

### Erik's Story: From Student to Teacher

*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

Early childhood education

Tennessee

Erik always wanted to teach and work with preschool-age children. While enrolled in Next Steps at Vanderbilt University, he pursued a US Department of Labor Registered Apprenticeship in Early Childhood Education, completing it in 2025.

Next Steps at Vanderbilt University is a 4-year inclusive higher education program committed to providing neurodiverse students an inclusive, transformational postsecondary education in academics, social and career development, and independent living, while honoring equality, compassion, and excellence in all endeavors. During his final two years in the Next Steps program, Erik logged 180 hours of training (including three Vanderbilt courses and one Experiential Seminar). He paired that coursework with, 10–12 hours weekly of on-the-job learning during his junior year, and 15–20 hours during his senior year. He transitioned from a pre-Registered Apprenticeship to Registered Apprenticeship status in his final year, meeting state-recognized competencies defined by the Department of Labor.

Because Next Steps already had established partnerships with local preschools, Erik was placed in multiple classrooms throughout his studies, gaining experience with children of different ages. His coursework and internships allowed him to hone skills in lesson planning, selecting appropriate read-aloud books, and classroom management. His mentors and instructors gave regular feedback, helping him improve along the way.

The credential Erik completed through his studies is recognized by the State of Tennessee, making him more competitive in the job market. Today, he works at Vanderbilt University's Child and Family Center, serving as an Assistant Teacher at the Acorn School. He relies on many of the skills he acquired in the credential program every day: how to respond when children are upset, how to maintain control when the classroom gets noisy, how to administer first aid, and how to stay attuned to students while juggling multiple tasks. He also picked up non-instructional but crucial life skills—navigating mass transit, using ride-sharing services, and managing stress.

His journey was supported by multiple layers. Each semester, a mentor teacher checked in on Erik's progress at work, peer mentors (Ambassa'Dores) helped with his homework, and his parents helped him choose classes aligned with his interests. Next Steps also planned his semesters strategically, balancing music courses with the education classes needed for the apprenticeship.



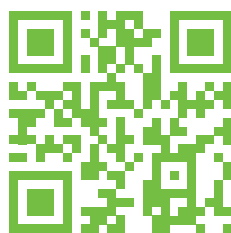
**"I love my job. It makes me happy to go to work every day—and it lets me pay for my utilities, rent for my apartment, and all my groceries. I'm so grateful I went through Next Steps so I could get this great job and support myself."**

## 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.



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See the data on employment  
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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](http://thinkcollege.net/projects/tcn)

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