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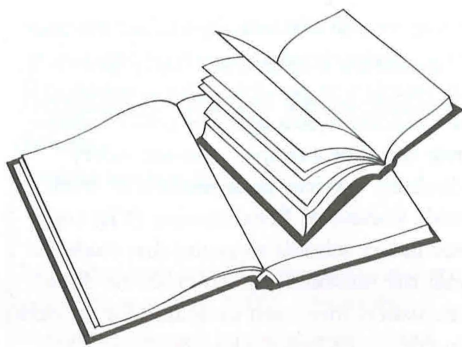
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Supporting the Successful Transition of Youth with Disabilities Between Secondary School and Postsecondary School

BY MEGAN A. CONWAY AND
KELLY B.T. CHANG

Introduction

A successful transition is highly individual. A transition is “successful” if a person achieves desired outcomes, whether it is receiving a college degree, finding a satisfying and well-paying job, living where and how one chooses or pursuing enjoyable activities. During the past decade, educators, policy makers, researchers, and families have become increasingly interested in improving the transition process for youth with disabilities between secondary school and postsecondary school. A number of research projects have been funded to explore outcomes of transition from secondary to postsecondary school and the factors that contribute to a successful transition between these two environments (e.g., National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational Supports, 2000; National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, 2005; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005).

While the research has shown that people with disabilities are less likely to participate in or graduate from postsecondary school than are people without disabilities (Wagner et al., 2005), the research has also demonstrated that factors related to the provision of supports and services before, during, and after the process of secondary to postsecondary transition can improve postsecondary participation for people with disabilities (National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational Supports, 2001a). Several important factors are discussed below, including:

- promotion and respect for self-determination,
- maximization of technology,
- continuity of supports and services, and
- coordination and management of supports and services.

Promoting Successful Transitions for Youth with Disabilities

Enhancing and Respecting Self-Determination

Self-determination is defined as “acting as the primary causal agent in one’s life and making choices regarding one’s actions free from undue external influence or interference” (Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 2000, p. 58). Because of their need for support or low expectations from others, youth with disabilities may not have the same opportunities to be self-determined as do other youth (Wehmeyer et al., 2000). At the same time, youth with disabilities may actually need to be more self-determined than other youth in order to get the supports they need, especially when they transition to postsecondary school. During secondary school, it is not uncommon for parents, teachers and administrators to make decisions for youth with disabilities about courses, services and supports, and future directions (Wehmeyer et al., 2000). In postsecondary school, however, youth are expected to make their own decisions and to advocate for their support needs, as well as their daily living and academic needs.

Research has shown that youth with disabilities who are self-determined fare better in postsecondary school (National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational Supports, 2001a). By second-

ary school, if not sooner, youth should be encouraged to communicate their wants and needs effectively, should have a clear understanding about the nature of their disability, and should be actively involved in planning their supports (e.g., through active participation in their IEP meetings), their academic programs and their futures (Izzo & Lamb, 2002). By the time they get to postsecondary school, youth with disabilities should be able to seek out the supports that they need, discuss their disability with their professors and others on campus, and plan their coursework and other activities accordingly (Izzo & Lamb, 2002).

Too often, educators, professionals, and family members forget that encouraging self-determination and self-advocacy also means respecting students’ decisions about their own lives and trusting them to know their own needs as well as, if not better, than those around them (National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational Supports, 2001a). It is discouraging and frustrating for students if, after they take the important step of advocating for themselves, they are met with resistance.

As with any young person, educators, professionals, and family members have an important role in supporting youth with disabilities to be self-determined (Izzo & Lamb, 2002). This role involves guiding students in planning their own coursework, activities, and supports. It means working with students to map out the steps to fulfill their dreams. It means helping students gain self-knowledge and an understanding of the educational and political system.

Maximizing the Use of Technology

Research has also shown that access to technology is one of the most important supports that a person with a disability can receive (Burgstahler, 2002a). Children with disabilities should be introduced to technology as early as possible (Getzel, Stodden, & Briel, 2001, March). A computer with magnification software, for example, is just as useful to a student with a visual impairment in junior high school who is writing a short essay as it is to a college student who is writing a twenty-

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page paper. Technology is a great equalizer for people with disabilities of all ages (Wehman, 2001, March). A student with a disability who is transitioning to postsecondary school will be much more likely to succeed if he or she already has access to, and is able to use, the technology that the student needs (Burgstahler, 2002a).

There are a number of considerations for maximizing the use of technology by students with disabilities as they transition between secondary and postsecondary school. The first is ensuring that technology that is used by most students is accessible to students with disabilities (Burgstahler, 2002a). For example, if most students have a computer that they use to complete class assignments, students with disabilities should have the adaptations that they need to access a computer. Depending on the needs of the student, this might include enlargement software, dictation software, a voice synthesizer, a modified keyboard and/or mouse.

Second, even the most widely used technology can assist students with disabilities (Burgstahler, 2002b). The use of spell check on a word processor or handheld organizing devices (such as PDAs), for example, can help a student with a learning or intellectual disability. A student who is visually impaired can read independently by using voice synthesizer software to read electronic versions of printed material.

Third, technology such as hearing aids, assistive listening devices, electric wheelchairs, augmentative communication devices, and independent living aids can be as important to a person with a disability as "high tech" devices such as computers (Burgstahler, 2002a). Youth with disabilities should own and be able to use these types of technologies before they head off to college.

Finally, studies have shown that a major barrier to utilizing technology by college students with disabilities is that technology that they may have used in secondary school does not travel with them to postsecondary school because the school district "owns" the technology (Burgstahler, 2002a). Technology should move with the student between secondary and postsecondary school.

Continuity of Supports and Services

Transition to college for any student involves many changes. There are new systems and activities to learn about, such as registration, procuring textbooks, transportation, health services, student residential life, and extracurricular activities. In addition, students with disabilities must learn about new ways of accessing disability related services and supports. Postsecondary institutions are governed by different laws from secondary institutions, and the types of services offered in postsecondary schools are different from those offered in secondary school (Stodden, Jones, & Chang, 2002). Postsecondary schools also differ from each other in the types of services and supports they have available and the system through which they are acquired (National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational Supports, 2001b).

For example, students who received disability specific tutoring and other one-on-one supports in high school will likely not find such services in college. Before students can even negotiate the supports that are offered in college, they usually find that colleges require professional documentation of a disability but do not provide evaluation services.

To help students overcome this barrier, there needs to be adequate preparation on two levels. First, students with disabilities need to be informed before they graduate from high school about the changes in laws and support systems. As they explore postsecondary options, they should contact schools to learn if the supports they need will be readily available at that institution.

Second, support systems need to collaborate with each other on state and local

levels in order to help make the transition from high school to postsecondary school as seamless as possible. Documentation is an important area agencies could collaborate on. For example, post-secondary disability services personnel could work with Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) and secondary schools to assure that students exit the secondary system with the documentation they need to qualify for services in college (Whelley, Hart, & Zafft, 2002).

Coordination and Management of Supports and Services

When students with disabilities transition into postsecondary school, they have the added responsibility of managing supports and services that come from a variety of systems external to the university, such as Vocational Rehabilitation, the Social Security Administration, transportation providers, and other service providers. These systems often have conflicting eligibility requirements, inconsistent terminology, and limited resources. Managing such disparate supports can be very difficult, and students with disabilities are often overburdened and unable to participate fully in their postsecondary education (Whelley et al., 2002).

Emerging practices in the area of coordination include interagency teaming and resource mapping to help students with disabilities transition and manage supports. Some examples include the Interagency Support Teams facilitated by the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts on the local level and the Transition System Change Initiative in Colorado on the state level (see Whelley et al., 2002).

Summary

Though there are still many barriers to overcome, students with disabilities have made progress in postsecondary education. The proportion of students with disabilities entering postsecondary school is growing, though the proportion remains lower than that of their peers without disabilities. In the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 report of students with disabilities who

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had exited high school in the previous three years (Wagner et al., 2005), 30% of them had attended some postsecondary school. For these students, their retention in college depends on being self-determined and able to request the supports they need. There is also a need to make sure these students have full access to assistive technology. IEP teams, postsecondary disability support-providers, and other stakeholders need to do what they can to help students transition seamlessly. And agencies need to work together to alleviate the burden of coordinating services, so students can fully access all that postsecondary school has to offer.

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