

Enhance Access to Postsecondary Education for Students With Disabilities

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Postsecondary education has been identified as an important transition outcome for students with disabilities because of the impact of a college degree on future adult outcomes. Students with disabilities who graduate from college exhibit similar employment rates and annual salaries compared to their counterparts without disabilities (Madaus, 2006; National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). It is not surprising that these graduates also evidence more favorable outcomes than their peers with disabilities who do not graduate from college (Madaus, 2006). In light of such statistics for adults with disabilities, the National Council on Disability (2004) stated that "it should be more apparent than ever before that, wherever possible, higher education is key to the economic prospects and aspirations for independence of youth with disabilities" (p. 68). Data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 (Newman, 2005) reported that when surveyed in high school, 76.7% of youth with disabilities aspired to attend a postsecondary school or program. However, 2 years after high school, only 19% were attending a postsecondary school. Clearly, much work remains to be done to enhance transition to postsecondary education.

This article presents 20 ways to improve preparation and to foster increased access to postsecondary education for students with disabilities.

Provide Encouragement and Information

1

Let students and their parents know that postsecondary education is an increasingly possible option. Increasing numbers of students with disabilities can have a productive postsecondary experience. The number of students with physical, emotional, and cognitive disabilities attending college has increased significantly over the past 20 years (Shaw, in press). More recently, there is a growing movement to develop a range of postsecondary programs and supports for students with intellectual disabilities and autism spectrum disorders (Hart, Zimbrich, & Parker, 2005).

2

Students and their parents should understand the various types of postsecondary institutions available to them. There is an array of

postsecondary institutions to be considered, including 4-year colleges and universities, junior and community colleges, vocational or technical schools, social development and life skills centers, and adult education. Students also need to consider a range of postsecondary elements, including institutional competitiveness, size, location, cost, and academic programs, as well as the availability of support services and personnel (Madaus, 2005).

3

Help students and their parents to understand that different colleges offer a range of different types of student support programs and services.

Although public secondary schools must offer individualized special education to students with disabilities, colleges are not required to offer similar services. In fact, special education services end when the student leaves high school. At a minimum, colleges are required to offer reasonable accommodations and auxiliary aids to qualified students with disabilities (Madaus & Shaw, 2004). Some institutions offer more intensive and individualized services. However, it is important for families to understand that these more intensive services are not required by law, and as a result, colleges can charge additional fees to students who use the services. It is also important to understand that colleges cannot charge students for accommodations that provide equal access to the curriculum.

Planning

4

Begin transition planning early. Although the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004) has specified that transition planning should begin no later than age 16, the law is permissive. A number of states have specified no later than age 15. Schools would be wise to begin making transition decisions in middle school or at the beginning of high school to make sure that students are taking a course of study that would make them eligible to fulfill their postsecondary education goals. Include the student in the most demanding academic curriculum possible. Identify transition goals and activities that will prepare the student for postsecondary education both in terms of becoming an independent learner and developing social and interpersonal skills.



5

Start to gather data and important documents.

Beginning in the freshman year, start a *transition file* that includes important documentation, individualized education programs (IEPs), progress reports, and summaries of a student's work. This file could simplify the development of the *summary of performance* in the senior year. Documentation in the student's transition file may need to be provided at various points during the student's college career, and it is better to have such extensive documentation in hand as opposed to having to locate it after graduation from high school when records may be harder to retrieve.

Foster and Enhance Student Self-Determination and Independence

6

Help students develop skills in self-determination.

Encourage student participation in and leadership of the IEP process. Because students in postsecondary education have to self-advocate and request services, it is important to encourage parents to relinquish their advocacy role to their children to the greatest degree possible (Van Dycke, Martin, & Lovett, 2006).

7

Have students try out accommodations and auxiliary aids that might carry over to postsecondary settings.

Accommodations at the postsecondary level are not based on the student's label but must be related to the student's assessment data. Help the student understand that there is no one-size-fits-all accommodation for all classes. Accommodations that might not be allowed in postsecondary education such as untimed tests or course substitutions should be avoided whenever possible.



8

It is best for students to learn to arrange their own accommodations to the greatest extent possible and help monitor the effectiveness of any accommodations that have been used. Starting in high school, students should begin to identify those accommodations that have been most effective from among all the accommodations for which they might be eligible. This is often a trial-and-error process. Students should be prepared to explain to college disability services personnel why a particular accommodation is needed and the history and circumstances of past use of the accommodation. Students should be prepared to explain why certain accommodations previously may not have been necessary but are needed in their current postsecondary setting. This is particularly important to consider for students who might have received informal accommodations while in school (e.g., parents reading the textbook aloud to the student for homework assignments).

9

Learning strategies should be taught in addition to content tutoring. Teach learning strategies such as planning, organization, taking notes, time management, studying, and learning. Because special education personnel are not available in postsecondary education, it is critical that students not only learn such skills but also can independently apply them to meet their learning needs (Deshler & Schumaker, 2006).

10

Identify postsecondary technology needs and expectations. Prepare students to meet the general technology competency expectations of institutions of higher education (e.g., spreadsheets, database basics, graphics, multimedia, and use of the Internet), as well as technology-based learning strategies (e.g., functioning in a Web-based class; online research, and *netiquette* for virtual learning communities; Brinckerhoff & Banerjee, 2006).

11

Help students use an array of assistive technology that will enable them to become independent learners. Encourage students to explore assistive technologies as part of their transition plan in high school. Initiating the search for appropriate assistive technologies when in college may be too late. The range of educational hardware and software that can help compensate for functional limitations and enhance access and learning efficiency can be bewildering. Students should be aware that there is a learning curve for most assistive technologies, and it is better to start sooner than later (Day & Edwards, 1996).



Work With Students and Families to Understand Legal Rights and Responsibilities

12

Inform the student about the differential expectations in secondary and postsecondary education. In high school, students are often surrounded by a group of adults including parents, teachers, and other professionals who make decisions for and about the student. Typically, the student's day is structured with classes and extracurricular activities. In college, the student is expected to make important decisions related to coursework and disability-related needs. It is the student's responsibility to request accommodations and to explain his or her needs to a professor. The day-to-day routine of a student is also remarkably different at the college level, as it is possible to have only one or two classes per day or to have entire days free of courses. How this free time is used can present a significant challenge for many students.

13

Help students differentiate rights and responsibilities provided by IDEA in P-12 from those under Section 504 in postsecondary education. As noted previously, public secondary schools are subject to the mandates of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004. This entitlement law requires schools to provide individualized special education services to students with disabilities. This includes identification, assessment, and individually appropriate education programming at no cost. In contrast, colleges are covered under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. This is a civil

rights law, and as such, students with disabilities must be qualified for admission into the institution and must remain eligible by maintaining satisfactory grades. The student is required to self-disclose the disability to the college and to present supporting documentation to verify the nature of the disability. Such documentation must be provided at the student's expense, as colleges are under no obligation to identify or evaluate students. At the college level, it is also the student's responsibility to monitor progress and the effectiveness of requested accommodations and to self-advocate as needed. Therefore, it is critically important that the student understands the specific nature of the disability and related legal rights and responsibilities (Madaus & Shaw, 2004).

- 14** **Ensure that students understand that they have the right to disclose or to not disclose at college, and that both decisions carry advantages and disadvantages.** At the college level, the student has the ability to decide if he or she will self-disclose the disability to each professor and for each course. Some students prefer the anonymity that not disclosing provides and the possibility to succeed on their own. However, if the student does not self-disclose, accommodations need not be provided and cannot be provided retroactively if the student does not succeed. It is also important to decide if accommodations are necessary in all courses or just in some. These are vitally important decisions for a student to carefully consider, as accommodation requests must be timely.

Final Steps

- 15** **Determine the changes to transition assessment created by IDEA 2004.** As noted, IDEA 2004 requires transition planning to begin no later than at age 16. Whenever possible, an earlier option should be used to provide more time to enhance transition planning. In addition, IDEA 2004 requires appropriate and measurable transition goals based on appropriate transition assessments. The student's transition plan must also consider what courses of study are necessary to assist him or her in reaching these goals. For students with disabilities who aspire to attend college, appropriate transition assessments may be those that assist the student in meeting the documentation requirements of postsecondary institutions. The student's plan of study should be those courses that are the most rigorous possible to prepare the student for college admission requirements, but more important, to be

academically prepared for the rigors of college. The transition services (including courses of study) need to assist the student in reaching those goals.



- 16** **Make students aware of documentation requirements by high-stakes testing agencies for admission into competitive colleges.** Since 2001, high-stakes tests that are taken with accommodations are not flagged, unless the accommodation substantially alters the construct of the test. Despite this, the burden of proof is on the student to provide evidence that justifies the need for any test accommodation. To request nonstandard administration of a high-stakes test, students must provide appropriate documentation of their disability. High-stakes testing agencies have their own criteria for disability documentation, which must be met before a student is considered eligible for test accommodations. These documentation guidelines address recency of documentation, validation of current functional limitations, and rationale for the requested accommodations as supported by psychometric data, clinical interpretation, and student self-report. Check the Web site of the appropriate testing agency for guidelines on disability documentation. Getting approval for high-stakes test accommodations may take time. Students are well advised to start this process early. It is also important to note that approval of such accommodations does not guarantee approval of similar accommodations at the postsecondary level.

- 17** **Encourage the student to prepare for college entrance exams and to attempt them with and without accommodations.** Most high school students seeking admission to colleges prepare

for college entrance exams such as the SAT and ACT. Test preparation ranges from group classes offered by for-profit organizations such as Kaplan and Princeton Review to individual tutoring. Many students take college entrance exams several times to improve their scores. Test preparation can be expensive. Students should practice taking the test with and without accommodations to get a sense of how their performance is affected under each circumstance. Although test preparation questions are not the same as the actual test, practice with and without accommodations can help a student fine-tune his or her test preparation by informally determining the need for increased content remediation versus test accommodations.

18 **Become aware of documentation requirements of institutions of higher education in your area.** Under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, students must present valid disability documentation to institutions of higher education to receive supports and accommodations. Given the changes to IDEA noted earlier, postsecondary disability documentation requirements are in a state of flux. It will be necessary to monitor these changes to help students provide the necessary information to access protections under Section 504.

19 **Develop a summary of performance form that will provide needed transition assessment data.** The Regulations for IDEA 2004 are ambiguous regarding the components of the required summary of performance (SOP). As a result, there is great variation in the forms proposed by various states. The SOP documents range from a simple, one-paragraph statement to a comprehensive document. A Nationally Ratified Summary of Performance Template has been approved and recognized by seven national organizations, including the Council for Exceptional Children and the Council for Learning Disabilities. Because it was developed with the intent to make it useful in the postsecondary documentation process, it would be a good format to adopt or adapt.

20 **Implement a process to effectively complete the summary of performance.** The SOP is most useful when linked with the IEP and transition planning process, thus giving the student an opportunity to actively participate in its development. The SOP should be developed by someone who knows the student and should be reviewed and approved by the IEP team. The SOP must be completed during the final

year of a student's high school education. Ideally, it can be the basis for transition planning throughout high school so that it is nearly completed by the senior year.



Summary

Postsecondary education is a realistic and necessary option for successful adult outcomes. An understanding of the realities in postsecondary education is necessary if students with disabilities and their families are to be prepared to make wise choices for successful transition. School personnel should use the high school years to implement transition planning that fosters self-determination and independent learning in students with disabilities.

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