



Executive Summary

TYPE YOUR RESPONSE IN THE BOX BELOW, IT WILL EXPAND AS NEEDED.

(1) Collegiate Academies is committed to ensuring that every student receives the supports, services, and instruction they need to be prepared for their most rigorous option after high school.

The mission of Collegiate Academies is to build world-class public schools that prepare all students for college success and lives of unlimited opportunity.

Collegiate Academies’ staff, students, board, and partners are united in an unshakeable belief in the potential of schools to transform a child’s life. We focus on serving students in high school and after because our shared belief is completely unbounded by time: all students, including those in high-poverty environments, can learn and achieve at the highest levels, regardless of their academic success to date.

Success for Collegiate means closing the opportunity gap for students with disabilities as much as for those without.

Collegiate’s commitment to serving all students not only sets us apart from other schools, but also drives comprehensive support services and specialized programming for our students with diverse learning needs. By the time a student with an intellectual or developmental disability crosses the stage at graduation to signify the end of their 12th grade year, they have completed a rigorous program, worked toward their maximum potential, and are prepared to pursue engaging opportunities post-graduation. We celebrate them just as we do their classmate heading to a prestigious liberal arts college, confident that both students are going on to pursue rigorous and dignified outcomes.

As the Collegiate Academies network grew over the last ten years and more classes began to graduate, we realized that despite offering high quality programming to meet the needs of our students with the most significant disabilities in high school, the post-secondary opportunities for these students were few and far between in Louisiana and New Orleans. **We cannot achieve our mission to prepare all students for lives of unlimited opportunity without identifying meaningful and rigorous post-secondary opportunities for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.**

In response, Collegiate developed Opportunities Academy (“OA”), Collegiate’s signature approach to addressing the long overlooked gap in post-secondary public education programming for students with disabilities, offering students the opportunity to receive up to four additional years of tuition-free, individualized services in a college-like setting that spans the transition from high school to adulthood. OA is a one-of-a-kind, rigorous transition program providing students with intellectual and developmental disabilities with the academic and vocational skills they will need to pursue their desired levels of independence and employment. As a program housed within our existing high schools, OA has already been able to produce exciting results for our students. However, we seek to expand the regional impact by creating an entire school dedicated to innovative transition programming for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Collegiate Academies launched the initial pilot of OA for a small group of students at Abramson Sci Academy in fall 2014. By April of its pilot year, 80% of OA students had already achieved their transition goals. Recognizing the power of this program, Collegiate launched a second OA program at G.W. Carver High School two years later, in fall 2016. OA students participate in a social graduation after having completed their traditional 9th-12th grade year, and then enroll in OA’s programming between the ages of 18 and 21.



As its own school, Opportunities Academy will be more inclusive, seeking to serve students with intellectual and developmental disabilities from non-Collegiate Academies schools across the city to provide a pathway and the support to achieve their highest level of independence in their pursuit of meaningful and fulfilling personal and professional outcomes.

(2) Success for each Opportunities Academy student will be highly individualized. OA will provide students and their families with the personalized supports to define and achieve goals that will prepare each student to reach their fullest potential in adulthood.

We aspire to open Opportunities Academy as a tuition-free school to empower young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities with the resources and experiences they need to actively participate in their communities and lead fulfilling adult lives with maximum independence.

OA is designed to resemble an independent college, with students on pathways towards their chosen vocational and independent living skills. Upon entering OA, the student and their IEP team meet to develop the student's person-centered plan, or PATH (Planning Alternative Tomorrows of Hope) plan, which includes their desired employment outcome along with goals related to independent living and community access. All services are then aligned through experiential learning, with a strong focus on internships and first-hand independent and professional experiences to best prepare the student to reach their outlined goals. OA will serve students who have either completed or are working to complete a LAA1 diploma. Students who arrive without a diploma will receive functional, experiential instruction to help them complete their academic requirements, while giving them work-based learning experiences.

Students in OA will receive specialized supports to achieve their fullest potential across the following categories:

- **Independent Living:** Are students prepared to live independent and robust lives with proper levels of support?
- **Family Supports:** Are families able to navigate available public agencies to best meet their child's needs?
- **Meaningful Career:** Do students leave public education and transition to paid and meaningful employment that aligns with their most rigorous goals?
- **Community Access:** Upon exiting public education, do students know how to effectively and authentically participate in the community?

All students will participate in an internship work opportunity on-site at Opportunities Academy, or an externship work experience through an OA partner off-campus. Each student will participate in a daily movement class, designed based on best practices for students with disabilities.

OA students will develop career skills, become more independent in daily living skills such as money management and cooking, and learn how to access their community and explore opportunities in recreation and leisure. All of these tools will help them to lead fulfilling adult lives after completing their time with us.

Desired outcomes for each student will be aligned to each student's personal goals and defined in partnership with the student, their family, and their IEP team. For some students success will be defined as securing employment in their industry of choice, while for others it may be achieving maximum independence through mobility and mastery of a personal communication device.

(3) Opportunities Academy is strongly aligned to the district's priorities.

Opportunities Academy satisfies Priority Three by creating a high school for students ages 15-21 that is entirely dedicated to programming that **explores non-traditional pathways to college and careers for students with**



intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Opportunities Academy also satisfies Priority One by creating a school entirely dedicated to **addressing the unique needs of diverse learners, and creating a more inclusive environment for the needs of all kids in the Orleans Parish School District.** The school will have a particular focus on Focus Area 2 through its highly individualized pathways designed specially **for students with low-incidence disabilities.**

(4) Opportunities Academy creates a post-secondary atmosphere that provides personalized experiential learning for students with disabilities to gain the skills they need to achieve their fullest adult potential.

Collegiate has a strong track record of success in creating and implementing innovative programs that serve students with disabilities in public school settings. Our approach to overcoming big challenges for students with disabilities leverages the deep expertise of members of our team, [studies of strategies](#) being implemented across the country, and focuses on [setting ambitious goals](#) for students with their most rigorous post-secondary outcomes in mind. This successful approach to addressing big-picture needs for students with disabilities has been recognized by Louisiana Department of Education, which commissioned a [comprehensive report](#) with specific guidance for schools and districts seeking to develop and implement innovative approaches to serving students with disabilities. OA has also already garnered national attention from education news outlet [the74.com](#) and the [Walton Family Foundation](#).

In 2016, a coalition of state governments outlined best practices in [a comprehensive report](#) on workforce development for people with disabilities. OA aligns to the report’s four key goals: create equal opportunity for and treatment of persons with disabilities, ensure their full participation in society, support their economic self-sufficiency, and foster independent living, skills development, and access to long-term services and supports.

OA strives to feel like a real college campus so that students with intellectual and developmental disabilities can have an authentic and individually-driven post-secondary experience. Upon enrollment, students choose classes from a course catalog modeled on those of four-year institutions. Prior to enrollment, and then on an ongoing basis, students in OA are immersed in courses and instruction that work toward their person-centered plan, with goals in the areas of independent living, community access, and career readiness.

The person-centered plan, or PATH (Planning Alternative Tomorrows of Hope) plan, serves as the cornerstone of student progress towards goals, with each level of the rubric helping students to target and develop a variety of skills grounded in the major domains of transition necessary for an independent adult life. OA supports students in reaching their individualized goals and monitors their progress in the major domains of transition, including employability, daily living, community, personal life, personal interests, and lifelong learning. The instruction is as practical as it is academic, with communication and problem-solving skills being honed alongside job awareness, transportation navigation, nutrition, and math and reading.

Daily schedules in OA include internships, independent living routines (e.g. chores, recreation and leisure, food preparation, and cleanup), and fitness. Activities are built around identified student needs. For example, in independent living, a student may need to develop the budgeting and personal hygiene skills in order to successfully maintain an apartment on their own.

The instruction is highly personalized and students receive support from a full team of professionals, including services such as speech-language therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and adapted physical education, based on the student’s individual person-centered plan.

OA seeks to provide all students with work-based learning experiences in their classroom, the school, or the larger



community. Through a partnership with Louisiana Rehabilitative Services, some students are paid for their work. Depending on their levels and goals, some students have the opportunity to do externships off-campus with local community partners. All of these experiences build toward their personalized goals.

(5) Opportunities Academy will transform outcomes for students with disabilities and reshape what the region believes they are capable of.

The dire and disproportionate problems facing persons with disabilities in our society warrants an ambitious citywide project designed to address far-reaching concerns for this population and the larger community. The current status quo enables an atmosphere in which fewer than 40% of students with disabilities from families earning under \$50,000 complete a post-secondary education in Louisiana and only 33% of people with disabilities are employed in the state (bit.ly/Kraus1). Consequently, persons with disabilities experience poverty in greater numbers than those without (bit.ly/NCSL2016) and, in New Orleans, 55% of the homeless population is disabled, far exceeding the national rate of 40% (bit.ly/UnityNO) and is well above the rate of 19% adults with disabilities in the national population. Furthermore, research indicates that family members supporting children with special health care needs, including a disability, experience reduced employment, greater stress, and poor mental health (bit.ly/OAfamhealth). OA seeks to eliminate the current obstacles of unemployment, pervasive discrimination, and general exclusion confronting low-income youth with disabilities and foster a systemic shift toward an ecosystem of inclusivity in which individuals with disabilities and their families actively participate in the community, gain personal financial freedom, and experience a greater quality of life. Ultimately, this shift will also increase the overall economic vibrancy of our region.

Prior to OA, there were no free programs in New Orleans providing students aged 18-22 with intellectual and developmental disabilities with comprehensive post-secondary transition experiences.

(6) OA was born out of conversations with community members and families about their needs and developed with their collaboration.

Throughout the development of OA, Collegiate Academies has created structures to continually collaborate and involve community members in the development of a program that could expand into a full standalone school. Examples include:

- Establishing a regional Advisory Council, which guides long-term planning, advocacy, community engagement, and OA program implementation;
- Hosting OA Summits, which provide information sessions for families, providers, and employers to learn about OA and its partners; and
- OA site visits, which share best practices with regional schools.

OA's Advisory Council actively engages community members in decision-making, seeks input from diverse stakeholders, and enhances both OA and vital community services. Participants include OA parents, OA staff, representatives from local high schools, New Schools for New Orleans, Delgado Community College, Metropolitan Human Services District, New Orleans Therapeutic Day Program, Louisiana Rehabilitative Services, Families Helping Families, and more.

OA has also cultivated partnerships to provide students with real work opportunities, establishing relationships with companies and organizations like the Hyatt, Grow Dat Youth Farm, Operation Spark, and Ma Momma's House of Cornbread, Chicken and Waffles.