

What Youth and Families Should Know About the Transition to Postsecondary Education for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

By Shari Barr, Joe Timmons, and Chris Opsal

Transition refers to the time a student begins planning to leave the secondary school system and enter young adulthood to live, work, and participate in lifelong learning. For students with intellectual or developmental disabilities, many things must be in place to ensure that postsecondary educational opportunities are maximized. Until recently, college was rarely considered an option for many but, in fact, there are more options and opportunities than ever. This brief details some of the essential activities that students and their families should undertake as transition planning occurs. It also provides numerous resources and links to additional information. This brief serves as a companion piece to the Student and Family sections of the Think College Web site: <http://www.thinkcollege.net/>

POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION PLANNING IN HIGH SCHOOL

Federal law requires transition planning for students with disabilities to begin at age 16 but for most students, this planning should begin as early as eighth grade, when course selection for high school usually begins. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA), transition planning for students receiving special education is done in conjunction with the Individualized Education Program (IEP), which is updated annually. The transition IEP must include appropriate measurable postsecondary goals based upon age-appropriate transition assessments related to training, education, employment and, where appropriate, independent living skills.

Additionally, in the student's final year of high school, the school is responsible for bringing together the essential participants in his/her planning team to gather all relevant information about progress made in the school system and to develop a Summary of Performance that documents his/her academic and functional skills and postsecondary needs. The Summary should have five parts:

- Background information about informal and formal assessments that show strengths and needs;
- The student's goals for what he/she will do after leaving high school;
- A summary of academic, cognitive, and functional performance and the accommodations, assistive technology, and modifications that the young person will need to be successful after leaving high school;
- Recommendations for helping reach the young person's goals after high school; and

Think College: For Families is published by THE CONSORTIUM FOR POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES and is supported, in part, by a cooperative agreement from the Administration on Developmental Disabilities, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Grantees undertaking projects under government sponsorship are encouraged to freely express their findings and conclusions. Points of view or opinions do not, therefore, necessarily represent official Administration on Developmental Disabilities policy. CFDA# 93-632 Grant No. 90-DD-0659

THE CONSORTIUM is based at the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts-Boston.



- The student's ideas about how he/she understands the impact of their disability.

The Summary of Performance is a bridge between the high school and post-high school environment and provides useful documentation that many colleges and universities will request. For a sample Summary template, visit http://www.idanatl.org/aboutId/adults/post_secondary/sop.asp

COLLEGE IS DIFFERENT FROM HIGH SCHOOL

It is important for young people and their families to understand that college is a radical change from high school. In college, a young adult will face complicated academic and social environments that allow for greater independence without the benefit of some of the structured interaction with teachers and hands-on help at home that occurred during the high school years. In college, young people need to rely on self-sufficiency and self-determination skills to ask for support and accommodations, meet class assignment deadlines, become involved in campus social and academic life, and care for themselves.

As the number of students with disabilities attending colleges and universities increases, more supports have become available, but students and their families have also assumed greater responsibilities. Because postsecondary education is not covered by IDEA, students are not "entitled" to services and supports in college, but must demonstrate "eligibility" for them. Documentation of disabilities is not the responsibility of the college (or other government agencies, necessarily). Laws supporting the college student with disabilities include the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 as amended and are essentially anti-discrimination acts that require colleges to provide certain accommodations that address specific aspects of an individual's disability. They do not allow for adjusting the general curriculum or coursework required in degree or certificate programs but do allow for many different types of programs for non-traditional students.

College programs for students with intellectual disabilities may be designed in three ways. Many are a mix of special programming focusing on disability issues with exposure to regular classes taken in a mainstream setting (with appropriate supports). Some are completely mainstream and inclusive. Others are essentially segregated, or designed specifically for a special population or disability group. In any case, when researching postsecondary options, families consider the many ways that any student can gain access to college, including auditing classes, taking individual courses for credit, entering a certificate program, entering a two-year degree program, and entering a four-year degree program.

Students who apply to a traditional degree program are held to the same admissions standards as all other applicants. In two-year community and technical colleges, which have open enrollment, students may have to take a placement test to determine what classes they should take to start with at college. Many colleges use a placement test called Accuplacer. It is usually taken on the computer and it covers three subject areas: math, reading, and writing; students may request accommodations for this test.

For more information on this topic, visit the Pathways to Postsecondary Education section of our Web site: <http://www.thinkcollege.net/for-professionals/pathways-to-postsecondary-education>

WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO

Whether students are considering postsecondary education through a traditional or non-traditional path, there are steps that families can take to prepare for that important transition. For instance, the HEATH Resource Center (2009a) describes how parents or family members of a transitioning high school student can actively participate in transition planning; they can:

- Encourage, guide, and mentor the student to be directly involved in his/her IEP planning, including leading IEP meetings;
- Work with teachers, counselors, and others to identify skills to reinforce at home to foster greater independence;
- Meet with adult service agencies and attend planning sessions;
- Insist upon measurable postsecondary outcomes with supports and services; and
- Work with the school counselor, special education teacher, community agencies, and others on the transition team to envision a course program for the student's remaining years in high school that will prepare the student to be able to work independently toward his/her goals.

The Postsecondary Educational Research Center (2007) provides these tips for families:

- Talk about what college is and how it is different from high school. There are no bells, no study hall, and no principals. Students are expected to do what they need to do with little supervision or assistance.
- Discuss how college is a place where the student decides what they want to learn, not their teachers or parents. Students have the opportunity to choose to learn about a topic or subject that interests them.
- Visit a local college or two. Eat lunch there, go to the library, and talk with some students. If you can, sit in on a class or two to see what it's like. Try to get a feel for the culture and where the students hang out and spend time together.
- Look at the different types of continuing education courses that are available for all students.
- Encourage your child to take a college class while still in high school to see how the adult learning experience is different from high school.
- Discuss the things that your child would like to learn about. Although these things may not be academic, they may certainly be meaningful to them. See if local courses are available on these topics.
- Help your child make the connection between his/her learning goals and his/her life: a cooking class could help them become more independent in the kitchen; a cake decorating class could help them get a job in the bakery at the local grocery store; a Microsoft Office class could help them get a job in an office; classes taken just for fun could help them meet people who have similar interests.

- Find out what accommodations are being provided in high school to help your child succeed.
- Work with your child to help practice asking for support in different environments from people your child doesn't know. If your child has difficulty communicating, help create other appropriate ways to indicate a need.

ACCOMMODATIONS

Accommodations are changes or adaptations made to a classroom or exam setting to alleviate the impact of a disability. These can include alternative testing, note-taking, document conversion (also known as alternative media), interpreting (including sign language, oral, cued speech, and computer-assisted real-time captioning), registration assistance, laboratory/library assistance, information technology access, reduced course load, assistive listening, course substitution/waiver, and seating. Colleges differ in the types and/or levels of services provided. Individuals should be clear about the services and accommodations they need and should speak early on with the disability services coordinators at the colleges they're considering to see how supports are provided there (HEATH Resource Center, 2009b).

Because the daily routine of college is very different from high school, it is important for students to know which services and accommodations a given college will provide. To qualify for disability services, students are required to provide diagnostic documentation from a licensed clinical professional familiar with the history and functional implications of their impairments. Although institutions can be flexible in accepting documentation from professionals, providing documentation early prevents delays in services.

Colleges that have special programs for students with intellectual or developmental disabilities usually have well-designed supports for their students. Visit the Think College website for more details about specific programs for students with intellectual or developmental disabilities across the country:

<http://www.thinkcollege.net/searchadd-programs>

CONTACTING COLLEGES AND SEEKING FINANCIAL AID

Students should connect with and apply to college as early as possible because the process of investigating, visiting, applying, and deciding on a college program is complex and time-consuming. It can be advantageous to contact a prospective college's Office for Students with Disabilities before contacting the admissions office. The Think College website provides a family checklist to help families through the college decision-making process:

<http://www.thinkcollege.net/for-families/transition-checklist>

To become eligible for financial aid, most schools require filing the federal financial aid application, known as the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). The FAFSA is the first step in applying for more than 90% of available federal money for college. The FAFSA application is examined by a federal processor and the results are sent by computer to the financial aid offices of the colleges you indicate when you file the form. Most colleges use the FAFSA to determine eligibility for federal, state, and college-sponsored financial aid, including grants, educational loans, and work-study programs. You can access the FAFSA at <http://www.fafsa.ed.gov/>

A new federal law, the Higher Education Opportunity Act, has provisions to allow non-degree-seeking students to qualify for Pell Grants and federal student loans and work study (the country's primary financial aid funds from government sources). Regulations related to these funds are not complete (as of July 2009) but Think College will post more information about the status of the regulations when they become available. See the Research Brief on the Higher Education Opportunity Act for more information: <http://www.thinkcollege.net/publications>

Students may qualify for scholarships based on academic achievement or special skill or talent. Financial aid may also be available through state agencies for Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) if an individual is eligible for VR services. VR may be able to help pay for some college costs but not others. Many students with disabilities receive services from their state VR agencies (see <http://tinyurl.com/JAN-VRoffices> for a list of state VR agencies). A written application must be submitted to request services and provide information to determine eligibility. A counselor at the local VR agency can help determine eligibility for services.

The work incentives administered by the Social Security Administration (SSA) can be used to offset college expenses—again, if an individual is eligible for them. There are two major programs: Supplemental Security Income (SSI) for people with little or no income and resources, and Social Security Disability Income (SSDI) for insured workers, their disabled surviving spouses, and children (disabled before age 22) of disabled, retired, or deceased workers. To be eligible for either of these programs, the individual must meet SSA's definition of disability, which is based on the inability to work. Applying for either Social Security program is a lengthy process and requires the completion of many forms as well as parents' permission for SSA to access medical and school records. You can learn more at <http://www.ssa.gov/disability/>

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT FOR THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

The HEATH Resource Center (2009c) describes some things that can be done to provide emotional support for college students.

- **Family Support:** While college can be a big transition, it can be helpful for new college students to keep regular contact with family and friends at home. Such close relationships are helpful for sharing emotions and having affirming experiences. If visits are not always feasible, making a regular time for phone contact can be a source of support and comfort.
- **Spiritual Involvement:** Participating in familiar or new spiritual activities can be rejuvenating.
- **Club/Association Involvement:** Joining a club or association allows for opportunities to socialize with people who share similar interests. Many clubs or organizations are also involved in community service projects, which can be a source of personal gratification.
- **Exercise/Diet:** Eating healthy and exercising help to ward off stress and promote feelings of personal wellness. Some examples of exercise are a personal workout plan, a walk in the evening, or involvement in intramural activities.
- **Affirming Activities:** These are activities that highlight personal strengths and qualities, bring about

warm emotions, and help a person to feel good. It may be as simple as engaging in a favorite activity or surrounding the self with favorite “things.” Another example is keeping a “personal strength” file, where qualities, compliments, or achievements are stored in a file and are available for remembrance when emotional support is needed.

- Mentoring/Tutoring: Students can benefit emotionally from providing and/or receiving mentoring and tutoring services.

Emotional preparedness and wellness will be increased when a young adult takes an active role in seeking out supports. The college experience is an emotional experience, and the better he/she is at finding and taking advantage of emotional supports, the more successful and enjoyable the college experience will be.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Think College: College Options for People with Intellectual Disabilities

<http://www.thinkcollege.net/>

Postsecondary Education Research Center (PERC)

<http://www.transitiontocollege.net/>

The **HEATH Resource Center** has 16 training modules for students and families that cover many topics related to postsecondary education, including:

- College Application Process: Getting into College
- Awareness of Postsecondary Options: Knowing Your Options
- Parents' Guide to Transition of Their Adult Child to College, Career, and Community
- Campus Life/College Living: Keeping Healthy and Happy at College
- Accommodations: Academic and Co-Curricular Accommodations in Colleges and Universities
- Emotional Supports: Navigating the Emotional Landscape of College
- Independent Living: Living On My Own, Away From Home, Having To Do My Laundry All Alone
- Career and Technical Education: Opportunities in Career and Technical Education at the Postsecondary Level
- Self-Advocacy Skills You Need To Know For College Success
- Community College: An Excellent Option for Students with Disabilities
- Legal Issues: The Laws: What Do They Have To Do With You?

See http://www.heath.gwu.edu/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=12&Itemid=65

DO-IT provides an on-line tutorial for students preparing for college, including links to help students

- plan steps they will take to prepare for college;
- know their learning style;
- become academically prepared for college;
- assess their skills, interests, and personality as they consider potential academic fields of study to pursue;
- consider different types of degrees and schools;
- consider what accommodations they might need and learn what typical accommodations are provided on

college campuses;

- explore colleges and universities;
- consider funding options;
- use technology to maximize their participation, productivity, and independence in learning; and
- find role models and mentors.

See <http://www.washington.edu/doit/Brochures/Academics/cprep.html>

Financial Aid Resources for Students with Disabilities

- DisabilityInfo.gov: Financial Aid/Scholarships
<http://www.disabilityinfo.gov/digov-public/public/DisplayPage.do?parentFolderId=84>
- Michigan State University Libraries: Grants for the Disabled
<http://staff.lib.msu.edu/harris23/grants/3disable.htm>
- Scholarships 4 Students: Special/Disabilities Scholarships
http://www.scholarships4students.com/special_scholarships.htm
- Proyecto Vision, a bilingual web site for Latinos with disabilities: Scholarship Opportunities
<http://www.proyectovision.net/spanish/opportunities/scholarships.html>
<http://www.proyectovision.net/english/opportunities/scholarships.html>
- The HEATH Resource Center: Topic: Financial Aid
http://www.heath.gwu.edu/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1053&Itemid=65

The Americans with Disabilities Act and Related Laws

- Think College: Differences Between High School and College
<http://www.thinkcollege.net/for-families/high-school-v-college>
- LD Online: College Students and Disability Law
<http://www.ldonline.org/article/6082>
- The College of New Jersey: Transition: There are No IEPs in College
<http://www.tcnj.edu/~technj/2004/transition.htm>

Accommodations and Other Supports in College

- DO-IT: Obtaining Accommodations in Higher Education
<https://www.washington.edu/doit/Careers/accommodations.html>
- HEATH Resource Center: Students with Disabilities in the College Classroom
<http://tinyurl.com/HeathClassroom>
- The Ohio State University: College Accommodation Planning
http://ada.osu.edu/resources/college_accomodation.htm

- AHEAD: Seven Essential Elements of Quality Disability Documentation
<http://www.ahead.org/resources/best-practices-resources/elements>
- Office for Civil Rights: Students with Disabilities Preparing for Postsecondary Education: Know Your Rights and Responsibilities
<http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/transition.html>

REFERENCES

HEATH Resource Center. (2009a). *Parents' guide to transition*. Retrieved July 9, 2009 from http://www.heath.gwu.edu/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1093&Itemid=56

HEATH Resource Center. (2009b). *Topic: Accommodations*. Retrieved July 9, 2009, from http://www.heath.gwu.edu/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1060&Itemid=31

HEATH Resource Center. (2009c). *Topic: Emotional supports*. Retrieved July 14, 2009 from http://www.heath.gwu.edu/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1058&Itemid=65

Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, Pub. L. No. 101-315 (2008).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004, 20 USC 1400 (2004).

Postsecondary Education Research Center. (2007). *Transitioning to college: Tips for parents to help students with intellectual disabilities think about college*. Retrieved July 9, 2009 from http://www.transitiontocollege.net/percpubs/parent_tips_reformatted.pdf