

Going to College: A Campus-Based Partnership for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

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ABSTRACT: In this article we describe a university-school district partnership offering an on-campus transition experience for students with intellectual disabilities that includes collaborative experiences with pre-service special education teacher candidates. A description of the specific components and outcomes of the program is presented along with a discussion of some of the challenges school district and university personnel have faced. The article concludes with recommendations for professionals preparing to undertake similar initiatives. The program is presented as an example of how large, metropolitan school districts and university teacher education programs can collaborate to provide an effective transition program for students with intellectual disabilities together with meaningful experiences for pre-service teachers.

NAPDS Essentials Addressed: #1/A comprehensive mission that is broader in its outreach and scope than the mission of any partner and that furthers the education profession and its responsibility to advance equity within schools and, by potential extension, the broader community; #4/A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants; #5/Engagement in and public sharing of the results of deliberate investigations of practice by respective participants; #6/An articulation agreement developed by the respective participants delineating the roles and responsibilities of all involved; #7/A structure that allows all participants a forum for ongoing governance, reflection, and collaboration.

Introduction

The years between late adolescence and early adulthood are typically marked by an increase in activities that foster independence, promote social integration and provide for vocational preparation. For the majority of youth today, these activities are usually anchored to a college or university campus. Historically, however, students with intellectual and developmental disabilities have been excluded from traditional college experiences and instead, have most often remained in high school settings long after their same age peers graduate. Since federal legislation provides students with disabilities access to public education until age twenty-two, for many students this can mean up to four additional years spent in a high school environment. Increasingly, the value of this practice has been questioned with many in the field of special education calling for opportunities for young adults with intellectual disabilities to move beyond secondary school into environments where they can participate in meaningful transition activities with same age peers as they prepare for life beyond high school (Wehmeyer, Garner, Yeager, Lawrence, & Davis, 2006). College and university campuses can provide an option for such experiences. Colleges and school districts can work together to offer services

that do not isolate individuals with intellectual disabilities (Pearman, Elliot, & Alborn, 2004). As federal policies have changed and options have expanded for individuals with intellectual disabilities, support for academic, physical, vocational and social-emotional needs is provided in a diverse range of settings including universities and community colleges (Kolb, 2003).

The success of college and university based programs for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities are largely dependent on close collaboration between school district and higher education personnel. Work experiences offer experiential learning and structured opportunities to acquire hands-on employability skills and habits (Lindstrom, Paskey, Dickinson, Doren, Zane, & Johnson, 2007). Students preparing for post-school outcomes need proper training in order to successfully enter the workforce. The infusion of academic, employability and self-determination skills within the high school curriculum more adequately prepares the individual transitioning to post-secondary settings (Benz et al., 2000; Wehmeyer et al., 2006; Lindstrom et al., 2007). Providing these services in a community-based setting, particularly a college setting, provides opportunities for access to functional skills and

knowledge that students need to live, work and play more independently (Wehmeyer et al., 2006).

In this article, we describe a campus-based partnership, between a large research university and a local urban metropolitan school district located in the Southeastern United States. This paper offers insight into the development of the partnership and implementation of the university transition program in order to provide ideas for other large, metropolitan school districts and university departments that would be interested in exploring the development of partnerships.

Campus-Based Programs for Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

Several authors (Dolynuick et. al., 2002; Eskow & Fisher, 2004; Kirkendall, Doueck & Saladino 2009; Schmidt, 2005) have described campus-based transition programs for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The *Think College* program at the University of Massachusetts in Boston provides a searchable database of campus-based transition initiatives (Grigal, Dwyre, & Davis, 2006; Grigal, Neubert, & Moon, 2001). Within the database there are a number of programs located at 4-year institutions, which specifically include individualized programming for students with intellectual or developmental disabilities, and focus on students who exited from the high school setting.

There are currently over 250 university-based transition programs that offer some form of campus experiences for students with intellectual disabilities (Hart, Grigal, & Wier, 2010). In 2010, the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Post Secondary Education, awarded 27 grants to institutions of higher education (IHE) to expand their programs and services to students with intellectual disabilities. The programs were developed on IHEs across 23 states. Most IHEs participating in the study provided some form of credentialing to students with disabilities who participated in the program. By the third project year 71% of IHEs receiving funding provided some form of credentials to students with intellectual disabilities (Grigal & Smith, 2014). Furthermore, among the 865 students participating in programs across the country, 22% were receiving transition services through their local K-12 schools, the average class load during the program was eight courses, 70% were employed or participating in career development activities, and 36% of students held paid jobs (Think College National Coordinating Center, 2014).

Revisions to federal laws including IDEA 2004 stress the need for post-secondary planning. IDEA 2004 specifically requires that the IEP committee develop measurable post-secondary goals that are based on appropriate transition assessments (Yell, 2012). The increasing emphasis on transition within the law and increasing number of campus-based programs is an encouragement for universities and school districts that are interested in developing new partnerships. The remainder of the paper will explore the facets of one campus-based transition

program at a large metropolitan university in the Southeastern United States.

History and Nature of One Campus-Based Partnership

The campus-based school district and university transition program that we describe for the remainder of the paper began as an outgrowth of on-going collaboration between the Division of Exceptional Student Education within a large metropolitan school district and the Department of Special Education at a large metropolitan university. The goal of the partnership was to establish a campus-based opportunity for approximately 15 young adults each year between the ages of 18 and 22. The program was designed to assist students in the exploration of career options and gainful work experience in an age-appropriate setting. The program also provided pre-service training experiences for undergraduate and graduate special education majors working with individuals who have intellectual and developmental disabilities. The transition program evolved from the district's need to extend experiences and broaden the scope of secondary to postsecondary transitions. The district had developed several successful partnerships with other area employers including large national chain retailers and hospitals. The university partnership offered the opportunity for students to access multiple employers around the campus and surrounding community. It also offered the opportunity to integrate functional life skills, specific career experiences and integrated social activities within the university setting.

In order to initiate the partnership, a formal agreement between the school district and the university was developed. A memorandum of understanding was signed between the school district and the College of Education (COE) at the inception of the program. The commitment and approval to negotiate the memorandum of understanding and space within the college and department developed as an agreement between faculty within the COE and staff within the school district. The campus transition program became an entity within the department of Special Education at the university and as such it was also an entity of the COE. The school district was responsible for program staff and curriculum while the COE, Department of Special Education, handled incidental operational expenses, including telephones and copiers.

Finding a space for any non-traditional program on campus is a challenge. Requests were made by the special education department chairperson to the COE Dean for a classroom and other appropriate space to accommodate the individuals participating in the program. Initially, three adjacent offices in an auxiliary building in close proximity to the special education department were converted to provide temporary space for the program. Eventually, dedicated classroom space was assigned and remodeled to accommodate the program's needs. The current space includes a large classroom with an adjoining office and conference area.

Rationale for the Program

Prior to the implementation of the district and university partnership, students with disabilities who were exiting the local high schools had few options to participate in programs at post-secondary institutions. Students and their families were confronted with a void between the transition from high school to the world of work and independent living and needed the opportunity to further develop their skills in an age appropriate environment while benefiting from the broad range of experiences only available outside of a regular school setting. From the school district's perspective, the campus-based program provided an optimal opportunity to address this void. From the perspective of the university and the department of special education in particular, the university transition program aligns well with the department's priorities including a commitment to authentic, field based experiences for pre-service special education candidates, community engagement and service learning. Discussions between the metropolitan school district and the COE were held with a mutual understanding that as an academic department the Department of Special Education was committed to granting degrees, but as faculty became more interested in authentic experiences for students majoring in special education, the aim was to wed theory to practices and in addition to student integration within instruction. This provided experiences for college students to know and understand the experience of working with high school age and college age youth with intellectual disabilities.

Prior to the establishment of the campus-based program, the department of special education had a history of collaborative research with the local school district. Both educational institutions saw the transition program as an opportunity to continue with a joint research agenda. However, an important value of the university and district partnership has been to avoid "using" the university students, high school students and the transition program for research purposes. Instead, the research activities associated with the program have been carefully and systematically approached and only those, which clearly and directly benefit the students, have been pursued.

Program's Vision

The ultimate vision for the university and district partnership is that students with intellectual disabilities will increase their overall level of independence by being immersed in an environment where they can interact with same-age peers and participate in typical, age appropriate activities with a specific focus on vocational outcomes. To this end, students are provided opportunities to participate in on-campus and community employment training experiences and to obtain competitive employment in full or part-time paid positions either at the university or in the community. Inexorably tied to the program's vision for students are an increase in students' self-determination, social skills, and communication skills, which we believe

are natural outcomes of continuous interaction with same age peers in meaningful activities.

Meaningful Environments with Same-Aged Peers

During the time that the transition program has operated, students have had multiple opportunities for interaction with typical university students. The students participate with special education majors in various interactive projects and courses through the department of Special Education. For example, in the undergraduate *Introduction to Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities* class, the students with intellectual disabilities and pre-service special education teacher candidates work together in collaborative learning groups to develop presentations on various topics related to young adult living such as employment, housing, family dynamics, leisure activities and parenthood. Johnson and Johnson (1984) established that when students with disabilities work cooperatively with students without disabilities, the learning experiences for both groups are much more likely to be positive. Further, encouraging students to work in collaborative groups significantly enhances students' feelings of classroom community and sense of belonging (Summers, Beretvas, Svinicki, & Gorin, 2005).

Outside the COE, the students in the transition program also participate in activities such as with the university's College of Engineering Center for Urban Transportation Research (CUTR) and the Travel Assistant Device (TAD) project where they are part of a project to develop a device to assist with accessing public transportation (Barbeau, Winters, Georggi, Labrador, & Perez, 2010). The College of Medicine provides opportunities for the students to participate with same-aged peers in activities designed to help medical students and students in the transition program develop comfortable relationships and become more familiar with each other. The students also increase their knowledge and understanding of personal fitness and nutrition by working with undergraduates who are in need of training hours toward their work as physical trainers and nutritionists through degrees in the university's exercise science programs.

From a socialization standpoint, the university chapter of *Best Buddies*, an international program that promotes normalization for individuals with developmental disabilities, provides opportunities for one-to-one friendships between students participating in the transition program and university students. As friends, students participating in the transition program and their peers from the university take part in typical campus activities such as homecoming, where they participate in the parade, and a multitude of other activities. Additionally, students socialize with students from sororities and fraternities and utilize the fitness and recreation facilities. Job shadowing opportunities have also taken place throughout the campus in various departments, colleges, and operations.

Demographics of the Campus-Based Transition Program Student Population

The university and district partnership serves students ages eighteen through twenty-two. The campus-based program welcomes an average of ten to fifteen students are enrolled during the academic year. During the first seven years of the program, 63 students had participated in the program. Of those students, 57 percent have been male and 43 percent female. Approximately 45 percent of the participants have been from minority ethnic and racial backgrounds. All of the students recruited for the program are students with varying exceptionalities with the majority identified as having intellectual or developmental disabilities or autism. All of the participants exited traditional high schools with a “special diploma.”

Within the state where the transition program is based, special diplomas are available to students with disabilities who have been properly identified as specific learning disabled, intellectually disabled, deaf and hard of hearing, physically impaired, language impaired, and those students who have emotional behavioral disorders and Autism Spectrum Disorders. Students must earn the required number of course credits specified by the local school board. The course credits may be earned by taking a combination of either Exceptional Student Education (ESE) courses, basic education courses, or career education classes. Students must also master the State Access Points to receive a Special Diploma. A student with a disability is expected to master each standard at a level of functioning that is appropriate to the individual student. A modified curriculum is one that reflects substantial changes to the outcomes or expectations. Modifications to outcomes are determined by the individual education plan (IEP) team and may include partial completion of requirements, curriculum expectations below grade level, or alternate curriculum goals. Within the state transition services are offered in a number of settings. The role of the teacher has evolved to include not only the instruction of academic skills but also the coordination of transition services as students prepare for post-secondary living and employment (Lubbers, Repetto, & McGorray, 2008).

The day-to-day operations of the transition program are managed on site by a school district appointed teacher and teacher assistant under the supervision of district level transition personnel and in collaboration with a university liaison who is a special education department faculty member. School-based teachers in the partnership provide information about the program to students with the transition specialists. The transition specialists are members of the interview teams for potential program participants. Once students have entered into the program, the transition specialists attend students’ IEP meetings. The transition specialists assist with the development of paid employment and non-paid job training opportunities on and off campus. The supervisor and coordinator of the transition program meet regularly with the district employed transition instructor and university personnel to discuss the

program’s development, implementation of new projects, and any existing barriers.

Besides attending the transition program, other options for students 18-21 years old working on a special diploma are: enrolling in other 18-21 year old programs, Adult Education programs, non degree seeking courses, continuing free and appropriate education (FAPE) at their neighborhood school, and competitive or supported employment.

Overview of the Campus-Based Transition Curriculum

The purpose of the campus-based program is to assist students with disabilities in acquiring skills needed to achieve the maximum level of independent functioning, including employment preparation. Students are enrolled in four core state Exceptional Student Education courses, namely, *Career Preparation*, *Career Experience* or *Career Placement*, *Self Determination* and *Unique Skills*. The majority of the instructional activities occur in the community and university setting allowing students to learn, practice, generalize and maintain skills in the areas of transportation, employment, self-determination and functional life skills. A description of specific programming in each of these areas follows.

Transportation

Transportation challenges have been historically cited as a chief barrier to employment for individuals with disabilities (Temple, 2007). Since its inception the campus-based program forged a close partnership with the local county transportation agency. The transition program instructor and the public transportation specialist (travel trainer) meet with each student and parent or guardian to discuss transportation needs and develop a plan for independent transit to and from the university. Each student spends time with the travel trainer learning to travel independently using public transportation. The students also access transportation on campus by utilizing the campus bus known as the Bull Runner. The Bull Runner is a transportation system within the confines of the campus and surrounding businesses that offers transportation to students and employees.

As depicted in Figure 1, within the first seven years of the program, 59 of the 63 (93.6%) students received travel training. The students who participated in travel training were successful in utilizing the public bus system to new destinations. It took first year students an average of just over four days to successfully master the training provided by the regional transit line staff. Prior to entering the transition program only 11 students had utilized public transportation through regional transit services. Once they had mastered accessing the regional transition services, 34 students chose to utilize public transportation to destinations other than the university campus. These destinations included doctor’s appointments, the mall, or their place of work during their participation in transition program.

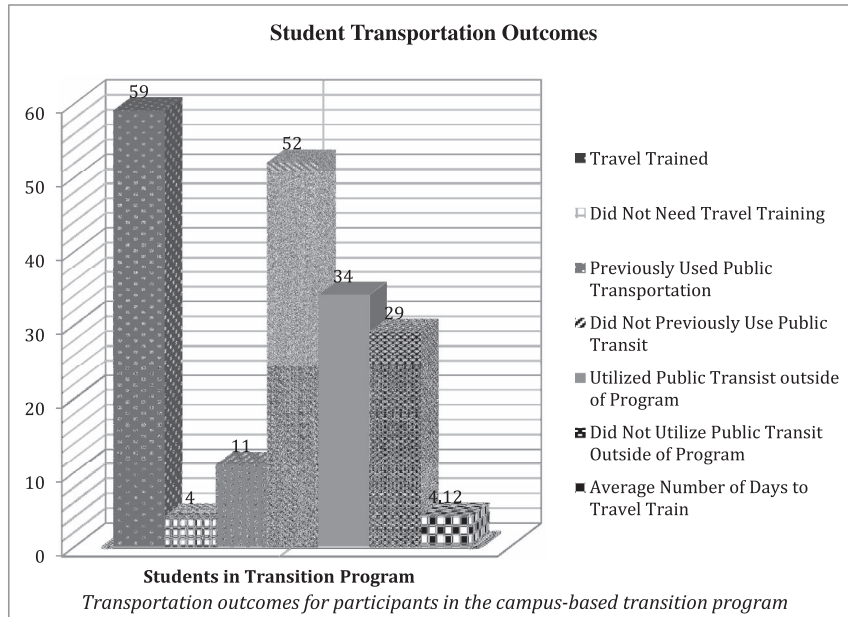


Figure 1. Transportation outcomes for participants in the campus-based transition program

Self-Determination

Allowing students to make choices on a daily basis helps them become more successful decision makers (Wehmeyer, 2005). While participating in the university program students learn how to keep track of their personal schedules, appointments, activities, and assignments and document their activities on a daily planner. Students are required to contact their Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor and/or representatives from other community agencies on a regular basis and effectively communicate their needs and individual goals. Students write their own IEP goals in their planning notes prior to IEP meetings and are responsible for inviting members of their IEP team to meetings. Students evaluate their own progress on a weekly and monthly basis with regard to IEP goals, job performance, individual goals, presentations and activities. Students learn how people are alike and different and they practice discussing their own exceptionalities and any accommodations or modification they may need. Opportunities to use self-determination skills arise during group presentations, individual interviews, community activities and visits to college classes and events. Each student assists with the development of his or her academic and employment goals while participating in the program. One of the students recently obtained a general equivalency diploma (GED) by developing an action plan to attain the GED while participating in the campus-based program. This enabled the student to pursue higher education as a registered student at the university.

Functional Life Skills

As is typical with most transition programs for young adults with disabilities, the development of academic skills for functional living is a major component of the daily curriculum. Students

demonstrate functional reading, writing, and math skills necessary for daily living tasks, e.g. prepare written or oral information to accomplish functional tasks, identify coin(s) and bill(s) combinations to pay for bus fare/vending machines, count money or use the next dollar strategy to purchase items in the community or on campus. Students are given the experiences needed to problem solve and determine the impact of their decisions. Often, assignments are given that require interaction with community members. For example, if the student loses track of time and misses the bus, he or she will miss their work opportunities. As a consequence, they must notify the instructor and business and devise a plan as how to prevent the error in the future.

Employment

In addition to the immeasurable benefits the students derive from the aforementioned experiences with same-age peers, students exiting the program have also experienced measurable success in the areas of employment and travel training. The majority of the program’s participants exit with paid employment experiences and the ability to travel independently using public transportation.

Students initially participate in a non-paid job-training program on campus and in the surrounding community with the intent to become gainfully employed during or upon completion of the program. Students are required to interview for positions and the decision as to whether or not the student is an appropriate candidate, is determined by the employer, not the program instructor. Students typically work 10 to 15 hours a week during traditional school hours. The students rotate job experiences every quarter unless they obtain a paid position.

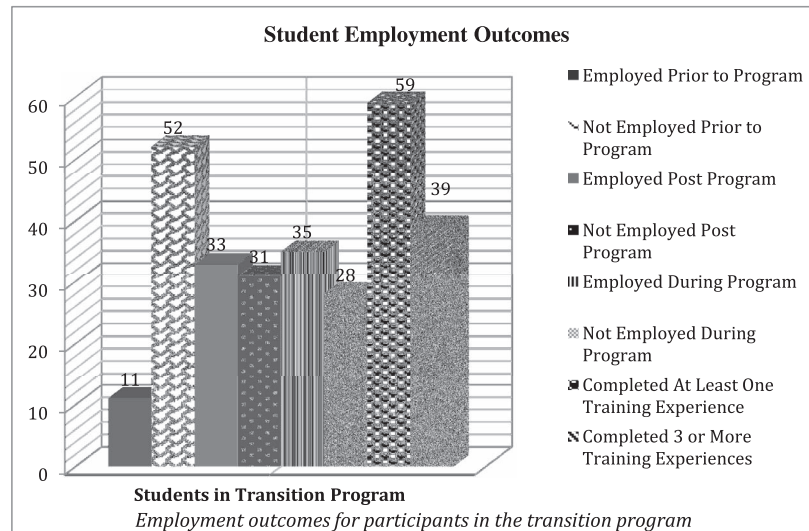


Figure 2. Employment outcomes for participants in the transition program

Preparation for employment was one of the primary objectives of the campus-based transition program. Students participate in a number of job training experiences throughout their time in the program. Fifty-nine of the 63 students (93%) participated in at least one internship. Since its inception 55.5% of the students enrolled in the program were employed within a paid position during their experience and 50.8% remained employed in a paid position immediately following their participation. This is a substantial increase from the 17.5% who were employed in a paid position, prior to their entry in the campus-based program (Figure 2).

Challenges and Recommendations

Following seven years of successful operation, key personnel from the school district and the university who have been closely involved with the transition program reflected on the lessons learned and the challenges faced individually and jointly. The following section provides brief analyses of some of these challenges, the lessons learned and recommendations for similar school district university partnerships. When reflecting on the program’s successes and overcoming barriers, it is recommended that clear program goals are defined with the ability to allow the goals to shift and change as student, environmental, and economics factors impact defined goals. In reflecting on the successes of the program, the following areas were critical to establishing the university and school district partnership: a shared philosophy, key personnel, parent support, independent transportation schedules, and collaboration with local employers.

A Shared Philosophy

While everyone involved with the university and district partnership seemed to have similar ideas regarding the program’s

philosophy, shortly after inception it became obvious that minor differences existed in how the philosophy would be operationalized, particularly with regard to the area of inclusion in university activities. On one hand, the explicit goals stated in the program proposal and cooperative agreement leaned heavily toward activities focusing on job training and employment. However, implicit in the understandings about the program was the notion of maximal social integration. Further, the program instructor appointed by the school district felt strongly that students should be included in regular university classes outside of the special education department and also possibly in dormitory life.

Over the years we have had to balance the desire to involve the district students in as much of campus life as possible with the reality that the students are on campus for a limited amount of time during the day and throughout the academic year. There are years where the students who were enrolled in the transition program were more involved in on-campus activities than others. In past experiences students partnered with the COE, Department of Special Education to attend and participate in pre-service teacher education courses. In past years some transition program participants also participated in partnerships with the Department of Psychology and the School of Medicine on campus.

Most recently the students enrolled in the transition program participated in a collaborative project with the Exercise Science majors. The project offered students an opportunity to work closely with the exercise science majors and athletic trainers in order to develop and achieve personal fitness goals. With each opportunity for a partnership college co-eds majoring in the academic specialty and the students from the transition program gain a great deal from the experience. The collaboration with various campus programs can change from year to year depending on questions of supervision and liability. These issues often come into play when determining the suitability of activities for the students from the district. While an

arrangement is made with the university to operate the program within a space on campus, the students are not admitted university students who intend to complete an academic program. There continue to remain certain challenges over the years as the district and university work to refine legal as well as practical understandings about the appropriateness of potential activities. These understandings are always considered in addition to the philosophical goals of inclusion.

Key Personnel

The success of the campus-based transition program over the past seven years is attributed to several important factors. A shared philosophy between the local school district and the university, COE was important, but having the right people in place to operate day-to-day activities and the maintenance of employment partnerships is critical. Many of the business and community partnerships continue and remain successful because of the work of the instructor and support personnel. The instructor has over 25 years of experience working with young adults with intellectual disabilities. When she worked with the district and the university to create the program, she used her background knowledge and experience to forge creative and meaningful experiences for the students.

In addition to the instructor, a university faculty coordinator also serves an integral role in the implementation of the program. As the university liaison for the university and district partnership, the COE faculty member assists the transition program instructor in negotiating university policies to ensure that students are safe and successful while they are on campus. Together the instructor and university faculty coordinator work with district leadership including the director of secondary education and the director of transition services to provide meaningful experiences for both the transition students and the special education pre-service teacher candidates. Also, as a team they ensure that area high schools are aware of the campus-based program.

Parent Support

As with the other transition programs discussed in the literature (Grigal & Neubert, 2004; Kohler & Field, 2003), the success of this campus-based program remains dependent in part upon parental support. The impetus for the transition program was initially based on the needs and interests of families who voiced a desire for alternatives to traditional transition preparation programs for students with intellectual disabilities ages 18-22 that were based within the high school setting. Families are required to assist their child in getting to and from the transition program. They are encouraged to support their child's use of public transportation. In addition to transportation support, parents are also encouraged to assist their child in accessing and using the technology from email to Internet based daily calendars. Accessing these online tools and

resources help students gain independence in their daily work routines.

Independent Transportation

It is clear that if students are going to move toward independence and increased participation in vocational, social, and recreational opportunities, they must have means of independent transportation. Research has historically shown that the biggest obstacle to employment for persons with disabilities is lack of transportation (Mont, 2004; Scheer, Kroll, Neri, Beatty, 2003). The partnership between the campus-based program and the county transportation network has been one of the most important aspects of independence for students. The transportation partnership has offered students a way to successfully navigate their way to and from the university. It has also offered a needed connection between their home and other places around the community. The partnership is also beneficial for the transportation authority, by enhancing the programs used to train bus drivers who operate daily routes.

Collaboration with Local Employers

Transportation is not the only major barrier to independence. Unemployment remains an obstacle for individuals with intellectual disabilities (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005; Fogg, Harrington, & McMahon, 2010). The employment partnerships that are established between the transition program and local employers on and around the university campus offer important training opportunities for students. These partnerships continue to invest time and resources to assist students in developing job skills that are valuable and transferable to future paid positions. Over one third of all participants exit the program with work experience that they gained from three or more different internship experiences. The training has also provided transferable skills and connections to employers in the area. As the students prepare for their transition from the 18-22 programs, employment becomes an important aspect of daily life that many prepare for. Employment is an important goal for the students who participate in the program and collaboration with local employers to ensure students success is critical.

Sustainability of the Transition Program and University Partnership

Long-term sustainability has been an ongoing priority of the partnership as evidenced by efforts to integrate the project into the life of both the university department and the school district with minimal added cost to either partner. Suitable, existing university classroom and office space was identified and renovated to accommodate the needs of the students and staff in the transition program. Through existing resources, the Department of Special Education within the university has absorbed the minimal costs of telephones, photocopying, and

postage. In addition, the university has integrated the district transition program's webpage into the COE website. Information about the program and several examples of collaboration that has occurred between the school district and the university are featured on the site.

Of particular importance for long-term sustainability is the absence of any external funding or other short-term fiscal supports that could eventually erode and result in termination of the program. Instead, the school district is able to assume responsibility for employing the special education classroom teacher and paraprofessional through student full-time equivalency allocations and also supplies all instructional materials needed to deliver the curriculum. The establishment of the transition program as a field experience site and the integration of students in the transition program throughout many areas of the university has strengthened the relationship over time. A permanent special education faculty member has continuously been engaged with the partnership and advises doctoral students who work with students in the transition program. Their contributions have enhanced the program and provided needed support at no cost. Uniquely, funds have been generated through contributions to the College's annual appeal resulting in the establishment of a designated foundation account to support special events associated with the program.

Aside from shared costs, the allocation of space, and the allocation of FTE, the partnership is tied to the success of many transition program alumni and university graduates who have returned to support the program. In addition to university graduates who exit the teacher preparation program, the Department of Special Education has offered support to several doctoral students who have completed research projects about the transition program including doctoral dissertation studies that have illuminated areas for inquiry in the field. These efforts have been particularly meaningful to the administrations of both the university and the school district as they have witnessed the growth and quality of the partnership, with a minimal infusion of funding or additional demands on faculty and staff time. Students who have graduated from the transition program also provide a unique and meaningful service to the ongoing sustainability of the program. Many alumni of the program return, after graduating to contribute support as mentors and positive role models for the students.

Conclusions

The university and school district partnership has experienced numerous successes. Pre-service special education teacher candidates have gained an awareness of the multifaceted components of a successful transition program and have acquired skills to help support students through the transition process. They have also benefitted from the multiple in class and outside of class opportunities for close interaction with students in the transition program. The pre-service candidates within the COE volunteer their time every semester to serve as

a peer mentor to the students in the transition program through a local chapter of the national Best Buddies organization, whose mission is to partner individuals with intellectual disabilities with a peer mentor. Many pre-service candidates also elect to spend time outside of the classroom and the peer mentor program by interacting with youth in the transition program during the lunch hour and during their Friday social hour, affectionately known as "free-time Fridays," where they enjoy playing basketball or other organized sports during a set-aside social hour.

Students exiting the transition program have improved their self-advocacy skills and functional living skills. The majority of the students exit the program employed and travel trained. This greatly improves the students' postsecondary outcomes enabling them to sustain developed goals. Additional noteworthy successes include students who have exited and now live semi-independently or leave to pursue other postsecondary programs. In one instance a student who exited the program had a goal to study for the GED. The student exited the program, continued to study and obtained their GED. Others students have exited the program with lasting friendships with classmates and college peers from the university. Students who participate in Best Buddies often keep in touch with one another long after they graduate.

When reflecting on the program's history, it is recommended that clear program goals are defined with the ability to allow for shifts in focus as student, environmental, and economic factors impact defined goals. While access to transportation and employment are important factors that assist students in reaching their personal goals, a collaborative partnership among staff from the school district and the university characterized by open, ongoing communication is critical to the ongoing development and success of the campus-based program. ^{SUP}

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