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## ABSTRACT

Rural communities have strengths and weaknesses that affect the development of transitional programs for students with disabilities. These community characteristics were factored into a federally funded, graduate-level training program called Project CREST (Collaboration in Rural Education for Special Teachers), which provided training stipends for certified special education teachers. Project CREST participants taught rural students with disabilities for 1 year and completed a field-based master's degree program in three semesters. Coursework and practicum experiences included a focus on concepts and competencies related to community-based training for transition, construction of a local support system, and development of vocational training sequences based on local community needs. The 10 participants were challenged to apply these competencies to constructing transitional experiences for rural students in an impoverished four-county region of southern Ohio. The four counties (Lawrence, Pike, Ross, and Scioto) had high unemployment rates and primarily retail and service-sector job opportunities. Project participants were prompted to engage parents, agencies, and community businesses in planning and implementing transition activities. Further, one training module focused on infusing eight categories of employability skills training into classroom activities. This infusion of an employability curriculum into daily instruction plus development of community-based training sites led to more varied transitional training options, improved student motivation, and opportunity for development of entrepreneurial skills among students with disabilities. (SV)

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## TRANSITION TO THE COMMUNITY, WORK, AND INDEPENDENT LIVING: THE RURAL COMMUNITY AS A CLASSROOM

### Introduction

Super (1990) defines transition as a lifelong process involving not only the individual, but her or his family and the community. According to Szymanski (1994), successful transition programs are based on the following principles: a) Contributions and participation of people with disabilities in the community- are valued; b) transition programs must be "owned" by the community; c) Transition programs should reflect the community's strengths and address its needs. Thus, transition programs should not result in the victimization of individuals and their families (Nisbet, Covert, & Schuh, 1992), but should promote their active decision-making.

To be "owned" by the community and reflective of its strengths and needs, natural rural community characteristics leading to the empowerment of families, and students with disabilities must be identified and utilized (Szymanski, 1994). Characteristics of rural communities perceived as major strengths have been identified as; a) cohesiveness and strong kinship ties (Finley, 1994), b) social capital or the caring of one individual for others (Coleman, 1988). Helge (1992) points to the following rural strengths or characteristics based on her research in rural schools; a) a unique "community spirit," b) a "personalized environment," c) greater percentages of community resources allocated to educational and other social services, and d) valuing of independence and local control.

Conversely, rural communities are confronted by formidable barriers which may inhibit the development of strong transitional training programs. Among those barriers cited in the literature are: a) limited financial resources (Carlson, 1993), b) long-term poverty (Stern, 1992), c) long-term economic decline (Carlson, 1992), d) distance and other geographic barriers (Helge, 1992), and e) limited availability of technical and human resources (Helge). Despite these problematic barriers, the sense of community which exists in rural locations has been cited as the single critical element leading to a quality educational experience for rural students.

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## Project CREST

Both the strengths and weaknesses of rural communities were factored into the development of a graduate level training program for rural special educators called Project CREST (Collaboration in Rural Education for Special Teachers). Funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services, Project CREST provided training stipends annually to 10 bachelors level teachers certified in special education. These 10 CREST participants worked with a class of rural students with disabilities in teams of two for a total of five teams and classes. In addition to teaching in the rural classrooms for one academic year, these special educators/CREST participants completed a field-based masters degree training program over three semesters. Training goals for CREST participants were to effectively meet the academic, social, vocational and ancillary service needs of rural students with special needs. In addition, Project CREST directors developed goals to improve the quality of training to rural special education preservice trainees, and to assist in the recruitment and retention of teaching personnel specifically trained for rural special education settings.

To achieve these goals, Project CREST participants completed the following courses during the three semester program; Foundations and Instructional Strategies for Rural Special Education, Problems and Issues for Personnel in Rural Special Education, Collaboration I and II for Related Educational Services, Practicum I and II in Rural Special Education, and Staff Development and Peer Mentoring in Rural Special Education among others. Embedded into these collective courses were the following concepts and competencies for rural special educators related to community-based training for transition developed and disseminated by Marrs (1984).

- understanding of the context of a rural school and its environment
- knowledge concerning the state-of-the-art of rural special education
- understanding the differences involved in serving students with disabilities in rural and urban environments
- knowledge of effective service delivery models for rural students with disabilities
- awareness of alternate resources to provide services to rural students with disabilities and skills to identify alternate resources
- skills in working with citizens and agencies in rural communities to facilitate cooperation among schools and service agencies serving students with disabilities
- understanding of personal development skills for professional growth and to build a local support system in the rural community
- skills in working with parents of rural students with disabilities
- skills in working with peer professionals from rural environments

Further, practicum experiences within the Project CREST training sequence were designed to enhance the development of these skills related to community-based training for transition:

- development of vocational training sequences based on an analysis of local community employment needs
- application of behavioral analysis procedures to academic and vocational training sequences for students
- application of appropriate consultation and communication principles with peers and community members
- application of appropriate consultation and communication principles with parents
- ability to select and adapt academic materials based on students' age, interests, training needs,
- ability to use regular and special education curricula for program planning
- application of alternative teaching methodologies and accommodation strategies
- ability to provide age appropriate social skill training to students
- ability to apply federal and state mandates for the education of students with disabilities

### **Community Demographics**

With regard to Project CREST participants serving rural adolescents with disabilities, those concepts and competencies focusing on skill development in working with citizens and agencies, the construction of a local support system, and the development of vocational training sequences based on local community needs were of significant importance in using the rural community as a training site. CREST participants are challenged to apply these competencies to construct transition experiences for rural students in an impoverished region of Ohio.

The rural geographic region served by Project CREST was a four-county region of southern Ohio within the Appalachian region of the United States. As illustrated in Table 1, approximately two-thirds of all employment opportunities were either in the retail or service sectors with unemployment rates above the national average and per capita income and percentage of high school graduates below the national average (U.S. Census Bureau, 1996).

(Insert Table 1 about here.)

Table 1

Selected Employment and Demographic Statistics of Counties Served by Project Crest Compared with Franklin County

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County	Percent Unemployed	Percent Retail Business	Percent Service Business	Percent H.S. Graduates	Per Capita Income
Franklin	3.9	24.0	38.2	81	\$21,547
Lawrence	6.9	30.7	33	65.9	\$14,400
Pike	10.6	32.6	31.8	60.8	\$13,895
Ross	6.5	30.3	35.1	67.6	\$15,215
Scioto	9.4	31.0	36.3	63.8	\$14,152

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**In-school Transition Initiatives**

As indicated earlier, CREST participants were prompted to engage parents, agencies, and community businesses in planning and implementing transition activities.

Further, the staff of the Pilasco-Ross Special Education Regional Resource Center and Project CREST faculty developed related training models to support participants' acquisition of critical knowledge and skills. One such module, Extending Practice Into Classrooms (EPIC) focused on infusing employability skills training into classroom activities. Within EPIC, suggested activities and employment skills were clustered into eight categories as illustrated in Figure 1.

(Insert Figure 1 about here.)

**Figure 1. Eight Clusters of Employability Skills**

Cluster Area	Related Skills
Employability Self-Help Skills	Demonstrates personal hygiene and good grooming; dresses appropriately; travels independently; communicates effectively
General Work Habits	Attends regularly/arrives on time; stays on task; works independently
Task Related Skills	Cares for tools, materials, and work area
Quantity of Work	Completes work on time; exhibits stamina; adapts to increased demands in work load
Quality of Work	Makes appropriate choices and decisions; recognizes and corrects mistakes
Relationship to Supervisor	Accepts constructive criticism from supervisor; follows directions from supervisor; seeks help when needed
Work Attitudes	Develops and seeks personal goals; shows initiative; accepts societal values and rewards; takes pride in work
Relationship to Peers	Works cooperatively with peers; Shows respect for rights and property of peers; uses appropriate language and manners with peers

Course content for Project CREST participants addressed curriculum initiatives, techniques, and activities related to students' attainment of employment and independent living competencies across subject areas. Further, practicum assignments prompted CREST participants to utilize this knowledge to synthesize their students' academic skill needs with these transitional skills. For example, if a student's Individualized Educational Plan included oral language goals, a special education teacher enrolled in Project CREST might provide lessons and training on taking accurate phone messages or interviewing supervisors at community job sites.

### **Community-based Initiatives**

These Project CREST participants developed transitional programs both within the traditional educational setting, and the broader classroom of the community through networks with parents, agencies, and community businesses. For example, one Project CREST participant was able to arrange for several of her students to shadow manicurists at the salon where she had her hair styled. Still other of these rural students had practicum experiences with employees working in inventory and purchasing departments at a small community hospital. Yet another exemplary example of a Project CREST participant's skill in applying professional transitional competencies may be illustrated through Joey's story.

Joey was an 18 year old senior high school student with profound deafness. He was a member of a family of five; two parents, one sister, and one brother. All other family members were hearing, but Joey would be the first to graduate from high school. He told his teacher, Mrs. Green, that he wanted to be a carpenter.

While a Project CREST Participant, Mrs. Green tried to advocate for Joey's admission into the construction trades program at the local vocational high school. but that staff found a way to prevent Joey's enrollment there. Next, Mrs. Green contacted the Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation (BVR), but counselors there passed off her requests for training assistance for Joey from case worker to supervisor to director. Phone calls from Mrs. Green to the BVR weren't returned, and time was passing.

Mrs. Green contacted a community volunteer, Mr. Riley, whom she had met when she taught the Emergency Medical Service (EMS) volunteers some sign language. Mr. Riley owned a small construction business and offered to allow Joey to work at construction sites during several afternoons each week.

To assist Joey and Mr. Riley to have a successful experience, Mrs. Green visited the construction site where Joey would work to obtain language samples of common words and phrases. Next, she made a videotape of the signs used to express this construction vocabulary for Mr. Riley and taught Joey these signs in the classroom as a normal part of the curriculum. A variety of individuals helped Joey travel to



and from his training site while he learned to drive. At graduation, Mrs. Green, with others of Joey's teachers bought him a set of tools as his graduation gift. Mr. Riley employed Joey as a laborer in his construction business, and Joey, with diploma and driver's license in hand, accomplished a critical step in the transition process. He told Mrs. Green his next goal was to buy a car.

## Summary

The success of the transitional curriculum and community collaborative initiatives implemented by Project CREST participants was based on their achievement of goals, knowledge, and competencies developed for special educators serving rural students with disabilities. Further, these special educators' ability to infuse an employability curriculum into daily instruction combined with the development of community-based training sites led to more varied transitional training options, improved student motivation, and opportunity for the development of entrepreneurial skills among students with disabilities.

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