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School Counselors Role in College Readiness for Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

This article discusses the importance of the professional school counselors' participation in the development of self-determination skills students with disabilities need to transition from high school to college. An intervention is proposed to guide high school counselors' involvement. Strategies to promote college readiness through the development of skills associated with self-determination (i.e., self-awareness, identifying social supports, and effective social skills) are offered. Implications for school counseling practice are discussed.

Keywords: self-determination, students with disabilities, college readiness, school counselors

School Counselors Role in College Readiness for Students with Disabilities

In the United States, graduating from high school and completing some level of post-secondary education is increasingly becoming a prerequisite for success in terms of employment, salary and career choice (Gwynne, Lesnick, Hart, & Allensworth, 2009). However, the majority

of high school graduates, who might have intentions to attend college, are not academically prepared for the rigor of postsecondary education (Conley, 2007). For students who are admitted to college, many come to quickly discover a significant gap between the skills and knowledge they learned in high school versus what their college or university expects them to know. As a result, a high percentage of first year college students find themselves enrolled in non-credit bearing remedial courses with percentages as high as sixty percent in public two-year colleges (Shulock, 2010) and twenty-five percent in four-year colleges and universities (McCarthy & Kuh, 2006). Consequently, taking remedial courses and not being prepared for college can bring about undue stress, broken dreams and an increased likelihood of a student dropping out of college during the first year (McCarthy & Kuh, 2006). The lack of college readiness among college students has become a major challenge for secondary and post-secondary institutions.

These challenges surrounding college readiness are even greater for students with disabilities (SWDs). Whereas college readiness has traditionally been determined

through academic achievement, GPA and specific scores on standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT, what constitutes college readiness for students with disabilities is usually more comprehensive. Many SWDs face unique challenges to college readiness that are outside the realm of academics (American Institutes for Research, 2013). For example, college readiness for SWDs may involve an additional focus on social and emotional learning skills, such as self-determination and self-advocacy skills (Izzo & Lamb, 2002; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Field, Sarver, & Shaw, 2003). These interpersonal and intrapersonal skills have been linked to positive post-school outcomes for SWDs (Cobb & Alwell, 2007). More specifically, developing self-determination skills in SWDs is important to accessing post-high school opportunities, including both attending college and entering the workforce (Bremer, Kachagal, & Schoeller, 2003; American Institutes for Research, 2013).

Colleges require students with disabilities to initiate and facilitate academic accommodations under the Americans with Disability Act, as Amended (2008), and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Cory, 2011; Heyward, 2011). SWDs are advised by secondary educators and parents to request accommodations from the college's office of student disability services. If accommodations are identified, students are then instructed by disability services personnel to interact with faculty to notify them of their eligibility of approved accommodations in order to utilize the accommodations in a class (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). This requirement assumes that SWDs enter into college equipped with the interpersonal and intrapersonal skills needed to discuss their

disability, understand their educational needs, and interact effectively with their professors (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). Hamblet (2014) describes students who are aware of their learning strengths and weaknesses as "better prepared to make good decisions with regard to accommodations once they get to college" (p. 57).

However, the reality for many SWDs is that their parents have served as their primary decision makers, problem solvers, and advocates for their K-12 education (Izzo & Lamb, 2002; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). Students in K-12 are often do not lead the development of their goals in their Individual Education Plan and Transition Plan. If students are involved in making their own decisions, many students make uninformed goals based on assumptions about life after high school (American Institutes for Research, 2013). Parents and teachers, intentionally or not, tacit decisions to exclude students from knowledge of their disability may also be lower the expectation for positive outcomes after high school (Izzo & Lamb, 2002). SWDs who are not encouraged to make decisions have lower self-esteem and feel less control over their lives, compared to those do make their own decisions (Bremer et al., 2003; Izzo & Lamb, 2002). Unsurprisingly, many SWDs who enter into college are unprepared to demonstrate the necessary self-determination skills necessary for college success (Field, Sarver, & Shaw, 2003).

Self-determination is a broad concept that encompasses a wide range of life skills such as self-advocacy, self-awareness, personal responsibility, problem solving, and decision-making, (Bremer et al., 2003). Such skills are viewed as critical

for SWDs in postsecondary education and employment (American Institutes for Research, 2013). Additionally, SWDs who leave high school with enhanced self-determination skills are more likely, when compared to their peers who have not learned to be self-determined, to be employed or attend a post-secondary institution one year after graduation (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003). Students with disabilities need the support and assistance of school personnel, along with family and the community, to develop the necessary skills and resources to help them become college ready.

Professional school counselors are in a key role to assist students, including SWDs, in preparing for the transition from high school to college. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2005) suggests that, through individual planning interventions, school counselors are in the best position to assist students and parents in identifying necessary resources to help students achieve success in school and in the future. ASCA supports their assertion with its "Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success" which are student competencies with corresponding behavior learning strategies self-management skills, and social skills based on researched best practices (ASCA, 2014). With their unique training, expertise, access to resources, and commitment to serving all students, school counselors can be a substantial benefit for SWDs in their preparation and transition to college (Erford, House, & Martin, 2003).

Literature Review

The review of literature that follows defines college readiness from the perspective of school personnel, higher education disability services personnel, and students

with disabilities. Additionally, the review of literature identifies factors that support college completion and the role of self-determination in college readiness and completion.

Defining College Readiness

Milsom and Dietz (2009) conducted a Delphi study in which they surveyed 29 experts (e.g., special education, post-secondary education, and school counseling) regarding students with disabilities and their college readiness. The participants identified 89 college readiness characteristics. After applying Delphi methodology, the list was eventually reduced to four areas of college readiness necessary for students with disabilities beyond the expected academic preparation expected of all students. These areas include self-awareness, social supports, social skills and self-determination, which includes the subcategories of autonomy and self-advocacy.

Self-awareness refers to the knowledge students have of their disability. It includes an understanding of their physical needs and the educational accommodations and modifications which may be necessary for their academic success (Milsom & Dietz, 2009). Social supports are the important interpersonal and intrapersonal networks, which strengthen and support students with disabilities. College readiness involving social skills are the mechanisms through which relationships needed for success are created and maintained. The last area of college readiness is self-determination, which is comprised of autonomy and self-advocacy. Autonomy refers to taking personal responsibility for one's actions. Self-advocacy is the ability to represent one's own interest. The results of the Delphi study emphasized the

significance of preparing SWDs in these psychosocial areas as requirement for successful college readiness for SWDs (Milson & Dietz, 2009).

Four Factors that Support College Completion

One component of being ready for college involves knowing what it takes to be successful in college as a student with a disability. In an investigation of factors and characteristics associated with successful college completion by SWDs, Barber (2012) interviewed 20 SWDs who had successfully completed their college education program within the past four years. Student participants received accommodations for a variety of disabilities, including physical, emotional, and cognitive disabilities, while attending their college program. The study identified several key factors that were determined to be helpful to college completion. These factors included access to a mentoring relationship while at college, perseverance and determination, a positive attitude in addition to work experience, and legally mandated accommodations (Barber, 2012). These important characteristics associated with college completion are enhanced by students who have well-developed self-determination and advocacy skills (Barber, 2012).

Role of Self-determination in College Readiness and College Completion

Self-determination seems to influence a variety of factors, including social and emotional skills that contribute to SWDs' college readiness and successful college completion. A case study conducted by Garrison-Wade (2012) examined SWDs' perceptions of the services they received in college. In an effort to develop a clearer understanding of what it takes to better prepare SWDs for positive outcomes in

post-secondary education, the researchers conducted focus groups with 59 student participants and interviewed six disability services coordinators. The results of this study included three themes identifying factors that inhibited or enhanced students' likelihood of postsecondary success. These three themes included: (a) capitalizing on student self-determination skills, (b) implementing formalized planning processes, and (c) improving postsecondary support (Garrison-Wade, 2012).

The theme of capitalizing on student self-determination emphasized students' belief that a key to their success was taking personal responsibility (Garrison-Wade, 2012). For students, responsibility meant setting personal high expectations, and taking the necessary actions to meet those expectations despite low expectations set by others such as family and teachers. Students indicated they needed to know about their disability and also be willing to self-advocate. Secondly, the theme of implementing a formalized planning process indicated that students and disability services coordinators believed that secondary education inadequately prepared SWDs to transition into postsecondary education. Students also stated they were ill prepared to assist in the facilitation of their accommodations. Disability Services coordinators echoed students' latter perceptions, reiterating the need for a formalized transition planning process.

Finally, the theme of improving secondary support provided focus to areas of weaknesses of institutions in welcoming and supporting SWDs. Students highlighted the lack of instructors' knowledge and ability to

implement classroom accommodations, physical accessibility of buildings and transportation, and financial assistance as major barriers to college completion (Garrison-Wade, 2012).

Implications for Practice

Studies consistently show that college readiness and successful completion for SWDs involves more than just academic preparation (Milsom & Dietz, 2009; Barber, 2012; Stodden, Jones & Chang, 2002; Field, et al., 2003; Cobb & Alwell, 2007; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003). With the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990, it is required that all SWDs have a transition plan by the age of 16 that addresses students' postsecondary goals. These plans may not readily identify and outline goals to prepare SWDs to meet the intrapersonal and interpersonal demands of college (American Institutes for Research, 2013) nor are special education teachers the most appropriate professional to aid students in the development of these self-management and social skills. Professional school counselors seem to be untapped resource to positively influence these students' college readiness.

The literature supports the development of social and emotional learning skills associated with self-determination and self-advocacy as critical components to positive post-school outcomes for SWDs (Milson & Dietz, 2009; Barber, 2012; Izzo & Lamb, 2002.; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). School counselors are specifically trained to assist students to develop critical thinking skills, time management and organization skills, use effective written and verbal communication, and identify long and short term personal goals (ASCA, 2014) . SWDs could use these skills in college to problem solve, manage

multiple courses with competing deadlines, communicate their accommodation needs to faculty, and to complete college. Four specific personal and social skills have been identified as critical to college readiness of SWDs. These include self-awareness, social supports, social skills, and self-determination (Milsom & Dietz, 2009).

School counselors in high schools are primed to equip SWDs with the intrapersonal and interpersonal skills described above through the implementation of a four-year self-determination intervention plan. It is a natural fit for school counselors to facilitate individual and group counseling strategies to help SWDs develop the skills they need to be successful in college and throughout their life. The proposed intervention presumes that school counselors have the type of schedules and administrative support necessary to implement this program. We suggest a collaborative effort between counselors, special education teachers, relevant agencies, and families to ensure the skills are appropriately developed, practiced, and reinforced. School counselors can use available resources to plan and evaluate students' level of skill development throughout high school (See Appendix A for Self-determination Online Resources).

Description of Intervention

We propose a series of interventions designed to move SWD's from self-aware ninth graders, to self-determined, high school graduates who are ready for college. Each year the intervention strives to enhance SWDs' self-awareness, social supports, social skills, and self-determination.

Ideally, by the end of the ninth grade, SWDs will have a better understanding of their disabilities and after high school aspirations. Counselors could facilitate activities that heighten students' self-awareness and self-management. Topics or activities might include stress management, learning styles, and volunteerism, and academic opportunities (Bremer et al., 2003). As students become aware of their personal and academic skill sets, school counselors could collaborate with teachers to promote use of these strengths. Students might be encouraged to create a journal, portfolio, or multimedia project to record their personal and academic success related to greater self-awareness and identification and use of strengths.

Beginning in tenth grade, the school counselor would focus on making informed decisions. Specifically, school counselors would help SWDs extend their support system beyond their families and traditional school personnel. By collaborating with the special education teachers and families, the counselor could help students identify an academic or extra-curricular goal to include in students' IEP or transition plan (Izzo & Lamb, 2002). School counselors could facilitate individual counseling strategies to guide SWDs to other resources that could aid in current and future success. Through ongoing sessions, counselors could assist SWDs in accessing such resources through the use of effective communication, problem solving, and decision making skills. The tenth grade year could culminate with SWDs conducting a meeting to propose a goal or activity to include in their IEP or Transition plan.

In the eleventh grade, school counselors

would encourage SWDs to develop social skills. School counselors could facilitate dyad and group sessions to teach and practice professional, academic, and social interactions. Topics for sessions could include assertiveness, problem solving, self-disclosure, and discussing disability accommodation needs. School counselors could facilitate dyad and group sessions to teach and practice the social skills. School counselors could collaborate with special education teachers to allow SWDs participate in the coordination and facilitation of the Annual Case Conference (Izzo & Lamb, 2002; Bremer et al., 2003). SWDs would exit the eleventh grade with sufficient social skills to embark on the student-centered objective of the twelfth grade intervention.

Self-determination "is not achieved simply because an individual has certain requisite knowledge and skills; it is also important that key people and institutions in the person's life provide a context conducive to self-determination" (Bremer, et al., 2003, p. 1). Throughout the twelfth grade year, school counselors would strive to provide SWDs with meaningful and supportive learning opportunities to demonstrate self-determination. At the start of the twelfth grade year, school counselors would advocate for SWDs serve in a leadership role for the final IEP meeting (Bremer et al., 2003; Izzo & Lamb, 2002). School counselors could design individual and group counseling sessions to prepare SWDs for the task. The individual sessions could include career exploration and planning activities to incorporate into SWDs' Transition Plan (Izzo & Lamb, 2002). Group counseling sessions could include mock IEP meetings. Additionally, school counselors would provide the IEP team with a rubric to describe SWDs effectiveness

within the target areas of the intervention. The rubric could be used to share feedback on SWDs progress throughout the year. The intervention would culminate with SWDs taking responsibility for final IEP, which includes transitional goals for college.

Discussion

In this article, the authors have provided an overview of an intervention that professional school counselors can use to help students with disabilities develop skills to prepare for and complete college learning. These skills include self-awareness, self-advocacy, and social skills. Throughout the implementation of this intervention, school counselors may need to consider how each strategy implemented builds SWDs' self-confidence and motivation (Milson & Dietz, 2009; Garrison-Wade, 2012; Barber, 2012).

Per Milson and Dietz (2009), SWDs' awareness of their disability and corresponding effective academic accommodations are components of college readiness. However, Garrison-Wade (2012) and Barber's (2012) findings imply that SWDs perceive that they are held to lower academic standards and post-high school expectations than their peers. School counselors are advised to prepare for this resistance. School counselors could introduce the intervention with activities that challenge students' negative perspective and promote a positive attitude about themselves, their disability, and the use of academic accommodations (Barber, 2012). For example, during the ninth grade year, counselors could encourage students' self-awareness and self-confidence through a group community service project in conjunction with an individual intervention of creating

a strength board. Components of the community service project might include SWDs exploring careers learning how to manage stress and identify their strengths during the project. SWDs could benefit from a written or verbal reflection on the transferability of their identified strengths to achieve academic goals. This activity could evolve into students exploring the breadth of differences between high school and college, including registering for classes, disability accommodations, applicable federal laws, funding, and potential career opportunities for graduates.

Other key figures, such as teachers, other school personnel, families, and community members, influence SWDs' college readiness (Milson & Dietz, 2009; Garrison-Wade, 2012). School counselors may also consider embedding ongoing self-assessments by SWDs and periodic feedback from the key figures on SWDs' ability to exhibit key self-determination skills such as self-confidence, self-awareness, self-advocacy, problem solving and goal setting. The combined ongoing feedback from students and key figures would provide meaningful information for identifying likely strengths and challenges to the students' development of self-determination. The IEP team would then modify aspects of the intervention (e.g., classroom instruction, IEPs, transition plans) to meet the individual student's needs. The responsive nature of ongoing feedback would also serve as a mechanism for school counselors to negotiate possible resistance from SWDs. The team approach would likely garner support for SWDs success and promote proactive development of individualized strategies. The approach also shares the responsibility of the intervention outcomes with key figures and strive to prepare students

with disabilities to request and facilitate accommodations to benefit from the goods and services offered on a college campus.

The need for effective self-determination skill development in high school is critical, because college students with disabilities are expected to take responsibility for their learning through the facilitation of their academic accommodations. School counselors and key figures should prepare SWDs to talk with their college faculty regarding classroom accommodations. SWDs may have to state their needs directly and the ways accommodation can help meet those needs because faculty may struggle to understand what they can do, specifically, to make accommodations (see Garrison-Wade, 2012). SWDs may also need to advocate for themselves to ensure that they have the appropriate transportation services and campus accessibility accommodations (see Garrison-Wade, 2012).

To stay current on post-secondary accommodation practices, school counselors are advised to consult with colleges and universities student disability services personnel. This may also serve as a means through which to advocate for SWDs. Through building professional relationships with service coordinators at local colleges and universities, school counselors can provide their SWDs specific information about the process of obtaining accommodations at the respective academic institutions. School counselors may even be able to refer their SWDs to an individual service coordinator. As Garrison-Wade (2012) suggested, one area in which colleges and universities can influence SWDs in succeeding is through helping them feel more welcomed and connected to the university upon admission. If school

counselors were to make a referral to the service coordinator at the student's new school, this may increase the student's senses of being belonging and security, thereby helping to diminish some of the students' apprehension regarding working with a new professional and requesting services.

School counselors unique training have prepared them to collaborate with special education teachers, school psychologists and other Individual Education Program team members in the effort to prepare students with disabilities to meet the intrapersonal and interpersonal demands of postsecondary education. By doing so, school counselors could help SWDs develop not only the skills they need to successfully transition to postsecondary education, but with skills SWDs need throughout their lives.

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Source	Description	Weblink
American School Counselor Association	Mindset & Behaviors for Student Success competencies that are searchable by grade-level.	http://www.schoolcounselor.org/school-counselors-members/about-asca/mindsets-behaviors
Georgetown Independent School District, Texas	Website defines self-determination. Provides recommendations on how to promote self-determination. Resources include decision matrices by grade level such as elementary, middle, and high school as well as transition	http://www.georgetownisd.org/Page/535
New Tier High School District 203, Illinois	Provides 14 downloadable resources such as articles PPT, fillable PDF, and workbooks on self-determination. An article entitled Why Is This	
Cake on Fire? Inviting Students Into the IEP Process by Van Dyke, Martin, and Lovett (2006)	http://www.newtrier.k12.il.us/page.aspx?id=22614	

Chicago Public Schools	Choose your future 2012 Summer Institute presentations included Self-determination based on the ASCA model	https://www.chooseyourfuture.org/resource/k-12-counseling-and-advising-2012-summer-institute-presentations
Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction	A 24 page PDF entitled Opening Doors to Self-Determination Skills. Designed to provide students, teachers, and school counselors with information and resources for successful transition to post-secondary opportunities.	http://sped.dpi.wi.gov/files/sped/pdf/tranopndrs-self-determination.pdf
National Center of Youth with Disabilities	Free resource guide available to download	http://www.ncwd-youth.info/ilp/produce-college-and-career-ready-high-school-graduates
University of Oklahoma	Self-determination assessment tools with protocol instructions and instruments	http://www.ou.edu/content/education/centers-and-partnerships/zarrow/self-determination-assessment-tools.html
Heath Resource Center at George Washington University	Guidance and Career Counselor Toolkit a 194 page PDF available free to download provides information for the novice and experienced school counselor to support SWDs transition to post-secondary opportunities	https://heath.gwu.edu/files/.../toolkit.pdf
ERIC	Practical Guide for Teaching Self-Determination is available on Eric to download The 186 page document is geared toward K-12 professionals who work with SWDs.	http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED442207.pdf