



UCF

**Florida Center for Students
with Unique Abilities**

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

FLORIDA CENTER FOR STUDENTS WITH UNIQUE ABILITIES



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 2024-25

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2024-25 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OVERVIEW

The Florida Center for Students with Unique Abilities (FCSUA, the Center) serves as the state coordinating center to establish and support comprehensive transition and postsecondary programs, in collaboration with universities, state, and technical colleges. The overall goal is to increase independent living and competitive integrated employment for individuals with an intellectual disability.

Located in the College of Community Innovation and Education at the University of Central Florida in Orlando, Florida, the Center was established following the passing of the Florida Postsecondary Comprehensive Transition Program Act (the Act; section 1004.6495, F.S.), effective July 1, 2016. The Act charged the Center and its director with implementation of the Act, and meeting the accountability requirements specified therein, including submission of an annual report by October 1 each year.

This Executive Summary (ES) provides highlights of the Center's work and impact during the reporting year, from July 1, 2024 to June 30, 2025. There were 33 approved Florida Postsecondary Comprehensive Transition Programs (FPCTPs) during this reporting year. Programs were required to submit annual reports to the Center, reflecting student and program information from the 2024-25 academic year (AY). Reported student data was derived from the 26 FPCTPs with student enrollment. Stories from FPCTP alumni and program leaders are featured to further highlight the impact of the Center's work during the 2024-25 AY.

This year's Executive Summary was written with contributions from our summer 2025 communications intern Ulises Castellanos Bocourt.

Approved FPCTPS



33

There are **33** Approved Florida Postsecondary Comprehensive Transition Programs located at **35** institutions on **38** campuses.

Institutions with an Approved FPCTP

Broward College
Cape Coral Technical College
Emerald Coast Technical College
Erwin Technical College
First Coast Technical College
Florida Atlantic University
Florida Gulf Coast University
Florida International University
Florida State College at Jacksonville
Fred K. Marchman Technical College
Ft. Myers Technical College
Indian River State College
Lindsey Hopkins Technical College
Lively Technical College
Manatee Technical College
McFatter Technical College

Miami-Dade College
Miami Lakes Educational Center & Technical College
Okaloosa Technical College
Orange Technical College - West Campus
Osceola Technical College
Pinellas Technical College - St. Petersburg Campus
Polk State College
Ridge Technical College
Robert Morgan Educational Center & Technical College
Santa Fe College
Sheridan Technical College
Southeastern University
St. Petersburg College
Tallahassee State College
The College of the Florida Keys

Traviss Technical College
University of Central Florida
University of North Florida
University of South Florida - St. Petersburg



GRANTS & SCHOLARSHIPS

The Center provides **initial and continuing grants** to institutions of higher education to support the implementation of approved Florida Postsecondary Comprehensive Transition Programs. Initial and continuing grants provide necessary funding to FPCTPs for staffing, equipment/technology, curriculum development, and other essential purchases to implement their approved programs successfully.

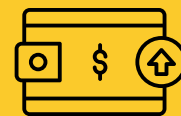


\$16.2 MILLION

Grant Awards for Program Implementation



The Center also provides scholarship funds for eligible students enrolled in a Florida Postsecondary Comprehensive Transition Program who meet Satisfactory Academic Progress. Scholarship funds are used to cover expenses incurred during a student's postsecondary education experience, including, but not limited to: tuition & academic fees, textbooks, uniforms, supplies, transportation/bus fees, industry certification exams, technology, and more.



\$3.2 MILLION

Amount of Student Scholarships issued

KELLY SOUTHMAYD

PROGRAM DIRECTOR

* SEU LINK

📍 SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY LAKELAND, FL

Helping students find their purpose is the mission of the Southeastern University Link program. As SEU Link's program director, Kelly Southmayd has found that for students with an intellectual disability, having meaningful employment is the key to confidence and independent living.

The program focuses on preparing students for the workforce through earning the Link Postsecondary Transition Certificate of Professional Readiness, then choosing from five concentrations: Art and Design, Business/Retail, Fitness, Hospitality and Tourism, and Education. From the moment they begin their first semester, students enroll in an internship prep course with mentors to help them develop soft skills and job readiness skills, earning a Florida Ready to Work credential, and job shadowing in their field of choice.

The course prepares students for the rest of the program, where they begin internships with the Link program's local partners. Partnerships include on-campus sites, such as the podcasting department and the bookstore, and off-campus sites, including hotels, classrooms, churches, the Florida Chamber of Commerce and more recently the YMCA, with some employers having employed students after graduation.

As the students work their internships, Southmayd said that hours are increased and supervision is reduced over time to provide the students with a real-world work environment, while also being able to meet with an instructor weekly to process and find opportunities for improvement.

One of SEU Link's graduates is a fashion designer who has had shows in New York Fashion Week and Tampa Bay Fashion Week. Southmayd said that the biggest amount of growth that she sees in Link's students is when they feel that they are useful and contributing to society.

Southmayd said that SEU Link is looking to expand by adding an apprenticeship program in the near future to help make the transition to the workforce a more engaging, hands-on experience for the students.



"THE BIGGEST AMOUNT OF GROWTH I SEE IN LINK STUDENTS IS WHEN THEY FEEL THAT THEY ARE USEFUL AND CONTRIBUTING TO SOCIETY."

ERIKA ESCOBAR

PROGRAM COORDINATOR



**“THEY WANT WHAT
EVERYBODY ELSE WANTS...
AND THIS IS THEIR PATHWAY
TO DO IT.”**

STAR Academy is a first-year FPCTP at Miami Dade College’s Wolfson Campus. Erika Escobar, the campus’ director of ACCESS disability services, has overseen the program since the start last summer. She said the starting point for STAR Academy was looking for a deficit in the community that their students with intellectual disabilities would be able to fill and carry on with meaningful employment.

Surrounded by the hotels and restaurants of Downtown Miami, the program saw the opportunity to begin credential offerings with two tracks: Hospitality, which earns the student both a Rooms Division Management and a Rooms Division Specialist credential; and Culinary, which earns the student Culinary Arts Management Operations and Chef Apprentice credentials.

* STAR ACADEMY

📍 MIAMI DADE COLLEGE MIAMI, FL

Escobar said the students also earn smaller certificates along the way such as Florida Ready to Work, SafeStaff Food Handler certification and the program’s own internal certificate that lets employers know the students have been prepared for the field.

While the eight students currently enrolled won’t begin internships until spring 2026, they’ve already connected with local employers in the hospitality and culinary fields. Escobar said that the students went on a field trip to the Hilton in Downtown Miami and that the program also has built a partnership with the InterContinental Miami hotel. The students work with a job coach who has connected with other local hotels and restaurants, ensuring that there are many different employment opportunities for the students.

Beyond technical training, the program also emphasizes challenging the students and building their sense of independence. Escobar found that many of the students weren’t pushed in high school and have not been taught to believe in their own abilities. She makes sure the students know that they are responsible for themselves and are just as capable as anyone else. Since enrollment, she has seen a newfound confidence in them.

Looking forward to the the future, Escobar is working to expand STAR Academy to some of the other Miami Dade College’s eight campuses and offer new credential tracks such as childcare. She believes college is for anybody who wants to come and learn, regardless of their ability levels.

JUDITH WILEY

PROGRAM COORDINATOR

* SOAR

📍 LIVELY TECHNICAL COLLEGE TALLAHASSEE, FL

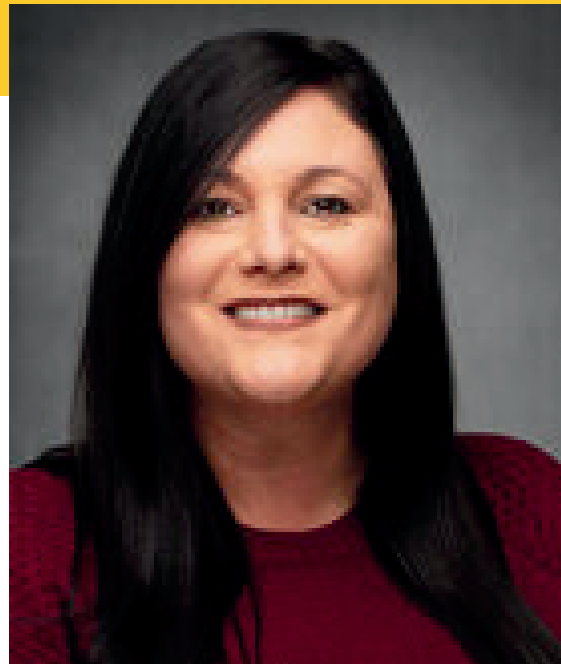
Judith Wiley has seen Lively Technical College's SOAR program fly to new heights since it started with a grant from FCSUA in 2021. Born from a collaboration between Lively's previous director Shelly Bell and State Representative Allison Tant, the program expected only one or two students to be enrolled in the first year. SOAR shattered those expectations by having 12 students enrolled in the program that year.

Since then, Wiley has worked to expand the program, having 30 students enrolled during the 2024-25 academic year. The students choose from one of seven credential programs offered, including Specialized Career Instruction - Comprehensive, Building Trades and Construction Design Technology, HVAC, Automotive Service Technology, Nails Specialty, and Facial Specialty.

Wiley said SOAR is dedicated to ensuring students with an intellectual disability succeed and grow independently. Within the program, students are offered internship opportunities and often gain employment after completion. SOAR thrives on community and has connections with local partners related to the credential fields that help graduates find the meaningful employment they seek. Wiley said some of the places SOAR completers are employed include K-12 schools, universities and Publix. Others are employed in HVAC at FAMU, cooking at Chick-fil-A, and facilities and student services at Lively itself.

One of SOAR's success stories highlights a completer who is deaf. Wiley said while enrolled in the fundamental food service skills course, he set a goal to live independently. At the beginning, he was living with his parents and wiping tables at Chick-fil-A. By the end of the program, he was working 30 hours a week and had moved from cleaning to cooking using skills that he learned during his time in SOAR. He currently lives in his own apartment with his pet cat.

Stories like this keep Wiley at the head of SOAR, motivated to ensure that the program dives headfirst into the future and continues to provide opportunities for all students with an intellectual disability.



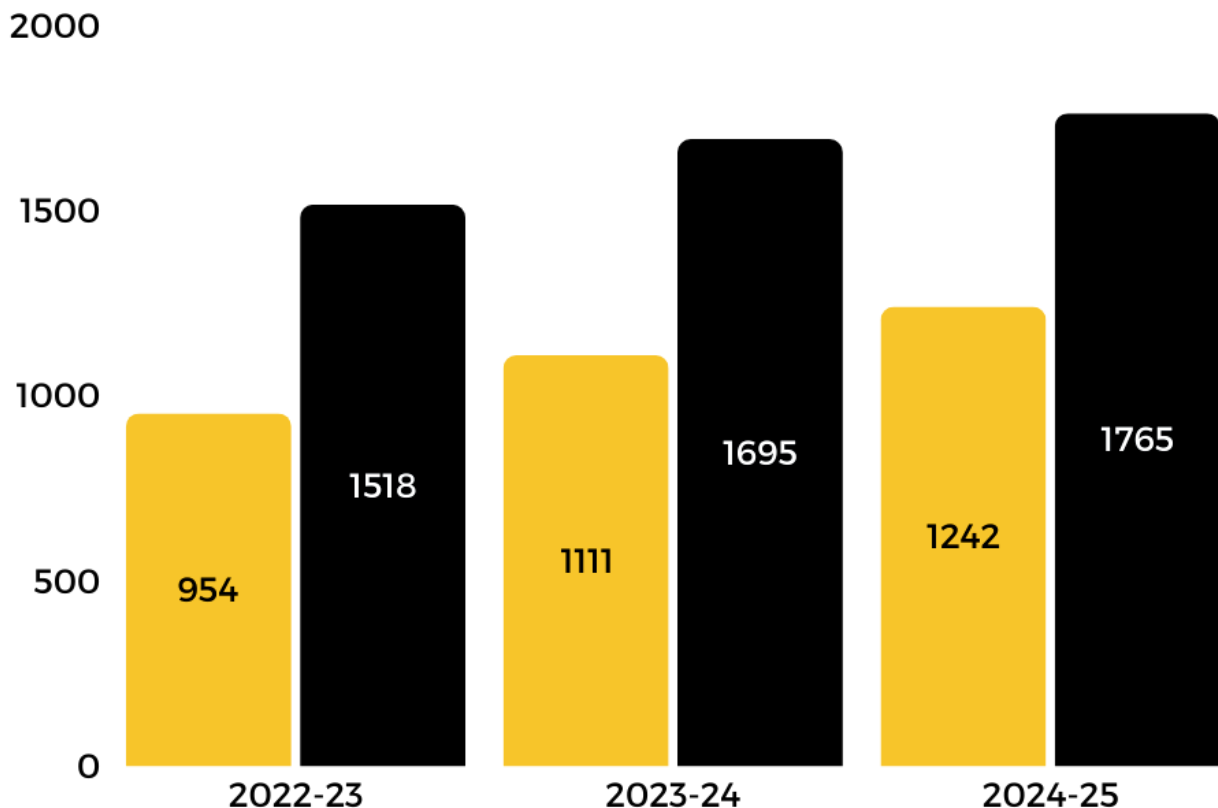
**SOAR IS DEDICATED TO
ENSURING STUDENTS WITH
INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES
SUCCEED AND GROW
INDEPENDENTLY."**



COURSE ENROLLMENT

One of the main purposes of Florida Postsecondary Comprehensive Transition Programs is to provide a well-rounded collegiate experience for students with an intellectual disability. This purpose is achieved through the enrollment of students in **courses with students without disabilities** available on campus. During the 2024-25 academic year, students were enrolled in a total of 1765 courses. Of those courses, 1242 were courses taken with their peers without disabilities.

- Courses Alongside Students without Disabilities
- Total Courses Enrolled



STUDENT PROFILES

Every year, during the Florida Postsecondary Education Program Planning Institute (FLPEPPI), three student completers are invited to participate in the FLPEPPI Student Panel. During this panel discussion, students share stories about their lives before enrolling in a Florida Postsecondary Comprehensive Transition Program, how college boosted their confidence, their experiences in college, and their post-graduation career plans. Following the panel, members of the audience are given an opportunity to ask questions to the students.

The panel is a highlight of the FLPEPPI every year, with audience members remarking on how powerful and impactful hearing the student stories are each year, and reminding everyone of the importance of Florida Postsecondary Comprehensive Transition Programs.

This year's panel was no exception. Nickayla Bennet, Nile Nanke and Jessica Gottlieb, all 2025 completers of their respective programs, shared how much confidence and job preparation skills they built during their time enrolled in the programs. The students on the panel are also spotlighted in this year's Executive Summary, highlighting their journey before, during and after college. These students' stories serve as a powerful reminder that everyone who has a dream to attend college should have the opportunity to make that dream come true, and FPCTPs are a great opportunity for students with an intellectual disability.



From left: Nickayla Bennett, from Build Your Future at Orange Technical College - West Campus, Nile Nanke, from FGCU R.I.S.E. at Florida Gulf Coast University, and Jessica Gottlieb, from Seahawk NEST at Broward College, speak during the 2025 FLPEPPI Student Panel.

NILE NANKE

FGCU R.I.S.E.

* FLORIDA GULF COAST UNIVERSITY

* COMMUNITY EMPLOYMENT CREDENTIAL

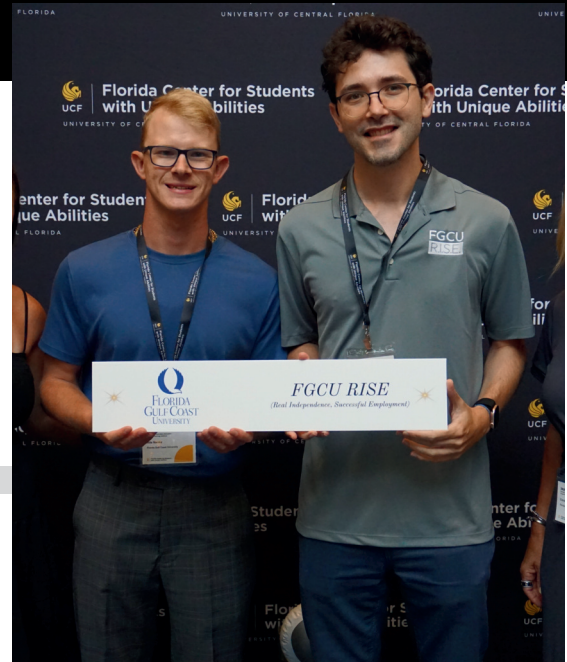
Working hard and showing up is what Nile Nanke embodies most as a completer of FGCU's R.I.S.E. program. Having earned a credential in Community Employment, he continues to push forward, following his dreams one step at a time.

After enrolling in R.I.S.E. and living away from home for the first time, Nile said he initially found it scary. It was challenging for him to get to class on time and to beat nervousness. Still, throughout the program he built his confidence, managing to fill his schedule with campus events, volunteering, socializing and his current job.

Within the program, Nile built the critical life and job skills necessary during his job search. He learned how to write resumes, manage a hectic schedule and what it takes to keep a job. Nile interned with the University's sports department organizing equipment, cleaning and unloading boxes. He uses his experience from what he learned during the program in his current job at Under Armour, where he works part-time, organizing the store's inventory.

Previously aspiring to become an FBI Agent and a businessman, Nile's ultimate dream is to become a sports broadcaster. Inspired by personalities like Charles Barkley and Stephen A. Smith, Nile said he's developing his public speaking skills and is learning how to edit video and livestream from YouTube as a stepping stone in his plan. He also has ideas of launching a podcast that would feature guests from his life including family, friends and mentors.

Although Nile said he still struggles sometimes, he makes sure never to give up and stays focused on the promise he made to himself and his family. Now that he is moving into his own house, he's applying everything he's learned throughout his experience and keeps leading by example.



"THROUGHOUT THE PROGRAM, HE BUILT HIS CONFIDENCE, MANAGING TO FILL HIS SCHEDULE WITH CAMPUS EVENTS, VOLUNTEERING, SOCIALIZING AND NOW HIS WORK."

JESSICA GOTTLIEB

SEAHAWK NEST

* BROWARD COLLEGE

* PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYMENT CREDENTIAL

Jessica Gottlieb knew from an early age that she wanted to help others. She would check in if someone didn't feel well and would offer support when her classmates needed it. Her instinct to care never faded, but as she got older, the path forward wasn't always clear.

As soon as her mother, Irene, found out about Broward College's Seahawk NEST Academy, she encouraged Jessica to apply, and Jessica was accepted in the program.

During her program, Jessica would build her own soft skills while also helping students. She earned a Professional Services Certificate and built real-world skills in communication, time management, and independence.

Through the program, Jessica completed an internship at the Broward County Library, where she would read books to children and clean tables and toys. She also completed another internship at the College's testing center, working on her communication skills, helping students get to class on time and guiding visitors all throughout campus.

Jessica loves to watch the Disney Channel in her free time, but she doesn't just want to look in from the outside. Her biggest dream is to work for Disney. After years of family trips to the parks and an early love for the stories and characters given to her by her parents, she envisions herself being part of the magic as a cast member.

Jessica currently works part-time at the testing center where she enjoys interacting with students and helping them with their needs, takes public transportation on her own and navigates campus independently. Her growth has been steady, marked by her self-starter attitude and determination. With the Disney College Program in her sights, Jessica continues to push forward, ready for what comes next.



**“HER BIGGEST DREAM IS TO WORK FOR DISNEY ... SHE ENVISIONS HERSELF
BEING PART OF THE MAGIC AS A CAST MEMBER”**

NICKAYLA BENNETT

BUILD YOUR FUTURE



Nickayla Bennett's journey began with a simple love: braiding hair. What started as a hobby turned into a career thanks to the Build Your Future program at Orange Technical College, where she studied cosmetology and received hands-on experience, developing her independence.

During her time at Build Your Future, Nickayla learned essential job and social skills needed to succeed in the workplace. She also practiced braiding hair on mannequins and earned her BARBICIDE Certification, scoring a perfect 100 on her infection control exam. Her enthusiasm and growing skills caught the attention of her mentors, helping her get an internship at The Lox Bar hair salon.

* ORANGE TECHNICAL COLLEGE

* PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYMENT CREDENTIAL

After a successful nine-week internship, she was hired part-time at the salon. She checks in clients, washes hair, cleans equipment, and finds the most enjoyment in braiding hair and folding towels.

When she's not at the salon, Nickayla can be found volunteering at Equine Angels, a horse stable in Clarcona, where she brushes, braids and rides horses. Nickayla dreams of one day owning her own salon and living near a farm, where she can continue doing hair and caring for animals. Her mother Nicola said she's already a familiar face in her community singing and dancing. She said that even Miss America winner Ericka Dunlap stopped to take a picture with her.

For Nickayla, the future is braided with confidence and care, and she wouldn't have it any other way.

**"FOR NICKAYLA, THE FUTURE IS BRAIDED WITH CONFIDENCE AND CARE,
AND SHE WOULDN'T HAVE IT ANY OTHER WAY"**

FROM ENROLLMENT



360



* Students enrolled in FPCTPs

89%



* Students who maintained satisfactory academic progress

2024-25
Academic Year

91%

* Retention rate



132

* Completers



TO GRADUATION

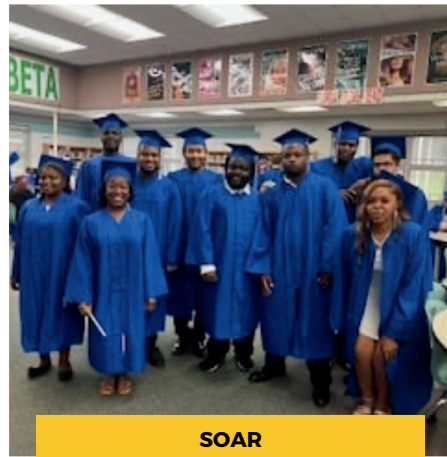


2025 FPCTP Completers



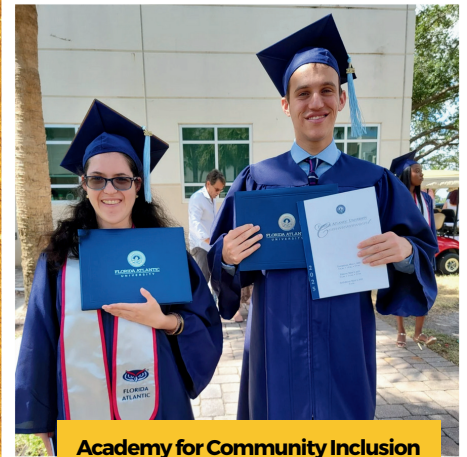
Unique Professionals

Pinellas Technical College



SOAR

Lively Technical College



Academy for Community Inclusion

Florida Atlantic University



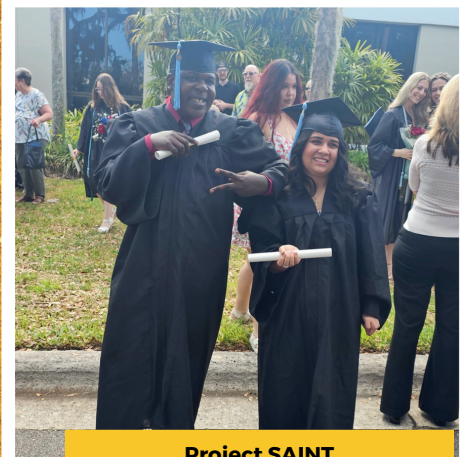
SEU LINK

Southeastern University



Eagle Connections

Tallahassee State College



Project SAINT

Santa Fe College



Build Your Future

Sheridan Technical College



Project TOPS

**Robert Morgan Educational Center
& Technical College**



Grow Your Future

McFatter Technical College



2025 FPCTP Completers



Project EDGE

Manatee Technical College



Okaloosa UP

Okaloosa Technical College



FGCU RISE

Florida Gulf Coast University



HIRE

School District of Lee County



UCF IES

University of Central Florida



UMatter

University of South Florida

CONCLUSION

LOOKING BACK

During this reporting year, FCSUA continued to implement the Act. The Center provided technical support to existing and newly developed FPCTPs to improve and expand opportunities for students with an intellectual disability. Through the year, the Center maintained an active agenda of working with key partners to disseminate information to institutions of higher education and other constituents about the Act, FPCTPs, and available support and resources from FCSUA. The programs maintained a steady course of providing high-quality programs to students. Programs implemented innovative recruitment and support strategies that yielded an increase in student enrollment and program completion. Institutions continue to express interest in developing an FPCTP, with three becoming approved programs, increasing the number of approved programs to 33 programs.



LOOKING AHEAD

During the 2025-26 academic year, the Center anticipates a continued positive growth in student enrollment. Additionally, program completion with earned credentials and secure employment upon completion are expected for the next reporting year. Based on the responses from institutions of higher education response to professional development and outreach efforts, the Center anticipates an increase in the number of approved programs across the state. The Center continues to take the charge from the Act seriously and strives to work towards developing and supporting more programs for students with an intellectual disability to attend college, earn a meaningful credential, and gain employment upon completion.



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UCF

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