

PRACTICE BRIEF

College Student for a Day: A Transition Program for High School Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

High school students with disabilities can benefit from early exposure to campus-based accommodations and supports as they transition to college. College Student for a Day (CSFAD) is an on-campus activity-based program that introduces high school students with disabilities to supports and accommodations on a college campus. This Practice Brief describes the planning, implementation and follow-up activities associated with the CSFAD program as well as outcome observations and implications for future programming.

Keywords: Students with disabilities, transition

Literature Review

Successful high school-to-college transition for students with disabilities is enhanced by a number of factors, including self-advocacy skills, strong relationships with faculty or staff members, and positive interactions with on-campus supports (Barber, 2012; National Council on Disability, 2012). High school students with disabilities who utilize these personal and university resources are more likely to attend college, increasing the likelihood that they will have higher rates of employment and earnings as adults (Barber, 2012; National Council on Disability, 2012). Thus, helping students with disabilities develop these types of self-advocacy and self-determination skills is an important part of the high school-to-college transition (Gil, 2007).

Despite knowledge about how to help students with disabilities (SWD) successfully navigate college environments, only 34% of high school SWD – versus 51% of high school students without disabilities – ever enroll in postsecondary education (Newman et al.,

2011). Even greater disparities exist for students from low-income families: 70% of high school SWD from families with incomes of \$50,000 or higher enroll in college, while matriculation for SWD from families with incomes of \$25,000 or less is 50% (Newman et al., 2011). These disparities suggest the need for stronger high school-to-college transition programs for all SWD, but particularly for secondary SWD from low-income families (Newman et al., 2011).

Teaching SWD to advocate for appropriate accommodations and supports during high school may help their high school-to-college transition. Research suggests that SWD are more successful in college when they receive appropriate services, including mandated accommodations such as additional testing time and non-mandated supports such as tutoring (Barber, 2012; Gil, 2007; Newman et al., 2011). While these supports are often available on a campus, many SWD fail to access them because they do not disclose their disabilities when they enroll in college, thus making it difficult for colleges and universities to meet their needs (Barber, 2012; Gil, 2007; Newman et al., 2011).

Further, in college SWD become responsible for identifying services that can support their needs – unlike in high school when case managers, teachers, and parents advocate for them (Newman et al., 2011). It is important, therefore, for SWD to learn how to self-advocate by accessing campus-based accommodations and supports before they enter college.

College Student for a Day (CSFAD) is an activity that may help secondary SWD learn how to navigate campus supports and accommodations as part of their transitions to college. In this activity, students are invited for a daylong campus visit during which they participate in activities that introduce them to campus life. To date, only one published study reports the use of programming similar to CSFAD with high school students. Brezuleanu, Brezuleanu, and Iațco (2013) designed campus-based lessons and activities to motivate high school students to consider agricultural study at a university after graduation. In their study, twenty-six high school students from three schools participated in demonstration classes during which they worked collaboratively with college students on agricultural activities. Participating high school students reported that the event influenced their decision to study at a university after graduation. The researchers attributed their results to the use of campus-based resources and partnerships, activity-based learning, and linking activities to learning objectives in demonstration classes. No published studies have reported the use of CSFAD as part of transition programming for SWD.

Depiction of the Problem

SWD from low-income families attend college at a significantly lower rate than their peers (Newman et al., 2011). When they do enroll in college, they may not disclose their disabilities to their institutions, thus limiting their access to available supports that can help them successfully matriculate (Barber, 2012; Gil, 2007; Newman et al., 2011). Ensuring that low-income SWD can self-advocate for services is important because research suggests that SWD are more successful in college when they receive appropriate supports and accommodations (Barber, 2012; Gil, 2007; National Council on Disability, 2012; Newman et al., 2011). There is a need, therefore, for interventions that can introduce SWD to college supports and accommodations as part of their transition planning. The purpose of the current paper is to describe the use of CSFAD as a part of transition programming for high school SWD from low-income families.

Participant Demographics

CSFAD was a collaborative project between a university's College of Education and two partner high schools: (1) a career academy with traditional high school students interested in health sciences careers; and (2) an alternative high school with at-risk students ages 17-22. CSFAD participants were freshmen (by credit hours) in special education classes at schools with an enrollment of more than 90% low-income students. Each high school selected ten freshmen that were interested in – but not committed to – attending college. In sum, twelve Black and eight Latino high school students from ages 14 to 19 participated. University faculty selected 10 Black and Latino undergraduate students as volunteer mentors. Eight mentors were education majors and two were business majors. Most mentors were seniors; one freshman and one sophomore also volunteered. Although efforts were made to recruit college SWD as mentors from a university's Center for Students with Disabilities, none volunteered. However, one mentor reported that she received special education services in elementary school.

Institutional Partners/Resources

An internal diversity award that supported the university's mission to develop urban, multicultural leaders funded this project. It was also supported by multiple campus offices that partnered for the event including the College of Education, food services, the campus bookstore, academic advising, financial aid, student services, the Writing Center, the Center for SWD, and individual faculty who invited CSFAD attendees to observe their university classes and allowed mentors to participate in the program in lieu of attending class.

Description of Practice

Planning and Training: After two meetings between university and high school faculty, program planning began by recruiting and training three key groups: (1) 10 student mentors from the College of Education and minority student groups; (2) 20 high school students with disabilities; and (3) five university offices that provided academic and social services to undergraduate students. Training occurred in this manner: (1) faculty explained the program and mentoring responsibilities to college mentors during a one-hour session; (2) high school students' teachers explained the program and its expectations to SWD; and (3) faculty met with university academic and social support offices to explain the offices' roles in CSFAD. Materials for CSFAD included four curricular components: (a) "Milestones and Progress" ([MAP]; Novakovic &

Ross, 2014), a scenario-based lesson that introduced students to campus services through online and activity-based learning (see Appendix); (b) "Sparking the Future" curriculum ([STF]; Washington Department of Education, 2014), a college and career readiness curriculum for students in grades 7-12; (c) *The Pact* (Davis, Jenkins, Hunt, & Page, 2002), a biography of three at-risk youth who fulfilled their high school goal of becoming medical doctors; and (d) a CSFAD syllabus that contained the schedule, expectations for the day, and the book citation for *The Pact*.

Implementation: CSFAD began at 9:00 am. Following a welcome and introductions, the day progressed in four distinct sessions of 45-120 minutes each. During the first session, faculty paired mentors and mentees, reviewed the syllabus, and gave directions for completing MAP scenarios; mentor pairs also completed an icebreaker activity from the STF curriculum. During the second session, mentor/mentee pairs collaboratively problem-solved MAP scenarios by using the Internet to locate campus resources. During the third session, mentoring pairs completed a scavenger hunt activity during which a SWD role-played a college student by visiting each of five campus offices and asking an office contact person a question related to the MAP scenario. The office contact person then signed the high school student's list of scenarios, indicating that he or she successfully visited the office. During the final session, high school students returned to the College of Education where they listened to speakers from Financial Aid and the Center for Students with Disabilities, received a university t-shirt for their participation, and completed a survey about the day. CSFAD ended at 3:00 pm.

Follow-up: Schools were given a copy of the movie, *The Pact*, to watch with participating students when they finished reading the book. Schools continued to discuss students' goals and include college transition planning for students who expressed an interest. Faculty and graduate students from the university's school counseling and special education programs visited the partner high schools to conduct follow-up lessons from the STF curriculum on choosing a career and selecting a corresponding major. Faculty distributed certificates of participation to high school students and thank you notes to all participating campus offices, high school teachers, and college mentors.

Evaluation of Observed Outcomes

A program evaluation questionnaire was given to participants at the end of the CSFAD event. Of the twenty participants, 17 (85%) noted that attending the CSFAD program helped to change their minds about

college. A majority of students, 16 (80%), who attended the CSFAD program indicated that they would "definitely" attend college, two students (10%) said "maybe," and two (10%) were "still unsure." Of the activities included in the CSFAD program, students rated their mentor highest ($M = 4.58, SD = .94$), followed by mentoring sessions ($M = 4.53, SD = .68$), lunch with the mentor ($M = 4.53, SD = .82$), the scavenger hunt ($M = 4.11, SD = .79$), and the classroom lessons ($M = 4.06, SD = .89$). The findings demonstrated that the students placed a higher value on the mentorship component of the CSFAD program than any of the other learning activities planned by the organizers.

Two themes about mentoring emerged from behavioral observations and students' comments throughout the day: (1) Mentoring relationships formed naturally, and (2) mentoring pairs preferred small group instead of one-on-one time. Though mentors and mentees were originally paired together by program organizers, they tended to merge together into groups throughout the day. During the computer activity, for example, mentoring pairs gravitated toward small working groups instead of working one-on-one. Similarly, during the scavenger hunt, several mentors and their mentees joined together based on their interests in seeing specific places on campus. During the final session of the day, one high school student said, "That's the way you should do it," indicating that faculty should allow mentoring groups to form naturally.

After mentoring-related activities, the MAP scenario scavenger hunt was the next most highly rated aspect of the CSFAD program. The major theme that emerged from planning and implementing the scavenger hunt was *individualization*. That is, all participants individualized the scavenger hunt activity based on their interests. For example, mentoring groups chose which offices to visit and, in some cases, visited university classes and other campus locations such as the student athletic center and residence halls, which were not included on the MAP scenario list. In fact, only 12 of 20 students were able to visit all of the offices in the scenarios. Similarly, during planning, both mentors and campus partners (e.g., The Writing Center) individualized their services for the students. For instance, the bookstore independently placed *The Pact* - the CSFAD textbook - on bookshelves and had an employee retrieve the book for high school students when they showed them their syllabi, as they would for an undergraduate student.

Implications and Portability

The purpose of CSFAD was to provide activity-based learning and mentoring to better acquaint low-income SWD with accommodations and supports available on a university campus with the goal of increasing their enrollment and facilitating their transition to college. The experiential learning activity (scavenger hunt) and the presence of mentors were clearly the most well-received aspects of the program. This finding is consistent with existing data on mentoring, which suggests that youth mentoring can affect students' attitudes when the mentoring has a specific academic objective (Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & DuBoix, 2008). In the current project, the students and mentors appeared to form relationships very quickly as mentors provided first-hand information about the campus and their experiences with the institution. Additionally, the scavenger hunt provided structure for high school students to be able to visit each office, yet mentors also had the flexibility to take them to other places of interest on campus. Finally, mentors provided high school students with modeling and support in approaching and speaking with representatives from each office. This offered the high school students an opportunity to practice the self-advocacy skills that are necessary for navigating disability services on a college campus.

One of the challenges encountered during the planning and implementation of the CSFAD program was related to mentor pairings. Due to inclement weather, ten students from one of the high schools arrived two hours late for the event. Since the organizers had already established mentoring pairs prior to the event, new pairs had to be created on-site to accommodate a smaller group. Once the tardy students arrived for the event, mentors returned to their originally planned pairs. Both the students and the mentors resisted the change in mentoring pairs, stating that they had already developed relationships and did not want to start "bonding" again. For future programs, it is recommended that mentor/student pairs develop organically during the first session of the day. Mentors can be instructed on ways to approach students and form pairs based on interest and comfort level.

Additionally, despite the activities designed to introduce students to financial aid information (visit to financial aid office and presentation by financial aid representative), almost one-half (40%) of the students reported they were unsure they would be able to pay for college. In future CSFAD programming, it is recommended that additional support be provided in the area of financing college. For instance, mentors can share their own experiences with financing their educations.

Also, during the small group activity, time can be allotted for the mentors and students to explore financial aid and scholarship opportunities online.

The CSFAD program can be implemented on a variety of college campuses with assistance and support from participating high schools and campus partners. The program can be tailored to a particular college or university as a recruitment activity for SWD, or it can convey a general message to SWD about typical resources found on any college campus, as did the program described in this article. Longitudinal surveys of high school participants' attitudes about college enrollment and knowledge of campus services could enhance understanding of program efficacy. Qualitative interviewing of mentors and mentees could inform researchers about the development of the mentor-mentee relationship and its importance in changing high school students' attitudes about attending college. Future implementations of CSFAD at the current university will include more high school students and encourage ongoing relationships between undergraduate mentors and high school students through a formal, year-long mentoring program.

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Appendix

College Student for a Day Experiential Learning Activity Scenarios

Scenario A: You are enrolled in college and you need some extra help with writing a report in one of your classes. How do you find out what is available for you?

Activities: (1) Find the Writing Center. Where is it located (building and room)? (2) Talk to a representative at the Writing Center. (3) List one service that is provided by the Writing Center. (4) Find the Center for Students with Disabilities. Where is it located (building and room)? (5) Talk to a representative at the Center for Students with Disabilities. (6) List three services that the Center for Students with Disabilities provides for students.

Scenario B: You just finished your first week of classes. You wonder if there is anything else to do at college besides going to class. You think that becoming involved with extracurricular activities like sports or clubs might be helpful. How will you find out what is available to you?

Activities: (1) Find the Division of Student Affairs. Where is it located (building and room)? (2) Talk to a representative at the Division of Student Affairs and ask which extracurricular activities are available at the university. (3) List three activities that interest you.

Scenario C: You have a question about paying for college. How will you find the answer?

Activities: (1) Find the Financial Aid Office. Where is it located (building and room)? (2) Talk to a representative in the Financial Aid Office. (3) List two services that the Financial Aid Office provides.

Scenario D: For this class (College Student for a Day), you received a syllabus. On the syllabus is the name of the textbook that you will need for this class. The book is available at the campus bookstore.

Activities: (1) On what street is the bookstore located? (2) Name one item you can purchase at the bookstore (besides books).

Scenario E: You have heard that you need to “major” in something like business or education in college. What is a “major”? How will you find out what majors are available at this university?

Activities: (1) Find the Office for Academic Advising Support. Where is it located (building and room)? (2) Talk to a representative at the Office for Academic Advising Support. (3) List three majors that are offered at the university.