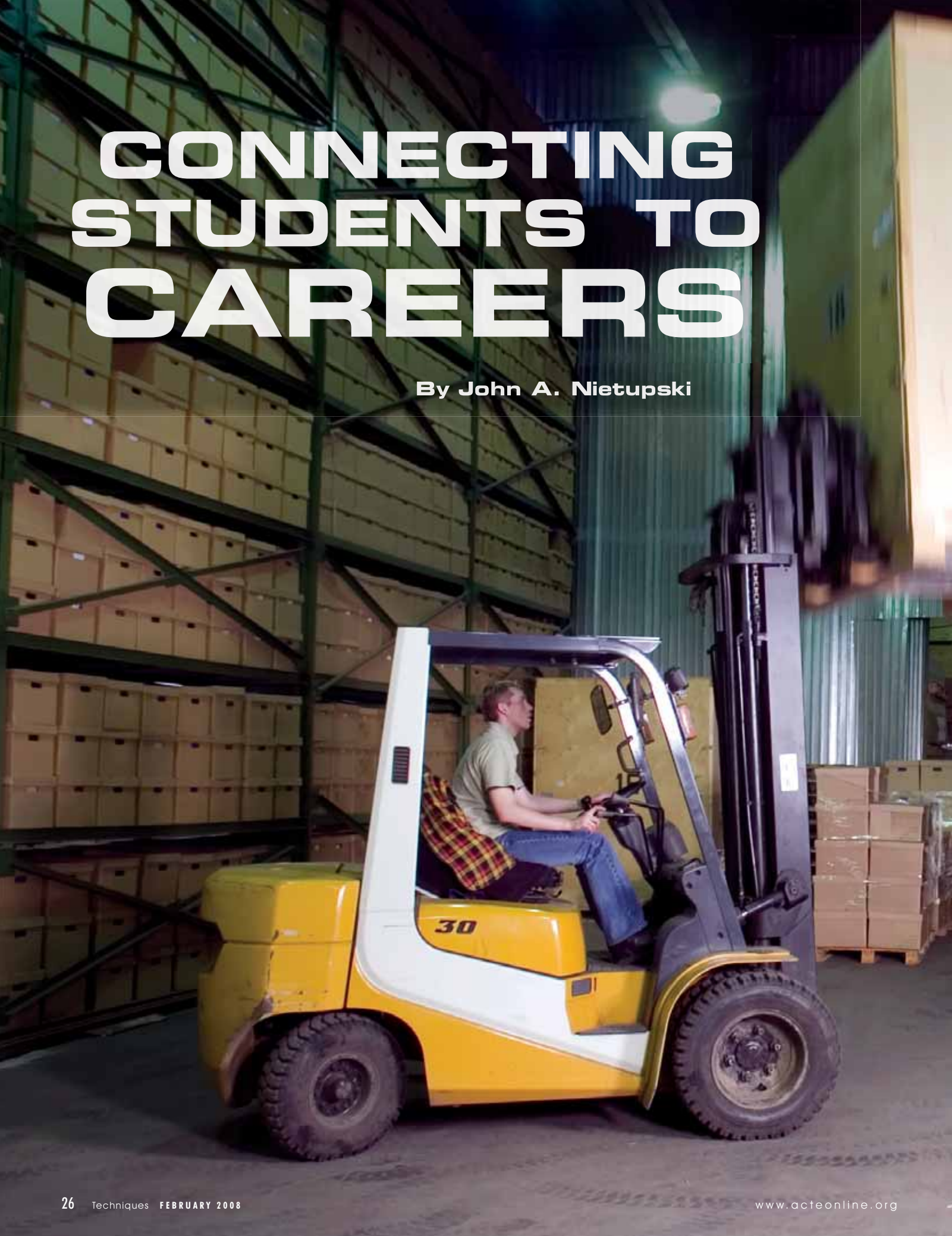


CONNECTING STUDENTS TO CAREERS

By John A. Nietupski





Young people searching for employment opportunities fresh out of high school know how difficult it can be to find openings that fit their skills and interests. It isn't easy successfully competing with other jobseekers for those all too rare positions that pay a good wage, have reasonable hours, and offer employer benefits and prospects for advancement. This is a daunting undertaking for many individuals—and even more so for a young person who happens to have a disability. According to the United States Chamber of Commerce, the unemployment rate for individuals with disabilities is a staggering 62 percent. The Grant Wood Area Education Agency (GWAEA), an intermediate agency that serves 33 east central Iowa school districts, began working in 2000 to determine why young people with disabilities were having a difficult time transitioning from high school to the world of work.

GWAEA was particularly disturbed by its follow-up survey findings which showed that students in the middle range of the severity continuum were struggling to find and keep good jobs. More than 40 percent of graduates served in what were called Self-Contained with Integration programs and were unemployed, and more than 20 percent only worked part time within 18 months of leaving high school. The agency determined that one explanation for the numbers is the fact that students had insufficient career exploration and work experiences in high school. As a result, most graduated with no real idea of what they wanted to do. Compounding the problem was the fact that many students either did not seek or did not qualify for adult services that might have helped them enter a career that matched their talents and interests.

Career Connections

Career Connections was created to help high school students with disabilities identify career goals and then find, learn and keep jobs that match those goals. Founded in 2001 with grants from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs, Career Connections is a collaborative effort involving students, families, school staff, GWAEA and community rehabilitation agencies such as Goodwill Industries of the Heartland and Advancement Services of Jones County. The program has expanded to serve 60 to 70 students annually from 21 Iowa high schools, with districts paying for program services. The program was developed on the premise that students with disabilities need extra training and support to be successful in the workforce. It has six program elements, each designed to answer a specific question that will help guide the student's career path.

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Career Connections' Program Element	Question Addressed by Element
<p>Establish a Relationship with and Get to Know the Student:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Record review • Teacher, parent, student interviews • School-community observations • Career interest inventories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the student's career dreams, general skill levels and areas in need of training and support?
<p>Person-centered Career Planning Sessions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team of student's choosing • Review work history, skills and interests • Identify ideal job elements and occupations to investigate • Identify barriers to an ideal job • Next steps and action planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What career options should be explored? • What are must-have and must-avoid elements of student's ideal job? • What is our plan for helping students obtain their ideal job? • Who can help implement the plan?
<p>Fifth-Year Community Work Exploration:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job shadows • Short-term work experiences and tryouts • Six to eight weeks of work experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What career area is of greatest interest to the student? • What are the student's support or training needs?
<p>Fifth-Year Internships:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Six- to 12-week paid internships • Coaching or co-worker support development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internship meets student career goals? • Is student qualified for such employment or is another internship warranted? • Will employer hire or provide a referral?
<p>Additional Skill Training and Support as Needed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community college coursework • Resume, job application and interview skill training • Transportation training • Behavioral and social skill teaching and support • Community service linkage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What related skills or services does the student need for employment success?
<p>Paid Employment and Program Exit:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convert internship into paid employment or develop job that matches career goal • Provide training and support until student is employed for 60 days 	<p>Should the student:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exit special education and the program? • Continue to receive Career Connections support on the job? • Exit to adult system long-term supports?



could get dirty; having a fairly consistent routine, but learning new tasks from time to time; and a degree of autonomy, but with a co-worker or supervisor nearby in case he had questions or needed direction. Career Connections then involved DuCharme in a variety of internships and work experiences, including one at an auto detailing business and another with a landscaping firm. They also arranged for him to become a certified forklift operator through a Goodwill training program. His final internship was as a hand at a local dairy farm. It was here that things really fell into place.

“Once I started working with the cows on the farm, I knew this was the job for me,” he said. Today he works 50 hours per week milking cows, checking for signs of disease, moving feed and supplies, and is learning about artificial insemination.

Over the past six years, 157 students like DuCharme have exited Career Connections with a job. The program enjoys a good success rate—83 of 100 students who stay through their fifth year exit school with a job. On the other hand, only 32 percent of the students who exited the program prior to completion of their fifth year were employed.

On average exited students work more than 30 hours per week (59 percent full time), and earn more than \$8 per hour (more than \$1,100 per month). Compared to their stats at program entry, the average hours worked increased by 427 percent, hourly wages by 272 percent, and monthly earnings by 628 percent. Student occupations are in the service, automotive, construction, computer, telemarketing and medical fields.

Career Connections' Outcomes

Wesley DuCharme was referred to the program this past year from one of the rural districts participating. Although he had an interest in automobiles because of his father's occupation as a car salesperson, he approached the end of his senior year with no clear idea as to what he wanted to do. He did know for sure though that further schoolwork was not in his plans. Career Connections' staff started working with DuCharme by going through the YES (“Your Employment Selections”—Morgan, 2003) CD-ROM-based career interest inventory. This program shows short clips of various jobs, with students indicating preferences among the choices presented and describing the appealing or unappealing job elements.

Staff helped DuCharme select a career and futures planning team of teachers, friends and relatives who came together to help create a picture of an ideal job for him, based on his interests, skills and support needs. They determined that DuCharme would work best around machinery. He likes performing outdoorsy work where he

Implications

The National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center notes that desirable employment outcomes for students with disabilities don't “just happen.” Rather, success is dependent upon strong school programs that provide personalized, intensive career exploration opportunities and customized supports. Sometimes those services need to extend beyond the typical four-year high school experience. Career Connections is one program that has demonstrated the effectiveness of such an approach. One-on-one counseling, training and personalized involvement with each student are what make the program such a success. The dedication of our staff, students' determination and support, and families and employers are key to making things click.

For more information about Career Connections, visit the program's Web page at www.aea10.k12.ia.us/divlearn/careerconnections/index.html. 