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Project Excel: A Demonstration of the Higher Education Transition Model for High-Achieving Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

Project Excel, a six-week summer transition program for high-achieving students with disabilities at the University of Arkansas, demonstrated the usefulness of the Higher Education Transition Model as an organizational concept and framework for the administration of the transition process. The model includes psychosocial adjustment, academic development, and university and community orientation as essential considerations for students with disabilities as they enter and adjust to college life. The twelve students who participated in Project Excel received academic advising and personal counseling, enrolled in six hours of college credit, and participated in a wide range of social and recreational activities. Overall, students rated the program as a good- to -excellent college preparatory experience.

The process of transition from childhood to adulthood has been a topic of keen interest among educators and social scientists for many years. Recent initiatives within special education and rehabilitation service delivery systems for individuals with disabilities suggest that students with disabilities require more support than their nondisabled peers to progress through the often traumatic adolescent years. School-to work transition programs coordinate educational and vocational rehabilitation services for youths with disabilities, which enables them to initiate the career development process within school curricula (Turner & Szymanski, 1990).

Unfortunately, that transition model has not yet been fully applied to higher education, where students with disabilities often encounter a void in vocational rehabilitation where special education left off, with inadequate institutionalized services in place to meet their college transition needs. In other words, choosing to attend college rather than going directly to work after high school puts the student with a disability at a disadvantage, because no formalized transition policies have been established to address the former option.

That disadvantage is expressed in research and programs that have documented the difficulties experienced by college students with disabilities. Evenson and Evenson (1983) noted that attitudinal barriers often result in delayed vocational development, unsatisfactory career development, and lowered expectations among college students with disabilities. Cordoni (1982) considered psychosocial adjustment to be a major impediment to effective transition among students with learning disabilities, and maintained that colleges and universities do not provide adequate support for personal, social, or academic adjustment. Rosenthal (1989) also reported that college students with learning disabilities have unique needs that are frequently unrecognized and, consequently, unmet by postsecondary institutions. Similarly Brandt and Berry (1991) reported that academic preparation, personal/social skill development, and individualized transition planning are common problem areas for students with learning disabilities who plan to attend college.

Siperstein (1988) proposed a three-stage service delivery model that enabled colleges to address the needs of students with learning disabilities as they enter, attend, and exit college. Aune (1991) described a transition model for preparing students with learning disabilities for the transition to postsecondary education. Retention rates of students with disabilities increased under this model when compared to the general student population.

In an effort to gain information on the transition from high school to adult life, Knox and Parmenter (1990) interviewed 73 young people with a range of disabilities. The most frequently made suggestion by these individuals was the need for linkages between school and community agencies. Social and personal issues (e.g., recreation, friendship) were seen as equally important in transition.

Students with disabilities generally lack awareness of their rights and responsibilities regarding support services (Baker & Blanding, 1986), find it difficult to advocate for themselves (Shaw, Brinckerhoff, Kistler, & McGuire, 1991), and encounter perceptions that people with disabilities need help in all areas of life (Baker & Blanding, 1986). These and other problems might be traced to the unavailability of proactive transition interventions at the postsecondary level.

Colleges and universities have recently begun to recognize the lack of effective transition services for students with disabilities. A number of postsecondary institutions offer summer programs that promote transition experiences for incoming students with learning disabilities (Dalke & Franzene, 1988; Goldstein, 1988; Sandperl, 1989; Seidenberg, 1986). As noted in a list of 14 pre-college summer programs compiled by the HEATH Resource Center (1992), many of these provide information to students with learning disabilities looking for ways to enhance their college performance. These programs are held on campus and offer high school students an opportunity to preview the college experience through activities which include college orientation, study skills, self-advocacy training, computer training, and leisure/recreational activities. Four of the 14 programs provide transition activities for enrolled freshmen, whereas others serve students who plan to enroll in a program at any college or university. A review of the

literature suggested that prior to Project Excel, no program had addressed the transition needs of high-achieving students with physical, sensory, and learning disabilities.

Promoting Access and Academic Excellence through the Higher Education Transition Model

Jointly sponsored by the Office for Continuing Education and the Division of Student Services at the University of Arkansas, Project Excel, an intensive six-week summer program, was designed to: (a) facilitate the transition to college for incoming students with disabilities, and (b) promote academic excellence.

Program activities were clustered into three categories: (a) psychosocial adjustment, (b) academic development, and (c) university and community orientation. These categories, which emerged from a series of summer workshops and college transition programs for students with disabilities, provided a comprehensive framework for the development of a Higher Education Transition Model for working with high-achieving students with disabilities.

Project Excel recruited high-achieving students with disabilities, defined by high school grade point averages of 3.0 or higher and /or ACT (American College Testing Program) composite scores of 22 or higher.

Implementing Project Excel

Planning and Recruitment

As the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 recognizes people with disabilities as a minority group that deserves antidiscrimination civil protection, Project Excel dealt with barriers similar to those reported by Oliver and Brown (1988) in their effort to equalize educational opportunities for minorities. These included: (a) the need for involvement of the majority populous; (b) the impact of false assumptions by faculty and administrators that they are interested in and knowledgeable about minority issues; (c) the need for formation of networks within and among minorities; (d) the need to include diverse activities, which would therefore increase the majority populous in the overall effort of integration; (e) the importance of providing access to service components for students; and (f) the need for systematic retention efforts as important issues in minority recruitment.

Recruitment for the summer, 1992, program began in December, 1991. A program brochure was developed and sent to Arkansas rehabilitation counselors, Arkansas public school guidance counselors, and all students who had been admitted to the University of Arkansas for fall, 1992 and had identified themselves as having disabilities. Project recruiters then telephoned students who met the program's eligibility criteria as stated in the brochure (3.0 high school grade point average, 22 composite ACT scores, and/or outstanding achievement in extracurricular activities).

Parents, teachers, and counselors participated actively in Project Excel's individualized recruitment approach.

Students and Their Academic Characteristics

Project Excel's selection committee chose 12 high-achieving students with disabilities from Arkansas, Texas, and Illinois as participants in the program. Disability types represented among those students were blindness (2 students), deafness (1), learning disability (7), spinal cord injury (1), and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (1). The students with legal blindness had low vision (L6/200 R20/400; L20/400 R20/200) and were accommodated by enlarged print, taped texts, readers, paratransit services, centrally located residences and mobility training on campus. The student who was deaf (hears less than five percent of sounds) used an interpreter in the classroom, in some tutoring sessions, and in most extracurricular and community activities. She was encouraged to help residence hall managers, newly made friends, and program participants to learn some sign language and to use some accommodations (e.g., telecommunication device for the deaf [TDD]).

The university provided paratransit services, a scribe, and physical access to the classroom for the student with a spinal cord injury (C2/C3 level). Residence life staff and others worked closely with Project Excel staff to ensure that this student was not exposed to extreme temperatures or without power for his life support system. Rehabilitation Services provided a voice-activated computer, which the student used to control his home environment (e.g., phone, lighting, television). Employing and managing persons to provide personal assistance presented major transition concerns for this student and his parents.

Five of the seven students with learning disabilities had specific disabilities in reading, written expression, and math. One student had a disability that affected his processing of verbally presented information. Six of the students with learning disabilities qualified for extended time and a reader for tests. Five students were accommodated by a scribe. The student with the attention-deficit disorder was accommodated by extended time for tests, which were given in a less distracting environment than the class room. All students were provided with class notes and specialized tutoring.

Few students were proficient in the use of technology. Several students had no skills in computer technology, and their instruction began with keyboarding. None of the students who qualified for taped texts knew how to use them effectively.

Most students were of middle to upper-middle class socioeconomic status. Eleven students were of European-American descent, and one African-American student participated. This ethnic distribution is consistent with the University's eight percent minority enrollment rate.

Project Excel's 12 students demonstrated a mean high school grade point average of 2.76 with a mean composite ACT score of 21.5. Four students had been awarded university

scholarships for the fall of 1992. The majority (8) of Project Excel students were unconditionally admitted to the university, while four were provisionally admitted, pending remediation of course deficiencies. Eleven students were admitted as freshmen, while one was accepted for transfer enrollment.

Personnel and Budget

Project Excel, a low-cost, self-supporting program, was implemented by existing disabled student services staff. Graduate assistants and interns assisted with program administration, academic instruction, counseling, university orientation, special events, and other activities. Personnel involved in the project included full year staff: the program director, a certified school psychologist, an English instructor, and "accommodators" (readers, notetakers, and sign language interpreters). Faculty consultants were used in the evaluation of students' needs for accommodation and the daily assessment of program activities.

Two doctoral level interns from Rehabilitation Education served as the program coordinator and program counselor. Graduate assistants helped with special events, the technology lab, and tutoring. Four students were employed as clerical assistants and peer helpers. One student was employed as an accommodator for a member of the summer staff. The program director and program coordinator taught the assistive technology course. Program fees ($3,000 for in-state residents and $3,684 for out-of-state) included tuition (six credit hours), room and board, university new-student orientation, workshops, seminars, special events, transportation to and from program events, and books and supplies. Accommodations were the responsibility of the year-round university program of services. The emphasis on existing campus resources was cost-effective, and allowed most expenditures to be allocated for direct services for students. The Arkansas Vocational Rehabilitation program sponsored four Project Excel students, and one student was a Texas Vocational Rehabilitation client.

Components of Project Excel

Psychosocial Development

As "college is an important time of growth and development, a time of transition from dependence to independence, and especially so for individuals with disabilities" (Benshoff, Kroeger, & Scalia, 1990, p. 43), psychosocial adjustment must be considered as a paramount issue of this important transition process (Cordoni, 1980). In fact, Chelser (1982) found the need for social skills training and the need to overcome dependence among the most pressing concerns for adults with disabilities. Brinckerhoff, Shaw, and McGuire (1992) exhorted postsecondary service providers to prioritize service delivery options that promote independence. Accordingly, the Higher Education Transition Model included psychosocial adjustment as an essential consideration. Every program activity focused on enhancing independence.

Project Excel employed a counselor who assisted students in identifying personal transition needs and in considering issues of psychosocial adjustment. The program counselor also participated in staff training, facilitated appropriate student interventions, and provided direct student consultation in the following areas: (a) goal attainment, (b) career exploration, (c) problem-solving, and (d) socialization. In individual counseling sessions, students expressed a broad range of psychosocial adjustment concerns. Issues included attendant care, medical needs, roommate concerns, fear of academic failure, test anxiety, peer rejection, time management, familial expectations, self-concept, and participation in intercollegiate athletics, Greek organizations, and other social activities.

Academic Development

Project Excel students enrolled in six hours of college credit coursework, three credits each in "English Composition" and "Techniques in Assistive Technology." A comprehensive academic development model, including individualized assistance, writing consultation, tutoring, individual educational evaluations, personalized technology sessions, and examination accommodations (Sandperl, 1989) facilitated student participation in these courses. Program staff participated in this process by (a) assessing students' academic histories, (b) monitoring students' performance in college courses, (c) teaching academic strategies and technology skills, and (d) providing technical assistance to faculty and university staff.

Assessing Academic Histories A certified school psychologist compiled educational, personal, and medical histories for each student prior to the summer program. These histories were used to assess the degree of each student's disability, and to determine the expected impact of the disability on college success. The examiner's assessments and recommendations constituted the basis for each student's individualized accommodation plan (IAP). The IAP, a signed agreement between a student and the university, summarized the student's need for accommodation and facilitated the transition process. Content of IAP's in Project Excel varied widely according to individual needs. For example, the IAP of one student with low vision called for enlarged printed materials (classroom handouts, program agendas, and menus). The IAP for the student who was deaf called for such accommodations as interpreter services and residential modifications (flashing light knocker, and flashing emergency system). The IAP's of students with learning disabilities varied with the type and degree of severity of the disability. For example, one student with a math disability required accommodations only when he worked with numbers. Accordingly, his IAP would be in effect only when he was enrolled in math or in a class that included math. The IAP of another student with a learning disability called for a notetaker, a reader, a scribe, and extended time for tests. A third student, whose disability affected written expression, required the accommodation of a scribe. The IAP directed the services and accommodations that each student received during Project Excel.

Monitoring classroom performance. Each participant's academic performance was monitored and evaluated on a daily basis by Project Excel's interdisciplinary team. Accommodations that were implemented to equalize opportunities for success included

sign language interpreters, notetakers, readers, enlarged print, taped reading materials, scribes, extended time, alternative testing conditions, modified housing, specialized transportation, electronic editing and communication adaptations, and modified instructional formats. Other out-of-class support services included study sessions, tutoring, exam reviews, goal establishment, research assistance, and writing consultation. Each student was encouraged to evaluate the effectiveness of his or her individual accommodations on a daily basis and to request an IAP review conference if significant changes were needed.

Teaching academic strategies and technology skills. In a laboratory component of the "Techniques in Assistive Technology" course, students explored and developed a clear understanding of academic strategies and appropriate technological alternatives. While course lectures presented different disability types and technological procedures that benefit those with specific disabilities, the laboratory provided opportunities for hands-on interaction with personally relevant assistive technology. Laboratory sessions included explanation and demonstration of such assistive devices as four-track, variable-speed cassette recorders; keyboard activated telecommunication systems; voice activated computers; voice-output synthesizers; Braille devices; augmentative speech devices; independent living aids; prostheses and orthotics; closed-circuit magnification machine; large-print computer programs; hearing amplification systems; electronic spellers; word processing aids; and information management systems. Students were also oriented to university wide computer networks, laboratories, and operations, particularly those used in their degree area.

Providing technical assistance to faculty and university staff. Project Excel's planning phase included collaboration with university agencies such as residence life and dining services, transit and parking, physical plant, university health services, financial aid, and academic affairs. Faculty representatives from rehabilitation, special education, counselor education, psychology, English, and educational technology also participated in Project Excel's development.

During Project Excel, technical assistance was provided for instructors in the English and technology courses. Instructors met with program staff to define student accommodation needs. As all Project Excel students had been admitted to the university for the fall, 1992 semester, program staff provided technical assistance to faculty advisors in formulating course schedules. Project Excel staff facilitated the student-faculty advising process through such recommendations as course load and scheduling modifications. Students met with their respective advisors and were introduced to their major faculty professors during their participation in Project Excel.

University and Community Orientation

Project Excel's university and community orientation component provided a structured opportunity for students to acquaint themselves with their new surroundings. Program activities designed to facilitate transition to the university environment included (a) special events, (b) New Student Orientation, and (c) peer interaction.

Special events. Project Excel featured workshops, seminars, and social events that provided associations with campus resources and student groups. Self-advocacy and problem solving seminars helped students to develop strategies for identifying and requesting on campus accommodations. Representatives from numerous university offices participated in a campus resources seminar, which gave students a chance to learn about financial aid, Greek organizations, university health services, residence life and dining, parking and transit, student services, campus activities, and student government.

In another seminar, a panel of successful University of Arkansas students with disabilities presented peer perspectives on the college experience. Informal recreational and leisure activities included a picnic at a city park, dinner at a local restaurant, Sunday night pizza parties, and casual sports events. Students also took part in a preregistration workshop, where New Student Orientation staff members offered suggestions for orientation and fall registration.

New Student Orientation. Project Excel participants enrolled in the University of Arkansas' one-day New Student Orientation program. Students registered for fall courses, met faculty advisors and deans, toured the campus, completed placement examinations, and participated in social activities. Parents were invited to share the orientation experience with students.

Peer interaction. An important part of Project Excel's underlying structure was group participation and peer interaction. Students formed a cohesive group, and friendships developed among those with different disabilities and socioeconomic backgrounds. Living in an on-campus residence hall offered opportunities for social interaction in the college milieu, and students established many associations outside of Project Excel.

Student Performance

Students chose majors ranging from studies in the humanities, such as journalism and music, to technical fields, such as architecture, engineering, and athletic training. Provisionally admitted students removed all deficiencies during Project Excel, except those deficiencies in mathematics. Each student earned an A in "Techniques in Assistive Technology," and "English Composition" grades included three Cs, six Bs, and three As. Students entered the fall semester with a mean grade point average of 3.5.

Student Evaluation

On a post-program Likert scale evaluation questionnaire, students rated Project Excel as a good-to-excellent college preparatory experience. One student remarked, "Project Excel has been a very good experience for me, because I've met lots of people and I'm more prepared for the fall than I would have been." Another noted, "Project Excel has been very helpful in introducing the university's resources to me." Most considered the opportunity to meet new people as the most beneficial aspect of the program, followed by earning six hours of college credit and introduction to campus resources.

Difficulties reported by students focused on adjustment to residential life, anxiety concerned with Greek "rush" activities, time management, stress related to test taking, grades, and learning to use accommodations in a college setting. Project Excel staff noted that students were not fully aware of their need for academic accommodations and therefore, tended not to articulate those to advisors, professors, and other college professionals.

Student participants' favorable reactions to Project Excel are even more encouraging when viewed in light of their first semester academic performance. Students' mean grade point average was 2.84 in their first semester of courses, which was markedly higher than the 2.34 mean grade point average for all first semester freshmen at the University of Arkansas.

Due to Project Excel's small sample size and in the absence of an equivalent comparison group, inferential statistics would not be an adequate tool for evaluation.

Conclusion

Project Excel, an effective demonstration of the Higher Education Transition Model, provided a comprehensive transition experience for 12 high-achieving students with physical and learning disabilities. Program activities enabled students to develop friendships, successfully complete two college courses, and acquaint themselves with the university and surrounding community.

As postsecondary institutions strive to improve access for people with disabilities, and professionals from education and rehabilitation continue to emphasize transition from public schools to career opportunities, Project Excel underscored one university's commitment to academic excellence and equalized opportunity, and provides an example for adaptation in other settings.

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