Achieving Postsecondary Access and Success

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Making the Transition from High School to College

College program completion is a goal of many secondary students with disabilities, but students with disabilities are not entering secondary education or succeeding once they have achieved college entry as frequently as their non-disabled peers. New York State VESID data indicate that as of 2002, only 3.5% of NYS individuals enrolled in postsecondary education reported having a disability and that the state has set a target of 5.5% by 2010. (NYS VESID, 2004). Federal efforts, such as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) legislation, are also aimed at increasing educational outcome levels for all students, including students with disabilities.

Wittenburg, Fishman, Golden, and Allen (2000), outline many factors that need further study when determining efficacy of transition planning models and student outcomes. What we do know now is that successful college planning for students with disabilities (SWD) requires considerably earlier and more involved preparation than that of the general college applicant. Students with disabilities may start with the same general college search process used by all students, but must move rapidly to focus on the unique needs of matching not only individual strengths but also individual disability considerations and support needs to ensure the best career, program, and campus environment match.
Prerequisite to the college search process is the career planning process. The federal government sponsors the site www.ed.gov/students/prep/college/thinkcollege/edlite-index.html in an effort to encourage students and parents as young as elementary school age to “think college early”. All students, especially SWD, should begin early college transition preparation no later than middle school to investigate their future career interests, aptitude, and plans; receiving the guidance of family and school counseling and teaching staff. Additional career planning resources may be found on the sidebar of this article.

Ideally, all students should enter college with a career pathway goal, or at least a career cluster of potential jobs in mind. After it has been determined that the student has established a reasonable and informed career goal that includes the completion of a college education, some of the many remaining tasks include insuring college readiness in a variety of realms, selecting the appropriate college type and program, and financing the program. The sidebar links contained in this newsletter will direct readers to a number of resources in these areas.

One key consideration for early college planning is that the more rigorous and academically challenging the college level program to which the student wishes to apply, the more rigor and challenge the high school preparatory program should contain. A recent study completed by ACT, Inc. (the American College Testing Program), a producer of one of the leading college admissions tests, reported “Only 51% of 2005 ACT-tested high school graduates are ready for college-level reading – and, what’s worse, more students are on track to being ready for college-level reading in eighth and tenth grade than are actually ready by the time they reach twelfth grade” (ACT, 2006).

Lack of adequate college-level math and science preparation was also a concern. College bound students with disabilities must master college preparatory work in addition to mastering their disability.

The Legal Shift from High School to Postsecondary Education

Perhaps the greatest consideration in college planning for students with disabilities is realizing that the natural progression toward adult independence has been codified by disability law into a system that makes a dramatic shift in rights and responsibilities from the secondary (high school) to the postsecondary (college or career school) level.

During high school students having documented disabilities are protected under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Title II) from discrimination based upon their disability. At the high school level Section 504 also requires that the school district provide a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to each student with a disability.

Additionally, if the student is identified as a special education student, the provisions of The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) with its special education programming requirements also apply. In secondary schools, students with documented disabilities which affect educational performance will have documented plans (IEP or 504 plans) that indicate what necessary provisions must be made to allow the student to achieve.
At the postsecondary level, the issues around disability move from providing free appropriate educational programming (FAPE) to those of nondiscriminatory access to programming.

“Unlike your high school, your postsecondary school is not required to provide FAPE. Rather, your postsecondary school is required to provide appropriate academic adjustments as necessary to ensure that it does not discriminate on the basis of disability. In addition, if your postsecondary school provides housing to non disabled students, it must provide comparable, convenient and accessible housing to students with disabilities at the same cost... Academic adjustments may include auxiliary aids and modifications to academic requirements as are necessary to ensure equal educational opportunity.” (United States Department of Education, 2005).

Postsecondary programs are not required to lower, waive, or effect substantial modifications to essential requirements in their educational programs. (United States Department of Education, 2005) Therefore, students must be able to make an informed prediction that they can be successful in their chosen program with only the academic adjustments and modifications necessary to accommodate their disability, and that learning in all the core content components is able to be achieved with these adjustments.

Postsecondary programs vary widely in quantity and quality of support services and programming. Some schools meet the letter of the law regarding access and accommodations, while may others provide modified and/or remedial programming options, often for an additional fee. Students with disabilities are advised to extensively research their schools of choice regarding the availability of services and seek a school with an exceptional “fit” for their needs.

Resources

Transition of Students with Disabilities from High School to Postsecondary Education: The Perfect Example
Excellent case study regarding the school to college transition process by Martin, J.E., Van Dycke, J.L., Peterson, L. & Walden, R.J. In C. A. Kochhar-Bryant, & D. S. Bassett(Eds.), Aligning Transition and Standards-Based Education; Issues and Strategies (pp. 167-186). Arlington, VA: Council for Exceptional Children.

www.pdccny.org
The Transition to College website of the Post-Secondary Disability Consortium of Central New York.

www.nycareerzone.org
One starting point to help answer the questions: What type of career does this individual want and is a college education the right choice for this individual?

www.nextstepmagazine.com
Addresses college selection and planning issues in general terms and directs readers to other related sites.

www.finaid.org
A well-known general guide to all types of financial aid. Students with disabilities should also search another part of this site, www.finaid.org/otheraid/disabled.phtml, for other financial aid information.

www.ahead.org
AHEAD is a professional association committed to full participation of persons with disabilities in postsecondary education. Browse the resource page at http://ahead.org/students.php.
For more information on legal rights and obligations, please see the Disability Discrimination Resources webpage of the United States Education Department, Office of Civil Rights: http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/disabilityresources.html

The shift in the intent and practice of disability laws can have substantial effect on the student experience from high school to college and implications for student learning, teaching, and advisement. Researchers have identified a general set of factors that are related to the potential success levels of students with disabilities in higher education settings. Although every student brings a unique profile to the quest for higher education, self-knowledge, self-advocacy ability, and knowledge of rights and responsibilities (Knight, 2000) should be considered as prerequisite study to any college experience.

What the Shift in Disability Laws Means for You

For students

Know thyself! Students need to know everything they can about their specific disability and be ready and able to explain their needs to others in a socially appropriate manner.

You will need to choose to identify yourself as a student with a disability if you wish adjustments to your program. You will be expected to handle all your own affairs. Your family will not have access to any information regarding you, your plans, or any of your records without your written consent and others may not be able to conduct transactions on your behalf.

Know your rights and responsibilities. Postsecondary schools may not charge you more for standard programs than they charge other students. A 504 or IEP plan alone will not be sufficient documentation at the postsecondary levels. Psychological and/or other evaluations will generally be required and the college may also require an updated evaluation for many reasons, including if the existing materials are more than three years old or not sufficiently detailed. You or a third party provider may need to pay for a new evaluation to meet the needs of some postsecondary programs and, in some situations, to meet the documentation requirements of some postsecondary college entrance examinations.

For teachers

All high school teachers who interact with any student who has a disability are responsible for teaching the student both academic content and the attitudinal, social, self awareness and self advocacy skills necessary for postsecondary success.

Self-knowledge, also referred to as self-determination, instruction makes up a large cluster of skills that secondary instructors can teach individually and/or imbed in content lessons. Terms related to this cluster include metacognitive skills, self-advocacy skills, organization, workload and time management skills, learning how to learn, knowledge of individual learning styles, etc. Instruction and measured competency in these areas are just as, if not more, important as content area competency.
In high school, some special education teachers aggressively monitor student progress, intervening frequently to ensure success. It is essential for the senior high special education teacher to work closely with the student, parents, and general education teachers to teach responsibility and self-advocacy skills. This promotes student empowerment, self-determination and total transfer of responsibility for advocacy and academic success to the student prior to graduation.

**For Families**

“The most important thing that parents can teach their children is how to get along without them.”

Frank Clark, as quoted in Eaton & Coull, Transitions to Postsecondary Learning, Self-Advocacy Handbook, p.21.

Remember, at the college level, parents talk less and students talk more. When it comes to determining college programming and arranging for services, many laws forbid the discussion or disclosure of the student’s personal information to anyone other than the individual directly involved without the express written consent of the individual. (see The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 [FERPA], and in health care matters, the Health Insurance and Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) of 1996) Even if parents are paying the bills, they may expect to be denied access to all personal information regarding the student, including grades and health information, unless the student signs detailed authorizations allowing disclosure of specific information.

Parents cannot expect to be invited to the postsecondary school to discuss any needed academic adjustments for their child. Students must be prepared to advocate for themselves and make decisions related to their own programming. Make sure your student has access to all their own important documents and knows how to use and safeguard them. If your child is claimed as your dependent, provide assistance and information for the filling out of financial aid information in a timely fashion, including filing your tax returns in a timely manner.

**For all involved**

Referrals to appropriate outside agencies, such as the office of Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities (VESID), the Office of Mental Health Services (OMH), the Commission for the Blind and Visually Handicapped (CBVH), or the Office of Developmental Disabilities and Mental Retardation (OMRDD) should occur by the student’s junior year. This is essential in order to properly determine eligibility, provide for smooth transition to adult services, and to enable the student to obtain any financial benefit from these programs for which he/she may be eligible.

It is important to become a lifelong learner regarding changes in disability laws. The federal government reauthorized IDEA in 2004. The federal regulations implementing the new IDEA are not expected to be final until late 2006. State laws and regulations are, and will continue to be, amended to reflect conformity with the federal guidelines as they are released. A new senior year document, called the Student Exit Summary (SES)
is one of several changes regarding transition planning that will have a direct effect on exiting students.

In the SES document, the school district must provide the student whose eligibility terminates because the student graduates from secondary school with a local or Regents diploma or exceeds the age eligibility for a free appropriate education with a summary of the student’s academic achievement and functional performance, including recommendations on how to assist the student in meeting the student’s postsecondary goals. School districts, parents, students and teachers create such a document for the exiting student during the student’s final year of high school. A NYS template and guidance for this document may be found at http://www.vesid.nysed.gov/specialed/idea/exitsumm.htm

A well-crafted Student Exit Summary has the potential of becoming a very valuable resource for the college-bound student.

Navigating the College Entrance Exam Process

Many colleges require college entrance examinations as part of the admission process. There are two large testing corporations who dominate the market for college admission testing, the College Board, providers of the SAT, AP, and PSAT/NMSQT exams (www.collegeboard.com) and ACT, providers of the ACT, PLAN and other exams (www.act.org). Both testing companies include specific pages addressing testing for students with disabilities within their websites (go to the main web page and search internally for disability).

Some postsecondary schools and some programs within larger schools (e.g. arts-related programs) will consider portfolios, interviews, or other assessment measures in addition to or in lieu of standardized exams. For a listing of “Schools that do not use SAT 1 or ACT Scores for admitting substantial numbers of students into bachelor degree programs.” see www.fairtest.org. Some community colleges and other two year institutions are more open to considering students for admission who have challenges with traditional testing and potential students should examine carefully the match between their individual academic and learning profile and the institution’s profile.

If the student makes the decision to participate in the standardized college examination process (and most college-bound students do go through this process) and wishes to apply for testing accommodations on these examinations, be advised to start preparing the paperwork early. This involved process requiring substantial documentation may be viewed as an introduction to the postsecondary world, where many requests for accommodation will require similar paperwork completion.

For students who wish to participate in the preliminary testing process (PSAT/NMSQT and/or PLAN), a process most high school students use as a ‘dry –run’ before the big exams, tests are usually given in the sophomore year. For students with disabilities who are requesting accommodations, the documentation deadlines established by these testing providers can be as early as the spring of the freshman year (see, for example, www.collegeboard.com/ssd/student/time.html) As documentation must meet the testing company’s criteria and standards, and the decision regarding adequacy of the documentation lies with the testing
company, it is essential for the student, high school and family to work together and consider this process early enough to gather the required documentation.

Finding Financing

The overall cost of higher education continues to rise at a pace that is faster than increases in the general economy, and all students, including those with disabilities, should carefully consider the economic realities of college financing.

Statistical data gathered from the National Center for Educational Statistics indicates that many students and parents of students in their final two years of high school have difficulty accurately estimating the yearly tuition for the type of college the students hoped to attend (Horn, Chen & Chapman, 2003).

When borrowing to meet college costs, the cost of the educational program must be realistically weighed against future income potential. The student with a disability must also consider the cost of any additional tutoring, personal care or other support services needed in the college setting. Students with disabilities often need to take reduced course loads and/or curtail part-time work efforts in order to succeed academically, all factors that potentially drive up basic college costs.

In general, the financial aid hunt almost always includes the filing of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FASA). This application may be found on the web at www.studentaid.ed.gov. This federal government site should be consulted early in the college planning process. As the competition for limited aid dollars continues to increase, it is important for all seniors applying for financial aid to get their family taxes done as early as possible after January 1 and to apply for college financial aid as early in the year as possible, as many schools award financial aid to qualified applicants on a first-come, first-served basis.

In addition to government programs, work, personal resources and borrowing, other sources of money for college are private and organizational scholarships. Start the search for these grants with your high school guidance office, branching out into local and national organizations and internet searches. Consider searching for scholarships relating to your strengths, skills, hobbies, relative’s work or fraternal connections, etc. There are some disability-specific scholarships available as well. Please see the sidebar links for more information.

As in the tax preparation market, there exist many commercial firms who will process your forms and offer to search for financial aid and scholarships – caveat emptor!

Depending on financial need formulas, VESID, the Office of Vocational and Educational Services With Disabilities (www.vesid.gov) may be able to assist some clients with financial assistance for college or career school programming and may also provide financial assistance in obtaining the equipment or assistive technology necessary to reduce the handicapping effects of the student’s disability on the ability to participate in education or work.

References


**Cornell University**
**ILR School**
**Employment and Disability Institute**

New York Mid-State Regional Transition Coordination Site 201 ILR Extension Building Ithaca, NY 14853-3901