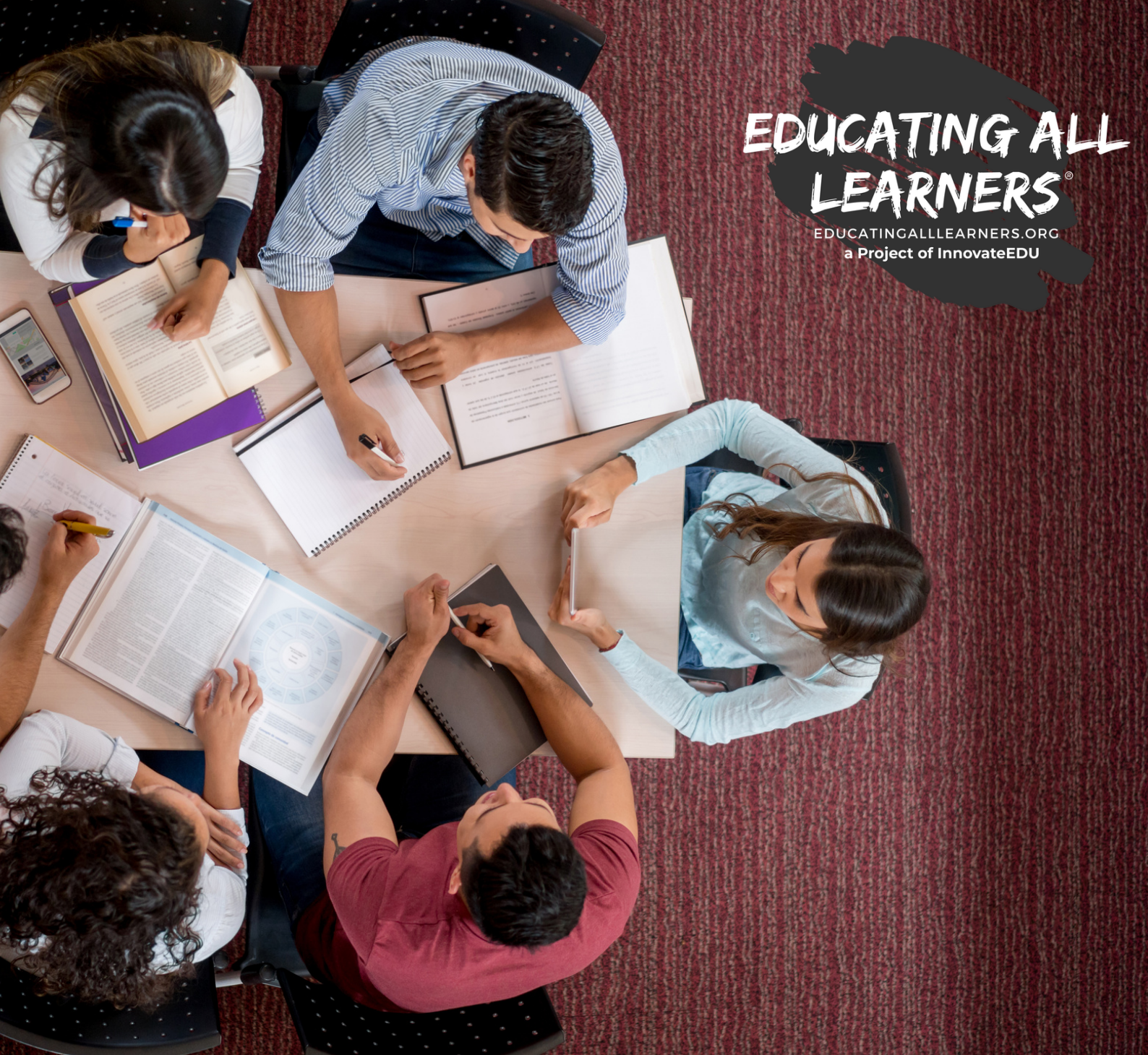


An overhead photograph of five students (three men and two women) sitting around a light-colored wooden table, studying. They are looking at various books and notebooks. One student is using a tablet. The table is on a red carpeted floor.

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# College Transitions:

## Expanding Postsecondary Access for Neurodivergent Students

By Dana Mandler



The Educating All Learners Alliance (EALA) brings together experts, teachers, and advocates for its annual Community of Action (CoA), an initiative focused on tackling the biggest challenges facing students with disabilities. During the convening, teams from different backgrounds and professions collaborate to brainstorm and develop real, innovative solutions for students with disabilities and their support networks. The community members then vote on which projects to fund, ensuring at least one group will walk away with the funding to drive real change.

The 2026 peer-selected project addresses a major, often overlooked milestone. College Transitions helps neurodivergent students and those with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) navigate the transition to higher education.

As leaders in the field, the College Transitions team brings a mix of national experience, research, and practical program development to the table.

**Dr. Meg Grigal** is the director of Think College at the University of Massachusetts Boston, which acts as the National Coordinating Center for all federally funded inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs.

**Dr. Lauren Bruno** serves as the Associate Director of Education and Training at the Kansas University Center on Disabilities focusing on improving post-school outcomes, competitive employment, and community participation for youth with disabilities.

**Dr. Lauren Watson** is the Director of Neuroinclusive Programs at Warren Wilson College where she leads the “Minds of All Kinds” initiative to support neurodivergent students through specialist coaching and Universal Design for Learning (UDL).



*The College Transitions team during the Educating All Learners Alliance (EALA) Community of Action convening.*

Drawing on their collective experience in higher education and advocacy, this group knows firsthand what bureaucratic labyrinths and other fraught roadblocks that neurodivergent students and students neurodivergent students and students with IDD must navigate. Often, these students are actively discouraged from pursuing higher education, leaving families without necessary tools or actionable information. While institutes of higher education offer support programs, a massive information gap prevents these families from knowing that college is a viable possibility and how to prepare for it.

EALA conducted an interview with the College Transitions leadership team to learn more about their process coming together. The team also discussed how they designed their project to meet the unique needs of the identified problem.

The interview, outlined below for brevity and clarity, demonstrates their process, their passion, and the future of neuroinclusive higher education.

## COLLABORATION DURING THE EVENT

### ***HOW DID YOUR TEAM COME TOGETHER DURING THE COMMUNITY OF ACTION (COA) CONVENING?***

Most of our team had backgrounds in higher education and disability, so it was easy to find common ground. All three of us share a foundational mission to expand postsecondary access, inclusive learning environments, and positive life outcomes for neurodivergent students and individuals with intellectual disabilities. Our complementary expertise spans the entire inclusion ecosystem—ranging from national policy oversight and transition research to direct, campus-based program delivery. Together, we combine the exact combination of macro-level technical assistance, transition planning, and on-the-ground implementation needed to create seamless pathways toward higher education, competitive employment, and community participation.

### ***WHAT FACTORS INFLUENCED YOUR DECISION TO FOCUS ON COLLEGE AWARENESS, PREPARATION, AND ADVOCACY SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WHO ARE NEURODIVERGENT, HAVE IDD, AND THEIR FAMILIES?***

From our experience in higher education and supporting transition-aged youth, **we know the journey to college for students with intellectual disability and neurodiversity can be challenging. Too often, students are discouraged from seeking out college pathways by educators and families may not receive adequate information or encouragement to help their child explore college options.** We wanted to create a resource that not only highlights opportunities but also provides families with practical tools and guidance to create a plan for the future.

### ***WHAT CHALLENGES DID YOU FACE IN FINALIZING YOUR PROJECT IDEA, AND HOW DID YOU NAVIGATE THEM?***

Our primary challenge revolved around balancing a tight timeline and budget constraints while avoiding static resource hubs that often overwhelm students. With guidance from our coaches, we pivoted on our final day to design an accessible, step-by-step online course enriched with lived expertise. This structured format breaks down complex content into manageable steps while remaining achievable within our one-year development window. Ultimately, this approach ensures the project is both sustainable after funding ends and genuinely supportive for families.



## **HOW DID YOUR TEAM COLLABORATE TO DEVELOP AND REFINE THE PITCH DECK, AND HOW DID YOU OVERCOME POTENTIAL DISAGREEMENTS OR ROADBLOCKS?**

*To create our pitch deck, we divided the work; some of us provided background info, others focused on formatting and revising the Google template. It was a team effort. One of our team members guided us toward focusing on serving students and families directly and that drove us to ultimately land on our curriculum development approach.*



## **ABOUT THE PROJECT**

### **CAN YOU DESCRIBE THE PROJECT AND THE PROBLEM IT AIMS TO SOLVE?**

We chose to create a college transition curriculum for students and families, helping them understand current higher education offerings. Additionally, we wanted them to learn how to prepare for college, conduct the college search, and ultimately create an action plan with a transition coach to set them up for success.

Our project seeks to empower students and families to know that college is possible and to offer guidance and resources to help them develop a plan to achieve their goals.

### **WHY IS THIS WORK IMPORTANT, PARTICULARLY FOR STUDENTS WHO ARE NEURODIVERGENT, HAVE IDD, AND THEIR FAMILIES?**

College options for neurodivergent students and those with intellectual disability remain limited. Yet, higher education dramatically improves employment, independence, and overall quality of life.



While these students thrive when given appropriate support, the shift from high school introduces unfamiliar environments and increased demands for self-advocacy. Without structured preparation, this complex transition can create overwhelming barriers to success. Our work bridges this critical gap by equipping students with the tools needed to confidently navigate campus life and academic expectations.

This course supports the whole family system as roles shift from primary advocacy to collaborative partnership. By using evidence-based practices, we prepare both students and families to address academic, social, and personal changes in tandem. This shared foundation reduces uncertainty, strengthens communication, and fosters a sense of belonging before students step foot on campus.

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### ***HOW WILL THE ONLINE TRAINING COURSES EXPAND ACCESS TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS WHO ARE NEURODIVERGENT OR HAVE IDD?***

This course expands access by raising awareness of over 300 nationwide college programs tailored for neurodivergent students and those with intellectual disability. Unlike traditional static resources, our curriculum guides students and families in tandem through co-learning activities that prepare the entire support system. When families understand what is possible and what preparation is required, they can actively explore postsecondary options aligned with the student's personal goals.



What sets our approach apart is the integration of personalized transition coaching to bridge the gap between learning and action. After completing the course, each student and family team will work with a coach to build a concrete plan for steps like applying for financial aid, touring campuses, or connecting with disability services. Meeting students where they are ensures they translate knowledge into real-world progress toward higher education. By combining targeted instruction with individualized guidance, we create a clear, actionable pathway into postsecondary learning.

Regardless of their neurotype or disability status, students need their support system to help them navigate this major life transition

### ***WHAT MAKES YOUR APPROACH DIFFERENT FROM EXISTING POSTSECONDARY ACCESS EFFORTS FOR STUDENTS WHO ARE NEURODIVERGENT OR HAVE IDD?***

There are many transition-to-college resources available for students with disabilities; however, few focus specifically on students with intellectual disability or neurodiversity. Our approach shares targeted information tailored to student and family needs, builds in shared activities for co-learning, and provides support for developing an action plan once the curriculum is completed.

### ***WHAT FEEDBACK HAVE YOU RECEIVED SO FAR AND HOW HAS IT INFLUENCED YOUR NEXT STEPS?***

We discussed how to ensure the curriculum content is parallel; meaning what do students need to know about college planning and what do parents need to know. We also talked about the supports students might need to navigate the curriculum and which platforms might be best suited for their needs. We continue to work with our partners at EALA to develop a plan that maximizes the project's sustainability.



# IMPACT AND FUTURE PLANS

## ***WHAT SHORT-TERM IMPACT DO YOU HOPE TO ACHIEVE WITH THIS PROJECT AND HOW DO YOU ENVISION THE LONG-TERM IMPACT OF THIS WORK?***

In the short term, we know that this project fills a gap. The curriculum is a step in the right direction to empower and guide students and families to make informed choices when looking for a college. It's basically a starter kit for preparing for this process. The long-term impact may depend on where the curriculum is hosted and how we can provide sustainable access to it without grant funding. We will continue to explore ways to ensure families and students have access to this resource.

## ***WHAT ARE YOUR NEXT STEPS FOR PILOTING AND REFINING THE ONLINE TRAINING COURSES?***

Once we have the content developed, we plan to pilot it with a smaller group of participants to gather feedback and make necessary adjustments before a broader launch. We are in the process of content creation and hope to launch the pilot later in the fall.

## ***HOW DO YOU PLAN TO SUSTAIN AND EXPAND THIS WORK BEYOND THE INITIAL COA FUNDING?***

We will explore partnerships with organizations and other potential funders to see how we can support sustained access. Any online learning resource needs to be maintained and updated to ensure it remains effective.

## ***WHAT DOES THE REST OF THE YEAR LOOK LIKE FOR YOUR TEAM IN TERMS OF IMPLEMENTATION AND COLLABORATION?***

Our regular meetings will focus on content development and refinement throughout the summer, followed by recruitment for the pilot in the fall. We will adjust our content and tools in late fall and launch in full as winter approaches. We hope to have a full cohort of participants completing the curriculum as we enter the new year.



# CONCLUSION

College Transitions is bridging a critical gap for neurodivergent students and learners with IDD by rethinking standard transition supports. What began as an idea for a resource hub evolved into a dynamic, active online curriculum designed to empower students and their families to confidently prepare for a transition to higher education. As the team continues to develop their content, pilot testing, and implementation, their focus remains on refining the learner experience so that every student and family receives the guidance they need.

While creating this high-quality resource is a necessary and productive first step, ensuring it remains operational and accessible is key to its sustainability. Recognizing that grant funding is limited, the team is actively partnering with EALA and seeking other funding sources to build a sustained model.



*Educating All Learners Alliance (EALA)  
Community of Action convening.*