered to them.

Denise Rozell, former Director of Policy Innovation at AUCD and co-trainer of TCPA, said this about how TCPA is different than other advocacy training programs:

“Think College Policy Advocates is a way for students and staff to work together to understand the impact of public policy on their lives and that they can make a difference in changing it. Each has their role to play, and they are equal members of a team. Students are not tokens here. Staff are not there ‘just’ to support the student. They support and work with each other. This was an important part of TCPA from the beginning and makes it different than some other models of policy education.”



Cobey Meyer (left, TCPA 2025) and Denise Rozell discussing TCPA in the Microsoft Innovation office.

While the primary topical focus of the TCPA program was access to postsecondary education, participants were also introduced to other important disability-related legislation and policy. By focusing on inclusive postsecondary education while positioning it within broader legislative frameworks, participants were able to tell their story fully, connecting many parts of disability policy to postsecondary education access. Topics such as Medicaid funding and vocational rehabilitation provided context and highlighted the interconnected nature of disability policy in the lives of people with disabilities. These relevant topics show how and why policy impacts people’s lives. How or whether policies get passed is truly personal. For people with disabilities, this can mean having access to healthcare, a fair wage,

inclusive education, or living in the community.

Student and staff teams completed the program equipped to formally engage with policymakers and other civic leaders by sharing their lived experiences. The program also educated teams on the importance of bipartisanship in disability policy and emphasized the notion that personal political affiliations should not impact who works together to advocate for and advance policies that impact the disability community. With that in mind, students were encouraged to take what they learned through TCPA back to their college campus and community and continue their advocacy work. They can apply these skills to any situation they find themselves in: on campus, at work, living independently, in community groups, or wherever they advocate for themselves and others. Further, the TCPA program demonstrated concrete links between policy and advocacy.

This report was written to explain the development and growth of the Think College Policy Advocates program. Unlike other advocacy training programs, TCPA relied on each team to learn the basics of policy and advocacy and how to effectively communicate with their elected officials together, as equals.

The Evolution of Advocacy Training

The TCPA program evolved since its first occurrence in 2019 when college students with intellectual disability and program staff were supported to attend the Disability Policy Seminar. At that time, the college teams attended a conference about disability policy and then met with their elected officials on Capitol Hill. Feedback from participants in the early iterations indicated a desire for a more focused and intensive training experience, and AUCD and NCC staff realized TCPA could be more impactful.

“While the delivery methodology and curriculum has evolved over the years, the goals of Think College Policy Advocates training have remained the same: to offer college students with intellectual disability and college program

staff training in disability policy and advocacy skills and to support them to apply those skills to educate and advocate for inclusive postsecondary education and other disability-related issues impacting their lives.”

—Cate Weir, former Project Coordinator for the Think College National Coordinating Center

By 2025, TCPA had a competitive selection process, a comprehensive series of lessons on advocacy, ongoing alumni engagement, and opportunities for continued advocacy skills development post-program. As of Spring 2025, the advocacy training program grew to a months-long training that included multiple hours of online instruction and in-person training on the “what, how, and why” of advocating as well as specific preparation for in-person meetings on Capitol Hill.

TCPA also included ways for participants to stay engaged with each other after the formal training ended to continue to learn more about policy and advocacy. Initially, it was through regularly scheduled online meetings facilitated by a policy specialist from AUCD with lived experience (Liz Weintraub). These calls were open to any student with intellectual disability from any of the more than 350 college programs across the country that expressed interest in advocacy. This activity changed over time and has resulted in an established TCPA alumni group that meets regularly to discuss policy and advocacy. The alumni group uses a closed Facebook group to stay in touch with one another.



Cate Weir, coach for the 2023 team from Utah (Fish Vosnos and Morgan Jacobs) pose in front of the Dirksen Senate Office Building.

Each iteration of the TCPA program built upon the experiences and feedback of previous ones. Program staff gathered feedback through both quantitative surveys and virtual interviews. They refined the TCPA curriculum based on participant feedback and AUCD and NCC staff reviewed and introduced new topics to address emerging issues in inclusive postsecondary education and disability policy, resulting in an effective and impactful training curriculum and approach.

Think College Policy Advocates 2024-25

In 2024-25, the TCPA program included nine teams of two people and consisted of:

- a series of eight online meetings over seven months
- a 2-day, in-person training in Washington
- a full day of meetings with federal legislators from each team’s state

The application for TCPA 2024-25 opened in April 2024. The announcement explained the requirements for the program, including eligibility, timeframes, and tasks participants must commit to doing, along with the application.



Group shot of the 2025 Think College Policy Advocates at the Microsoft Innovation office.

THE TCPA APPLICATION PROCESS

Each member of the team—student and staff member—completed their own application. An important aspect of the team approach to TCPA was to ensure that professionals and students involved in inclusive postsecondary education

have an opportunity to learn about policy and advocacy together. Each person in the program was expected to do the required tasks and participate equally in all learning activities. Each person provided basic personal information and their experience and perspective doing advocacy work and submitted a letter of recommendation. Application materials were provided as downloadable files and also fillable online forms for accessibility purposes. Teams had the option to submit applications in numerous formats: as a written response, spoken responses written down by someone else, video, or PowerPoint presentation.

Once applications were received, a team of reviewers used a rubric to assess the applications. Reviewers were mostly staff from Think College and AUCD but sometimes included individuals from other disability organizations. A total of four people reviewed each application. Reviewers met to review the applications, discuss scoring, and come to agreement about which teams to accept.

Eligibility Requirements for TCPA 2024-25:

- Teams must have one student or alumni and one program staff.
- Teams can be from any inclusive postsecondary education program for students with intellectual disability.
- Teams must be:
 - » interested in learning more about public policy related to postsecondary education, and
 - » willing to commit to a series of activities over the next year to promote or change federal and state policies to support postsecondary education programs and students.
- Both team members must be available to participate in a series of training and informational webinars between September 2024 and February 2025.
- Both team members must be able to travel to Washington, DC in March 2025 for in-person training and Capitol Hill visits with members of Congress that they would be responsible for scheduling.
- Teams must commit to complete at least three of the following activities during the training year:
 - » Subscribe to one of AUCD's newsletters
 - » Host a policymaker (federal, state, local) at their postsecondary education program, either in-person or virtually
 - » Develop a "leave behind" document that educates policymakers in Washington, DC about their program, stories about students who attend it, and statistics about its impact
 - » Draft and submit an op-ed piece or letter about their program to the editor to their local paper
 - » Participate in an interview with Think College or AUCD about their experience that can be used to promote advocacy
 - » Share their public policy experience with other students and faculty at their postsecondary program

TCPA TEAM SELECTION AND PREPARATION

TCPA program staff sent acceptance letters, program agreement documents, and the training schedule to selected teams in June 2024. Ideally, teams were notified before summer break while team members were still on campus together.

Coaches were assigned over the summer, and each coach was asked to communicate with their team before the first training in September. Coaches were selected on a variety of considerations: the coach's background, what state a team was coming from, the policymakers they could potentially meet with, and the team's previous advocacy experience. All coaches had at least some policy experience of their own to assist teams in their policy understanding.

The coach served as the point person for teams to contact if they had questions, or if they needed help understanding TCPA and sticking to deadlines. Coaches also assisted with assignments between trainings and clarified information shared during training webinars. Coaches were asked to attend the trainings and schedule at least three check-in meetings with their team. The coaches were staff from AUCD, Think College, Autism Society of America (ASA), National Down Syndrome Society (NDSS), and The Arc.

Schedule for the 2024–25 TCPA Program

April 15, 2024: Application opened, shared via Think College website and social media

May 17, 2024: Applications due

June 21, 2024: Teams selected/notifications sent

September 13, 2024: Kick-off meeting

October 11, 2024: Policy 101

November 15, 2024: More about the Federal Legislative Process

December 13, 2024 (Optional): Ask Away! Q&A about Washington, DC Arrangements

January 10, 2025: Meeting Congress and Making Appointments

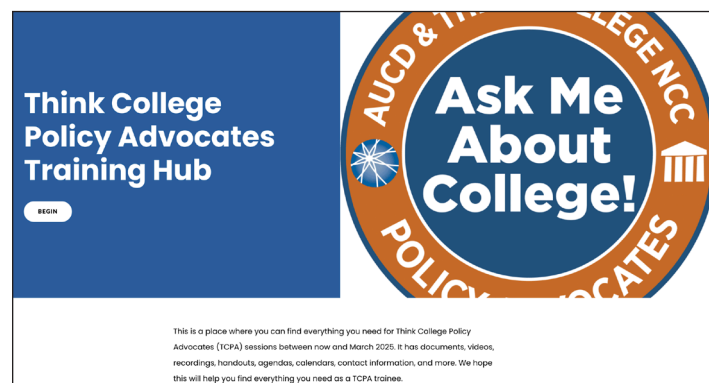
January 31, 2025: Advocacy and Relationship Building

February 21, 2025: Talking points & topics

February 28, 2025: Pre-travel meeting

March 9–12, 2025: Meet in person in Washington, DC

Each team had different levels of experience and expertise in inclusive postsecondary education and advocacy. Starting at the kick-off meeting, teams were encouraged to work closely with their coach to build comradery and learn together. Throughout the online training component, program staff presented information in accessible ways to prepare the teams for their ultimate trip to Washington, DC. Staff provided a curriculum for the teams that included policy materials, talking points, tips, templates, guidance on setting up meetings and building relationships with representatives and senators, and handouts about traveling and being in Washington, DC and visiting Capitol Hill. Additionally, staff provided supplemental information, or “homework,” to participants, which was often a recorded episode of “Tuesdays with Liz” on an advocacy-related topic. Occasionally, other videos or websites were included. All of the information shared throughout the training was posted on a secure, online hub that program staff created for TCPA.



Landing page of online training hub for TCPA 2025

TCPA TEAMS MEET IN-PERSON

The in-person training component brought all nine teams to Washington, DC for three days. AUCD staff were able to arrange a free meeting space at corporate offices in downtown DC for the in-person trainings. Over two days, participants heard from a variety of speakers, including the disability policy director at Microsoft and a former disability policy director for a US Senate Committee. These two disability policy thought leaders shared their perspectives on disability advocacy, and strategies and approaches that have been proven effective at articulating the issues that matter most to people with disabilities.



From left to right, Jessica and Anna from Utah State, Allison Haeger (formerly of AUCD), Kim Musheno from The Arc, and Emily and Savy, both of University of New Hampshire.

Presentations from AUCD policy experts covered critical historic disability advocacy events like the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the Capitol Crawl, and “All Means All”. A Think College staff member presented on the many ways social media can help with advocacy efforts. Teams also worked in small groups to prepare their elevator speeches and talking points about their college programs and were able to practice their “pitches” with other coaches and staff. This preparation ensured successful meetings with representatives and senators and allowed the participants to feel more comfortable speaking with accuracy and confidence.

“In 2025, as the Disability Policy Director at Microsoft, I had the honor of speaking with students with intellectual disabilities and others eager to learn about disability policy. TCPA is transformative because it empowers people with intellectual disabilities to understand disability policy, share their personal experiences, and advocate for change. The skills learned in TCPA create confident, well-spoken individuals who are ready to work and thrive in their communities.”

*– Rylin Rodgers,
Disability Policy Director at Microsoft*

The program also included a tour of the White House. While teams learned about the history of the White House, the tour also reiterated the idea of bipartisanship, which the TCPA program emphasizes. Regardless of who is president, the White House and the administration play an important role in our government’s history and policymaking, and this was a unique opportunity to learn about it firsthand.



TCPA 2025 outside the White House.



Teams from TCPA tour the East Wing of the White House.

Agenda for the In-Person Component of TCPA: Monday, March 10, 2025

- 9:00am: Arrive at Microsoft office
- 9:20–10:10am: Welcome, review of the daily agenda, and introductions
- 10:10–10:30am: Break
- 10:30–11:00am: Presentation from Rylin Rodgers, Disability Policy Director at Microsoft
- 11:00 – 11:15am: Review of elevator speeches
- 11:15am–12:00pm: Workshop: Elevator speeches and talking points
- 12:00–12:30pm: Questions
- 12:30–1:30pm: Lunch break
- 1:30–2:00pm: Capitol Crawl, the Disability Movement, “All Means All”
- 2:00–2:15pm: Table discussions
- 2:15–2:30pm: Talk about social media
- 2:30–3:00pm: White House visit review
- 3:00pm: Back to hotel
- 5:30pm: Meet in hotel lobby for dinner

Tuesday, March 11, 2025

- 9:00am: Meet in hotel lobby to travel to White House
- 10:15–11:30am: White House tour
- After White House tour, travel to Microsoft offices
- 12:00–1:00pm: Lunch break
- 1:00–1:30pm: What is it like on Capitol Hill?
- 1:30–1:45pm: Mock Capitol Hill visits: Review and watch one
- 1:45–2:15pm: Mock Capitol Hill visit: Practice
- 2:15–2:25pm: Break
- 2:25–2:40pm: Mock Hill visit large group discussion
- 2:40–3:00pm: Review Capitol Hill map, reminders, questions
- 3:00pm: Back to hotel

Wednesday, March 12, 2025

- 8:00–9:00am: Meet in hotel lobby to travel to Capitol Hill
- 9:00am–rest of day: Pre-scheduled meetings with your members of Congress

CAPITOL HILL VISITS

The final day in Washington was spent visiting legislators on Capitol Hill. Participants were prepared for how and why to do this throughout the TCPA training. Students and coaches learned about current and pending legislation that might impact postsecondary education and students with intellectual disability, how to state their thoughts and perspectives on these issues, and the differences between educating and lobbying when speaking to federal legislators and sharing their personal experiences.



TCPA staff stand with the team from Louisiana on the Speaker’s Balcony of the US Capitol Building in March 2025.



The 2025 TCPA team from Utah poses with Utah Senator Mike Curtis.



New Jersey Senator Andy Kim hosts a Capitol Coffee Hour attended by the 2025 TC PA team from New Jersey in Washington, DC on March 12, 2025. (Official U.S. Senate photo by Rebecca Hammel)

TCPA program staff provided teams with resources on how to identify and contact their representatives. Staff also supported teams to schedule meetings via email and phone using provided sample text or their own words. Using the materials they developed about themselves and their college during the training, the teams met with their state's federal representatives to talk about the importance of college for students with intellectual disability. Participants shared topics such as national statistics about postsecondary education, the impact it has on them as individuals, information about the federally-funded TPSID, or Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities, projects, the college programs they attend, and other college programs in their states. Students also shared personal stories about why college was important to them and other students with intellectual disability, and what kind of job they wanted after college. In 2025, teams met with members of Congress and staff from Michigan, South Carolina, New Jersey, Kansas, Louisiana, Missouri, New Hampshire, Utah, and Washington.

Following the Capitol Hill visits, the in-person portion of TCPA concluded, and teams returned to their home states. TCPA program staff scheduled a follow-up call for participants to share information about their experiences with their peers. Staff also sent a survey to gather information from the teams specifically about the Capitol Hill visits and about the TCPA program overall. The call allowed teams to share with the group about their experiences in DC and about their plans for future advocacy. In November 2024, TCPA alumni started a new Facebook group. They extended an invitation to all previous cohorts, including over 100 students, teammates, coaches, and staff. Over 40 people have joined as of January 2026.

TCPA Lessons Learned

As a result of the lessons learned from each iteration of TCPA, AUCD and Think College staff determined that the most impactful overall experience for the trainees would include a more robust TCPA program with additional education about inclusive postsecondary education and related issues, and better preparation for the Capitol Hill visits.

The approach in 2024–25 was to:

- build in more online trainings than previous years
- create assignments to prepare for each training
- design accessible online and in-person trainings
- provide support for learning between sessions
- schedule intentional time with coaches to go over what was covered in training and answer questions
- refine the in-person training before the Capitol Hill visits

Sufficient staff time had to be available to support all program components. Staff responsibilities included:

- creating and disseminating the annual TCPA announcement and application packet
- reviewing and scoring the applications

- developing the training schedule
- preparing for the meetings and trainings (updating training materials, scheduling web meetings, arranging for speakers)
- providing training content at both online and in-person training events, along with invited speakers
- meeting with coaches and teams between trainings and responding to questions
- maintaining contact with trainees post-training, including managing alumni network.
- planning, making arrangements, preparing teams, and attending events during the in-person portion in DC

We learned that the costs for the in-person component of TCPA training has varied depending on venue and partnerships with an existing conference. The 2024–25 standalone event allowed for cost savings due to the flexibility of hotel, meal choices, and free meeting space equipped with all the necessary technology.

Partnering with an existing event, the model used in previous years, saved some travel expenses because of negotiated hotel rates and because some staff and team members were already traveling to that venue for the conference.



Joe Louisell and Kate Strater (TCPA 2025) from Calvin University prepare for the group training.

However, those savings were offset by the expense of having to provide all the food through the hotel and the expense of hotel meeting space, technology, and audio/visual services costs.

In 2025, the cost for the event, including travel stipends for participants, meeting materials, and select materials was around \$33,000. This amount does not include staff time or travel.

Other budget considerations:

- We selected a hotel in a good location, close to public transportation and the chosen meeting space, that also included breakfast. It was farther from downtown DC, which made the room rate more affordable.
- Meeting space for the two days of in-person training was provided at no cost. Held at the Microsoft offices in Washington, DC, the meeting space was centrally located, and the meeting rooms had all the necessary technology (projectors, laptops, Wi-Fi) and accommodations, such as built-in live captioning at no cost. Using this kind of space instead of a hotel allows for significant cost benefits.
- We worked with coaches in the DC area to avoid covering travel expenses for coaches.
- Staff time was provided through a contract with AUCD. This provided TCPA with staff whose jobs were related specifically to disability policy, which is a key to the TCPA program's success. In any replication of TCPA, coordinators must budget for sufficient staff time with staff who are experienced in the area of federal and state disability policy.
- Coaches were able to dedicate some work hours to the program, with support from their employers.
- Working with experienced policy staffers from other disability organizations is another key to the program's success, as they each brought their own diverse experiences, professional connections, and extensive knowledge to the role.

Curriculum Development

The 2025 TCPA curriculum is far evolved from the original. Initially there was a focus on sharing information on a range of disability-related issues like education, community living, criminal justice, ABLE (Achieving a Better Life Experience) accounts, and Social Security. We also provided tips on how to prepare for the in-person meetings, like what to wear, what to expect being on Capitol Hill, and what kinds of questions to ask during the in-person meetings.

Based on feedback from the participants in each TCPA cohort, we expanded the curriculum and training materials. We held more trainings before the Hill visits and focused more specifically on inclusive postsecondary education and general advocacy skills, spending less time on the full range of disability policy issues. Teams were taught how to use tools to find out the activity in their states around inclusive postsecondary education, what federal legislation has a direct impact on inclusive postsecondary education, and what the difference is between state and federal policymakers.

TCPA teams had access to the [What's Happening in Your State](#) webpage from Think College. For each state, this map shows relevant legislation that has passed or is pending, what college programs exist, if there is an inclusive postsecondary education alliance, and who to contact with questions about inclusive postsecondary education.

As is reflected in the schedule of trainings leading up to the in-person event, the training worked through disability policy from a broad perspective, explained some basics about legislation and advocacy, and reviewed the most current information about disability policy. The increased focus on inclusive postsecondary education, particularly each team's own experience, was especially helpful for preparing for the in-person meetings with federal representatives. The materials in the curriculum mirror the focus of the training content.

Results of TCPA Program

Since 2019, TCPA has engaged nearly 90 students and staff from more than 25 states, teaching them about policy, advocacy, and leadership, and providing a real-life opportunity to apply that knowledge in meetings with members of Congress and their staff in Washington, DC. These meetings are the culmination of the TCPA training and give participants the opportunity to advance their advocacy and leadership skills at a high level at the United States Capitol.

While these meetings are specific to the states the teams are representing, they often include high-ranking members of Congress and their staffers. In the past, teams have met with the Speaker of the House's and Senate Majority Leader's offices, senior ranking senators and representatives, and chairs of committees that directly impact disability policy. In 2023, for example, AUCD staff were able to arrange meetings with Katy Neas, then deputy assistant secretary in the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services at the US Department of Education. Students and staff had a chance to tell the deputy assistant secretary their stories and share some brief data points about the proven benefits of college for students with intellectual disability. Teams also had a chance to meet Brad Thomas, senior education policy advisor from the US House Committee on Education & the Workforce. Even though these meetings can be very brief, it's impactful for representatives and appointed officials to hear directly from students about why being able to go to college is so important to them.

“The [TCPA] program empowers students with intellectual disabilities and staff of college programs to become informed, confident advocates who can positively influence legislative decisions and advance inclusive higher education for future generations.”

—Cate Weir, former Project Coordinator for the Think College National Coordinating Center

Table of Contents from the 2025 TCPA Curriculum:

Policy Materials

1. The Differences Between State and Federal Policymakers
2. Policy 101: Federal Disability Policy Education and Advocacy
3. The Federal Budget Process
4. Policy Terms in Plain language

Talking Points, Tips, and Templates

1. The Importance of Postsecondary Education for Individuals with Intellectual Disability
2. 10 Things to Know to Talk About IPSE in Your State
3. Plain Language Talking Points - Community Living
4. Plain Language Talking Points - Employment
5. Plain Language Talking Points - Education
6. What to Know about Your Members of Congress
7. Getting to Know my Legislators

Meetings and Building Relationships

1. Meeting with Members of Congress vs. Meeting with Staffers
2. Liz's Top 10 Tips on Relationship Building
3. Capitol Hill Visits Toolkit
4. Elevator Speech Template
5. Guide for Mock Capitol Hill Meetings
6. Educating Policymakers and Lobbying: Know the Difference

Washington, DC

1. TCPA Travel Sheet
2. Liz's 10 Tips for DC Training
3. Liz's Top 10 Things to Do in DC
4. Capitol Hill Map



TCPA teams (2022) from Maryland, Florida, and Illinois stand with Brad Thomas, Senior Education Policy Advisor, US House Committee on Education & the Workforce.



Teams from Missouri and Texas (TCPA 2023) met briefly with Katy Neas, then Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS; fourth from right), to talk about the importance of inclusive postsecondary education.

Since TCPA began in 2019, TCPA participants have taken part in more than 125 Capitol Hill meetings, ensuring that inclusive postsecondary education remains on the radar of federal policymakers and that students, alumni, and staff of these programs remain resources for future disability policy discussion for members of Congress.

Impact of TCPA Training

Each TCPA team member comes away from the training understanding how federal policies impact their lives. Team members also leave with leadership and advocacy skills meant to be a catalyst for continued work long after TCPA concludes. The impact of the TCPA training was measured using a variety of methods including annual student and staff interviews of each cohort, reflective summaries from AUCD staff, satisfaction surveys, and a final comprehensive survey in 2025 of all TCPA participants.

The findings show that TCPA participants consistently leave the program with greater policy knowledge, stronger advocacy skills, and more confidence as leaders. Staff return to their colleges and states with the goal of sharing this knowledge with others. Both students and staff continue their advocacy years later, testifying at hearings, participating in state advocacy days, hosting podcasts, publishing their views, and mentoring the next generation of advocates.

For many students, TCPA marked their first experience and exposure to legislative policy. Before participating, some admitted they weren't sure what policy even meant. One student who chose to remain anonymous reflected, *"I didn't know what to expect or even what policy really was, but I got to learn more. And I am still figuring it out."*

By the end of the program, students were able to describe major disability-focused laws, and connect these laws to their own lives, describing how education, transportation, housing, or funding policies shaped their opportunities in life. Importantly, many students said TCPA helped them feel proud of their personal advocacy stories.

The quantitative evidence supports these reflections:

- **82% of students** said TCPA "substantially" or "significantly" increased their policy knowledge.
- The online trainings that preceded the in-person portion of the program **scored between 2.8 and 3.0** on a 3-point scale (3 = very helpful).

- Sessions on the basics of understanding policy, communication strategies, and working with Congress all received the **highest possible average rating**. These sessions focused on everything from how a law is made to how to conduct and participate in meetings with members of Congress.

Staff also reported knowledge gains. All staff participants said TCPA deepened their understanding of policy and gave them strategies they could apply at their institutions and states.

TCPA was never meant to be a program that just teaches about disability-related topics. TCPA was meant to be a program where teams learn public-speaking skills, gain confidence, and take action. While learning and growth resulted for both members of the teams (staff and student), for the college-aged students, this new experience led to unique and impactful lessons.

Alex Rogers, from Ohio State University (TCPA 2019), reflected: *"The people from Congress asked me questions and seemed interested in my answers."*

Others spoke about leadership: *"I gained a lot of knowledge about opportunities for emerging leaders, and how to stay involved in disability advocacy in the long term,"* said Kenneth Kelty, North Carolina (TCPA 2021). Kenneth was a LEND Fellow and held several leadership positions in Tarheel Toastmasters. He is currently a disability advocate and host of two podcasts.

The impact of TCPA extended beyond Capitol Hill. Students learned to advocate for themselves in everyday life: requesting accommodations from professors, emailing instructors, and asking for support when needed.

One student explained, *"I used to only advocate for big things, but I've learned to do it for myself more."*

Twelve TCPA alumni completed a 2025 survey showcasing how advocacy continues after program completion:

- **8 alumni (67%)** reported meeting with legislators in person or virtually after TCPA

- **6 alumni (50%)** spoke at conferences, hearings, or community events
- **5 alumni (42%)** invited legislators to visit their campus
- **4 alumni (33%)** testified publicly
- **9 alumni (75%)** shared advocacy messages on social media

TCPA also reinforced independence skills. In surveys and interviews, nearly half of the students mentioned appreciating and learning from the opportunity to travel independently or with minimal assistance and noted that budgeting meals, navigating transportation, or managing safety independently in Washington, DC was a true learning experience. Students described learning to use ride-share programs, counting money for tips, and interacting with strangers. These skills gained through TCPA align with one goal of inclusive postsecondary education: to provide opportunities for students with intellectual disability to learn and practice skills in independence.



Grace and Kelly (TCPA 2023) traveled from Colorado to Washington, DC and learned to use the Metro to get around the city.

Another consistent theme is the importance of connection. Alumni frequently named “meeting other teams” as their favorite part of TCPA. They built friendships, exchanged stories, and saw themselves as part of a national movement.

Elizabeth “Anne” Stevenson from Ohio reflected: *“I learned about disability policies and laws and got to meet people from all walks of life. I got to learn about their disability experiences and meet with someone from my senators’ offices.”*

Anne and her team didn’t stop after TCPA. As Denise Rozell tells the story: *“One of my favorite parts of TCPA is being able to see its impact on individual students and staff. One student (Anne) was so interested in the way she could make a difference in policy that affects the lives of her and her peers, that she went back to her college campus, and with her employment specialist, created a yearlong independent study on influencing policy and developing the skills she needed to be able to do this [advocacy] as a career.”*

Participants also emphasized networking as one of TCPA’s most powerful outcomes. For many, TCPA was a reminder to engage in large-scale efforts to advance inclusive postsecondary education, whether that be at the state, regional, or national level.

Building relationships with people from other programs around the country not only helps influence policy but also allows for programs to grow and enhance opportunities they provide students. Collaboration among inclusive college programs is crucial to advocacy efforts on campus and across the state. One staff advocate, Christi Kasa from Colorado (TCPA 2021), said: *“Think College Policy Advocates reminded me that we need to continue talking about the work we do with stakeholders at all levels.”*

The evaluation data confirm this theme:

- **91% of students** named networking as a highlight
- **100% of staff** said building relationships with peers and students was one of the most valuable outcomes
- In the alumni survey, **9 of 12 respondents (75%)** said they had collaborated with advocacy organizations or invited policymakers to their campuses after TCPA

As a relatively small field, it is critically important that advocacy for inclusive postsecondary education opportunities continue, with or without TCPA. Networking, meeting with elected officials, and sharing one's experience is helpful in elevating the message that college is an option for students with intellectual disability.

Liz Weintraub shared this about the lasting effects of TCPA: “One of the things I feel very strongly about is that we must teach the next generation to learn how to advocate for themselves and others.... I loved seeing the students speaking to the staff or members of Congress. One example of this was in March 2025, a student who, at the beginning of the week, was very nervous and shy to even speak out to the group. When she met with one of her members, she read from her notes about what she wanted to say. At her next meeting, she didn't even need to read from her notes.”



Mia Crump (left, TCPA 2025) and Liz Weintraub preparing for a visit to Capitol Hill.

Here's what Grace (TCPA 2023) had to say about her own TCPA transformation: ***“I feel like a new person. I got WAY confident. I talked to people in the airport about my experience in college on the plane home. I told my family and my friends and my girlfriend about it. I can tell everyone about it!”***

She and her teammate Kelly said they learned so much about legislative processes, tried new things even when they seemed intimidating, met new people, made great connections, and stood up for what we believe in! They wrote [an entire blog post](#) together about the incredible impact TCPA had on their lives.

Several states have built their own advocacy days modeled after the TCPA program. Georgia is a great example of a state that has created comprehensive advocacy days inspired by the practices of TCPA. Georgia, Pennsylvania, Missouri, and North Carolina each reported adopting structures or practices inspired by the program.

How Things Changed for TCPA

While TCPA is clearly effective, participants have also identified opportunities for the program to improve over the years.

In the early years, “more detailed training materials” was the most frequent request. More than half of students in interviews and evaluations asked for clearer materials, visual aids, and checklists. These tools, they said, would have helped them feel more confident before arriving in Washington. As the program grew, AUCD and the NCC took this feedback and created what became the full TCPA curriculum. Program staff shared the curriculum in both a digital and hardcopy form, and it became the foundation for every online and in-person training. The online TCPA Hub, created in 2024, allowed for teams to revisit and engage with curriculum and supplemental resources, such as videos and articles, between training meetings.

There was also an evolution of how the program took place in Washington, DC. What began as a small part of other conferences evolved to an event with eight hours of online instruction, several support meetings, and a 3-day in-person training and meeting event exclusively for TCPA participants. Alumni shared that while attending the other conferences was beneficial in some ways, they would prefer more time in TCPA-specific training. In 2025, the first standalone training took place, and the response was overwhelmingly positive.

The alumni feedback allowed program organizers to examine what worked well, adjust each year, and grow the program to be relevant to the needs of teams. Their feedback reflects the positive benefits of participating in TCPA. Of all satisfaction surveys sent since 2019, **90% overall**

reported that TCPA made them more confident advocates.

One student commented in the alumni feedback survey: *“It absolutely made me so much more confident in advocating, and helped me become informed about how to do these things and how I can fight for what I believe in.”*

Others described institutional change: Staff alumni reported using TCPA lessons to organize open houses for policymakers and stakeholders, integrate advocacy into classwork, and redesign state IPSE Days. One noted: *“The opportunity to work alongside a student to promote their growth in policy advocacy was really meaningful. It was great to see the student speak up for themselves and others.”*

These ripple effects demonstrate that TCPA’s reach extends far beyond those meetings in Washington, DC.

Key Figures:

- there have been **88 participants from 25 states**
- **82% of students** report major policy knowledge gains
- **100% of staff** report improved advocacy capacity
- **90% of alumni** say they are more confident advocates
- **75% of alumni** continue to share advocacy messages publicly
- **125+ Congressional meetings** have taken place through TCPA

TCPA alumni are encouraged to share their experience with others, and many have gone on to publish blogs, articles, podcasts, and videos about their time as a Think College Policy Advocate.

Jaylin Brown, a 2025 Think College policy advocate and student in the Succeed+ program at the University of Missouri – St. Louis shared about his experience in the [UMSL Daily](#), the campus resource for daily news. *“It was an honor, and also I felt excited,”* he shared after his meetings with Senator Eric Schmitt and Representative Wesley Bell’s team. What motivated him most was the chance to push for greater equality: *“Disabled people need to be treated equally... that is why I*

do advocating.” Brown notes that the experience sparked a desire to continue the work, *“I started my advocacy career,”* he explained. It is not uncommon for participants to indicate that this program ignited a desire to pursue a career in advocacy. At minimum, most continue advocacy work even if not professionally.

In a Think College blog post titled [There Is No Doubt in My Mind](#), TCPA 2025 alumni and The College of New Jersey student Cobey Meyer captured the transformative experience of the advocacy training. *“There is now no doubt in my mind that I want to dedicate my life to advocating for people with disabilities,”* Meyer wrote. What began as a series of workshops and Hill visits evolved into a clear vision for the future. He wrote *“I asked people questions... the best way to make a change is by having a group of people supporting that cause.”* When speaking with legislators, the impact was undeniable: *“They listened to my story. It made me feel as if I could change the world for people with disabilities.”*



Whitley O’Neal, Chief of Staff for Missouri Representative Wesley Bell, stands with Jaylin Brown and Wen Zeng (TCPA 2025).

This is the “why” behind the Think College Policy Advocates program: equip students and staff to understand policy and empower them to share their personal experiences in ways that make lawmakers take notice.

Helen Nash (TCPA 2019), an alumna and once an employee of Highline College’s Achieve program, reflected on her experience in the college’s alumni

newsletter. Nash states that advocacy is not abstract, it is about action. She also emphasized how important it is for people to share their stories ***“so that those who listen will begin to rethink their perspective on what it means to be a person with intellectual disabilities in society.”***

“It’s important to fight for inclusion for higher ed,” she said. “I’m hoping those stories will help people to rethink and vote for elected officials who support inclusion.”

“I’m going out there to take immediate action on an issue I care about,” said Kenneth Kelty, a TCPA participant who went on to start his own podcasts, *“Exceeding Expectations with Kenneth Kelty”* and *“The Waiting Room.”* He says that participating in TCPA ***“gave me more advocacy experience and assured me to take the lead of podcast hosting.”***



Kenneth Kelty introducing keynote speaker, Liz Weintraub, at the 2025 HOPE NC Annual Inclusive Housing Summit.

Kelly Haan (TCPA 2023) from University of Colorado – Colorado Springs states in an Inside Think College blog post, ***“after completing TCPA, I feel so much more prepared as an advocate and a professional in this field.”***

Caroline Jurisich, a 2022 TCPA participant, describes the experience of watching her student, Nicholas Hadaway, discussing policy with Bill Cassidy, senior senator from Louisiana as something she will never forget: ***“Listening to Nicholas share his story with many of Louisiana’s senators’ and representatives’ offices was an experience that will stay with me forever. I spend a great deal of time teaching students how to***

advocate for themselves, and I often see them put their skills into action when it comes to decision-making, job assistance, and access to opportunities on our college campus. But it is not every day that I see my student sitting with Louisiana’s senior senator discussing policy, and how changes and additions to our laws will create a better future for Nicholas and others.”

Read more about Caroline’s experience and her thoughts on TCPA in this [Think College blog post](#).

Additionally, [this blog post](#) by Brenda Barrio and Lauryn Woolfolk (TCPA 2023), shares their recommendation about how advocacy can make a difference at a state and national level: ***When students, families, community members, and university staff work together, they can make a big impact!***

[Arthur Moreira writes about his TCPA experience in 2022](#), saying ***“It takes more than motivation, it takes realization, meaning that while it is important to learn about advocacy in school, we also need to work to actually practice those skills, to speak up for ourselves, and achieve our goals.”***

These stories are just a few of many. The impact of Think College Policy Advocates spreads across students, program staff, policymakers, legislative staff, states, and regions resulting in more advocates, support systems, and policy advancements for inclusive postsecondary education.

Imagining the Future of the TCPA Program

The TCPA program has been proven effective in developing skills in policy, advocacy, and leadership in its participants. Over the years, the program has undergone multiple iterations to improve its ability to impact participants and be delivered in a cost-effective yet impactful way. Testimonies from TCPA participants are proof that the training, teamwork, and travel can be a life-changing experience. Here are some ways this success could be built upon in the future.

MAINTAIN A NATIONAL TCPA PROGRAM

With a strong and tested curriculum and a detailed plan to manage the logistics of a national policy advocacy training, this program is well situated for replication and continuation. This report has detailed the structure and delivery methods used for the curriculum.

The TCPA program requires funding to operate. It also requires an entity to adopt this approach and continue to offer this training to students with intellectual disability and college program staff. There are operational expenses in terms of staff time; meeting expenses related to the in-person component of the training; and expenses related to supporting staff, coaches, and teams to travel to Washington, DC.

Each of these components could be funded differently or by more than one entity. For instance, a fundraising campaign to garner funds to cover travel expense stipends for participants would help support one of the most expensive aspects of the training. It has always been a goal of this program to include participants from different areas of the country, types of colleges, and with varying degrees of experience; providing money to support travel helps to level the playing field for teams. Some funding strategies to continue the TCPA program include donations for meeting space and meals, volunteer coaches, and an agency willing and able to provide staff for the operational and training aspects (or a funder willing to support those efforts).

When asked about her hope for the future of TCPA, Liz Weintraub responded:

“My hope is that more students can participate in TCPA either/or both on the federal or state levels. I believe that everyone, including people with ID, deserves the right to learn how to advocate. Advocacy is often busy because of deadlines. To include students with ID, it’s my hope that we learn to slow things down as well as using more plain language, so we can include students with ID in the process. I hope that can be a contribution from the disability community.”

IMPLEMENT TCPA AT THE STATE LEVEL

While Think College Policy Advocates focuses on policy and advocacy on a federal level, adaptation for state-level use is achievable. Since the National Coordinating Center began tracking state legislation in 2015, 71 bills have been introduced and 43 of those bills have passed across 22 states, providing funding and/or support for inclusive postsecondary education for students, program development, and/or state-level technical assistance centers. Often, legislation is focused in one of the following areas: student scholarship, program creation, program sustainability and enhancements, and technical assistance centers within the state. [The most recent tracking document](#) was updated in September 2025.

With about 60% of legislation introduced being passed and signed across the US, more bills are being introduced in state-level legislatures and more state-level policymakers are engaged. Creating and advocating for these bills is often a group effort composed of staff, students, and families. Adapting the TCPA program to the state level could create a more streamlined and efficient training model that results in more legislation. NCC and AUCD offer resources to those working to develop state legislation including examples of what is happening in other states.

While there are current state-level training programs that focus on training and advocating around disability services, these models tend to be on more broad and widespread topics. In contrast, the TCPA program is specifically concentrated on efforts around inclusive postsecondary education. Again, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Missouri, and North Carolina have developed or are developing advocacy programs inspired by the TCPA training.

Ultimately, more states could have more expansive legislation in scope and reach. This would include legislation that is either comprehensive and touches multiple parts of inclusive postsecondary education or separate pieces of legislation that support different areas

of inclusive postsecondary education. For example, many states are beginning to focus on the student access aspect of inclusive postsecondary education and are expanding current state scholarship models to include eligibility requirements for this category of students.

Adapting the TCPA program to state-level training allows advocacy in this area to be more ongoing and continuous, keeping inclusive postsecondary education at the forefront of policy conversations and work. At the federal level, the work is centered around increasing large-scale support of inclusive postsecondary education, while state-level work would directly influence the growth of programs and student access in that state, sometimes within just months.

The adaptation of this work has already begun with the NCC and the Think College Inclusive Higher Education Network creating a state-level curriculum based on the TCPA curriculum. The focus becomes less on understanding the makeup of the federal government and more on the relationship building that occurs within the TCPA training as well as the differing roles of state and federal level policymaking. While some components of this curriculum can be the same state to state, each state would need some individualization regarding its unique legislative structure. Much of the curriculum focuses on how to tell your story and how to connect your story to legislation and support. That remains true whether on the federal or state level.

State-level adaptation of TCPA could potentially drive impactful outcomes: creating stronger relationships with policymakers, accelerating meaningful legislative change, and ensuring that inclusive postsecondary education becomes a sustainable and expansive reality across the nation. Find state-level curriculum and materials at: [State Policy Resources](#).

DEVELOP A TCPA CERTIFICATION

In 2023, when the TCPA curriculum was really expanded, Think College staff started thinking how it would be excellent if TCPA alumni could indicate that they had participated in the program. Of course, many are talking about

their experience and publishing articles and blogs or speaking on podcasts, but it would be meaningful to define what it means to have gone through this experience and receive a certificate or badge of some kind to use on one's resume or in professional networking. By listing the skills developed and hours spent in training, those who come into contact with an alumni's resume or professional profile would know what to expect from a TCPA alumni.

A microcredential such as a badge could be developed to recognize individuals who have completed the Think College Policy Advocates training and demonstrated leadership skills in inclusive postsecondary education policy. The badge would indicate people have demonstrated skills in advocacy, leadership, communication, public speaking, policy awareness, and teamwork. To earn this badge, participants must have successfully completed the 10-hour TCPA training modules, prepared an advocacy message, and participated in a mock or real policy engagement activity.

MAINTAIN A TCPA ALUMNI NETWORK

An alumni network is a critical step with potential to continue the connections and motivation long after the TCPA experience ends. However, establishing an ongoing alumni network has not been easy. In 2023, we started using WhatsApp, a free messaging app that works across electronic devices, while we were in Washington, DC, to help with navigation and stick to the schedule. Once the event was over, alumni continued to text with each other, so we established the TCPA Alumni Facebook Group, thinking students would appreciate the space to connect with each other. Activity in the Facebook group has not been as robust as it was on WhatsApp, so this is something to be explored further. Additionally, we have an email list of TCPA alumni and those who indicated an interest in policy and advocacy, which includes over 900 names. If the right platform were introduced to current and former TCPA participants, it could yield some amazing opportunities for ongoing networking and personal and professional growth.

Conclusion

When this program was started in 2019, the intent was to create a training program that increased knowledge of federal policy and effective advocacy and met the learning needs of the participants. What's clear after offering the TCPA program over the course of five years, is that it is a powerful program with great potential to create lasting impact. That impact goes beyond policy work; the leadership aspect of the program, combined with the knowledge of policy and advocacy skills, gives participants the opportunity to use their voices in ways that will likely benefit them throughout the rest of their life. The proof is in the continued advocacy that participants have conducted since they attended TCPA and the products created that serve as lasting evidence.

Denise Rozell had this to say about the lasting effects of TCPA: ***“My hope for the students and staff who went through this program is that they take what they learned and apply it wherever they go to advocate for themselves and others. These tools can apply to any environment in which they find themselves – on their college campuses or in their places of employment, in their communities and, of course, in their interactions with state and federal policymakers.”***

Think College Policy Advocates has impacted 88 participants from 25 states, but in reality, the reach is much further. To start, participants held 125 meetings with national leaders in Washington, DC. Then, those teams went back to their campus communities and told their roommates, colleagues, and local leaders about what they learned. They shared their stories on social media and in college newsletters and publications. The ripple effect of TCPA is extensive.

Annual refinements to the TCPA curriculum and training approach have resulted in a solid, proven advocacy and leadership training that focuses on the importance of growing opportunities for students with intellectual disability to go to college while addressing

related disability issues of importance. It can be continued as a national or state-level training, using the existing curriculum and following the processes outlined in this report. Alumni of the program can and should be supported to stay in touch with each other and with the professional connections they made via their coaches and their DC meetings and continue their leadership and advocacy into the future.

Resources

The [Think College Policy Advocates page on the Think College website](#) features information about the program and is where application information was posted each year.

Find out [What's Happening in Your State](#) related to policy and legislation, as well as state and regional alliance activity.

Find other resources about policy and advocacy on [this designated resource by topic page](#).

[This spreadsheet](#) features state legislation related to inclusive postsecondary education activity and is updated annually. Use it to find out what bills have been proposed, have passed, or have been voted down.

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