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Research to Practice: Lessons Learned from the Learning Academy: Optimizing Transition Supports for Young Adults with Autism

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Introduction

The Learning Academy (TLA) at the University of South Florida is a 30-week transition program for individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) between the ages of 18 and 25. The program provides services, supports, and experiential opportunities, with the aim of enhancing skills that will prepare students to succeed in the workplace and postsecondary education settings.

TLA's program includes a curriculum with a mixture of classwork and a 60-hour internship, with a focus on student self-discovery and career exploration. Monthly parent workshops provide information to parents about their students, while mentors – a core component of the program – support students as they practice the skills they learn in class in natural settings on and around the campus.

The Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) at the University for Massachusetts Boston conducted a one-year evaluation of TLA to explore its essential programmatic elements, and the ways in which the experience influenced student transformation. The evaluation included a thorough observation of program structure, curriculum, daily practices, and history, as well as detailed interviews with TLA staff, students, parents, mentors, and external collaborators.

The findings showed that TLA influenced students' personal growth and transformation, manifesting in a newfound self-confidence. At the end of the program, students described themselves as having greater self-awareness, self-esteem, independence, preparedness, and social competence.

The purpose of this brief is to share the lessons learned from TLA to inspire similar programs and other transition professionals striving to optimize transition outcomes for students with ASD.

LESSONS LEARNED: THREE ELEMENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION PROGRAM: KNOWLEDGE, PRACTICE, AND SUPPORT

Findings from ICI's evaluation showed that student transformation was influenced by three core programmatic elements:

1. Developing knowledge and self-awareness
2. Having opportunities to practice knowledge gained in the classroom
3. Engaging in an environment of safety and support

TLA aimed to prepare students with ASD for transition to adulthood through offering appropriate *knowledge, practice, and support*. These three programmatic components were reported to be essential for students' transformation experience.

Rather than being delivered in decisive stages, these three components were embedded into the structure of the program. Students gained knowledge in the classroom, were able to master this knowledge through practice, and were given support by peers, mentors, and staff. Each element is discussed in more detail.

CORE ELEMENT #1: Developing Knowledge and Self-Awareness

The Learning Academy built student knowledge and self-awareness by:

- Exploring student aptitudes and interests
- Developing concrete job-seeking skills
- Raising student self-awareness of ASD

Exploring student aptitudes and interests

Transition readiness at TLA begins with building student knowledge around their varying abilities and differences, using a strengths-based approach. Exploring aptitudes and interests is an individualized process that occurs over the first half of the school year with an emphasis on self-discovery. TLA staff assumed competence of their students, and maintained high expectations irrespective of the students' disability.

As such, responsibility and accountability for success is placed on the students. This encourages them to identify the personal skills and interests that will aid them in succeeding throughout the program. With this philosophy, students learn how their personal aptitudes might lend themselves to certain career goals.

Developing concrete job-seeking skills

Alongside personal discoveries around aptitudes and interests, students built concrete skills that will help them in finding and retaining jobs. Students were taught how to prepare for interviews, how to write cover letters and resumes, and how to interact professionally with co-workers. Furthermore, newly gained knowledge about one's aptitudes was directed towards creating long-term career goals and career assessments around these aptitudes.

Raising student self-awareness of ASD

Another aspect of student knowledge-building and self-discovery included learning about their ASD. Through classroom instruction and large and small support group formats, students had the opportunity to learn about their own disability.

The strengths-based philosophy of TLA deemphasized disability as a deficit. Instead of making exceptions for having ASD, students were taught how to work effectively with ASD, and how to manage challenges. Students were tasked with identifying other aspects of their personality with which they could define themselves, allowing for a realistic and well-rounded exploration of who they are.

"It's like nobody really sat down and explained to some of these folks what [their] disability is and what that means and what it doesn't mean, and how do you work around it and how do you make it not a big deal because it doesn't define you, you know?...It's just part of you, but it doesn't define you." (TLA Staff)

CORE ELEMENT #2: Having Opportunities to Practice Knowledge Gained in the Classroom

TLA provided the regular chances to practice acquired knowledge by:

- Building skills to manage traditional challenges associated with ASD
- Offering opportunities for practice to use these skills in real-world settings

Building skills to address traditional challenges associated with ASD

TLA used the practice portion of the program to build skills and prepare students to address the challenges associated with ASD. Social skills and ease with social situations were addressed by providing exposure to a range of new people such as classmates, teachers, mentors, and other University of South Florida students.

A specific way that TLA students practiced these skills was by attending a mock job fair to prepare for community job fairs where they would meet potential employers (noted below). Students practiced introducing themselves, maintaining eye contact, and keeping in touch with people to maintain a network. They did this alongside mentors who addressed in real time what expected behaviors should be followed, including learning how to regulate emotions.

In addition, many mentors and students maintained contact after involvement in program, forming authentic relationships that followed the students into future settings.

"We know people with autism certainly have difficulties generalizing information. So we wanted to give them the opportunity to take what you're learning in the classroom and apply it somewhere that made a contextual fit for it, made it relevant, used it across different people and different places." (TLA mentor)

Offering opportunities for practice in real-world settings

Self-awareness and career knowledge is made concrete through practicing in relevant situations, providing real-world context for the theoretical portions of the program. Real-world skills were used in practical ways, such that students were able to practice job-related skills at internships, and create robust action plans for the future, as well as writing their own resumes and cover letters in preparation for job finding.

Internships were highly customized to individual interests and support needs to increase relevance for the student. Students also attend job fairs both on and off campus to practice meeting with unknown people.

CORE ELEMENT #3: Engaging in an Environment of Safety and Support

TLA provided support to students as they practiced their newfound knowledge by:

1. Taking advantage of the campus environment
2. Supporting parents to let go
3. Benefitting from the mentoring relationship

Taking advantage of the campus environment

Transforming students through knowledge and practice happens by fostering a supportive and safe environment. Since TLA is part of the University of South Florida campus, students feel part of the larger university community. At the same time, the enclosed nature of a college campus also provided a safe atmosphere that allowed students to learn at a comfortable pace.

“...the idea of being on a college campus with other students. It made her feel like she was just one of them. And it just sort of gave her the permission to go and explore without being afraid. And she felt very safe. She felt like this is it. Nothing’s going to happen around here and she just went for it. So she felt very safe in this kind of environment.” (TLA parent)

Supporting parents to let go

Staff supported parents to let go so that students could experience real-world challenges throughout the campus without their conventional safety net. Thus, the students were able to reach a confidence level where they could feel comfortable being independent in situations beyond the school environment. While it may have initially caused anxiety for some parents, regular workshops kept them up to date on classroom activities and well informed about the benefits of student independence.

Benefitting from the mentoring relationship

Another source of support at TLA was the highly structured mentoring component. Mentors, who were students from the larger University and acted as liaisons to the campus and the community, encouraged students to venture out of their comfort zones. While this provided a safety net for students, it also inspired students to be able to take risks and test themselves in novel social experiences. As a collaborative effort, this relationship gently pushed students to self-govern based on their newly found knowledge.

For each classroom topic, students were given the opportunity to practice with the aid of a mentor who made sure that their real-world exercises were supported with feedback and advice. Moreover, mentors served as friends with whom students could practice interpersonal skills.

Suggestions for transition professionals

Findings from ICI’s evaluation have important implications for others, including the full range of transition professionals. While TLA’s campus offers such resources as an adult environment, independent living options, and a variety of clubs and mentors, the intrinsic elements of TLA’s “knowledge, practice and support” model can be emulated in other settings.

The following suggestions are offered for professionals supporting the transition to adulthood for youth and young adults with ASD and other disabilities:

1. Take the time for discovery to build knowledge
2. Create mentoring opportunities and relationships to offer support

SUGGESTION #1: Take the time for discovery

TLA uses the first half of their one-year program to build knowledge around student interests, aptitudes and passions, job seeking and job maintenance, and a personal understanding of having ASD. This knowledge is delivered by emphasizing the strategy of discovery.

Discovery: What is it?

The fundamental question of discovery is, “Who is this person?” The value of discovery is that all people have specific areas of competence and potential contribution. Rather than applying a standardized method of guidance or mentoring, discovery takes into account an individual’s life experiences, which identify preferences that can aid them in the transition process (<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57fa78cd6a496306c83a2ca7/t/5830f70bb3db2be72dcc400/1479603979455/Discovery+is.pdf>).

Discovery: How does it work?

By getting to know job seekers personally through Discovery, it is possible to translate their life competencies into conditions for success. One-on-one pairs or small teams for each individual facilitate familiarity with the person and their

characteristics. A robust picture of the individual moves employment planning toward choosing what is best for the person, before supporting them in finding employment. This approach can guide the job seeker to a particular field of interest, or to a potential employer that may be a strong match.

As a result, the movement from learning about oneself to searching for a job is one that is owned by the individual, wherein decisions are made based on their own unique preferences, and inherently supports their self-determination, allowing for more lasting competencies for potential employment (http://flfcic.fmhi.usf.edu/docs/FCIC_FactSheets/FCIC_FactSheet_Discovery.pdf).

For more about Discovery, see:

The Discovery Process: A Path to Employment for All

http://flfcic.fmhi.usf.edu/docs/FCIC_FactSheets/FCIC_FactSheet_Discovery.pdf

Discovering Personal Genius: The Foundation of Customized Employment

https://wise.unt.edu/sites/default/files/Discovery%20job%20devel%20WEBINAR%20WO%202014_2.pdf

The Essential Elements of Customized Employment for Universal Application

<http://wintac-s3.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/topic-areas/Essential-Elements-of-Customized-Employment-for-Universal-Application%20%28005%29-FInal.pdf>

SUGGESTION #2: Create mentoring opportunities and relationships to offer support

TLA created a mentoring component within their program that allowed students to safely practice the knowledge they learned in new environments.

Mentoring is a relationship where an individual, through counsel and constructive example, supports someone in meeting their goals in work and in life. Such a relationship can be invaluable, as it provides not only work and life support, but a role model for interpersonal and problem-solving skills, the benefits of which persist throughout a mentee's life (www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/fact/cfm.htm).

For transition professionals, creating mentoring opportunities doesn't have to be complicated. Ask other students from your school, or alumni from the same general age group, to act as mentors. Mentors are invaluable for practicing social skills in new environments, and in helping students adjust to unexpected situations that arise as they are practicing knowledge they have learned.

Positive mentoring relationships should include:

- trust and respect between the mentor and mentee
- mutual agreement about the mentoring relationship
- guidance from the mentor on mentee questions or concerns
- regular opportunities to see each other

Career-focused mentoring in particular provides young people the opportunity to get a glimpse of the world of work that may not otherwise be available to them. It also allows them to gain and practice skills that are useful in professional and other settings, and to prepare for life as an adult. Career-focused mentors can share employment success strategies, provide employment-related guidance and networking support, and act as a reference for the student as they implement their career plans.

For more about career-focused mentoring, see:

Career-Focused Mentoring for Youth: The What, Why and How

www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/fact/cfm.htm

Paving the Way to Work: A Guide to Career-Focused Mentoring

www.ncwd-youth.info/paving-the-way-to-work

Conclusion

TLA's essential components provide a template that transition professionals can use in aiding young adults to move towards adulthood. Whether the transition process involves large groups, or is a one-on-one setting, a knowledge-practice-support paradigm allows transition-age students to enhance self-determination and discover their personal inclinations for future work.

This paradigm provides not only an inspiration for action-based guidelines for optimizing support, but a philosophy of centering the process around the individual that ultimately provides the skills to transition into adulthood.

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For more information on ThinkWork or the Institute for Community Inclusion:
www.ThinkWork.org | www.communityinclusion.org

For more information on The Learning Academy at the University of South Florida: www.learningacademy.fmhi.usf.edu

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A copy of the full report is available from TLA upon request.