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Transition Services for Students Aged 18-21 with Intellectual Disabilities in College and Community Settings: Models and Implications of Success

By Meg Grigal, Amy Dwyre, and Helena Davis

Recently in the field of special education there has been a call for the development and expansion of services for older students with intellectual disabilities outside of the high school setting (Agran, Snow, & Swaner, 1999; Smith & Puccini, 1995; Stodden & Whelley, 2004). In response, local school systems across the country have begun to provide transition services to students ages 18 and older with intellectual disabilities in postsecondary settings such as two- and four-year colleges or other community settings (Grigal, Neubert, & Moon, 2001; Hall, Kleinert, & Kearns, 2000; Neubert, Moon, & Grigal, 2004). This brief provides an overview of some successful models of transition services being implemented in postsecondary settings, describes one such model implemented by the Baltimore City Public School System in three local colleges, and presents some of the implications and strategies for success of this model.

Overview of Postsecondary Transition Services for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

Providing transition services and supports in college and community settings to students ages 18-21 with intellectual disabilities allows students to expand their independence, self-advocacy, employment, and social and community integration during their final years of mandated public schooling (Grigal et al., 2001; Hall et al., 2000; Hart, Mele-McCarthy, Pasternack, Zimbrich, & Parker, 2004). Students with intellectual disabilities receiving transition services in postsecondary settings may take college classes (for credit or audit) or participate in adult or continuing education classes (Neubert et al., 2004). Most students are involved in integrated community employment or in training positions with a goal of attaining paid positions. Students also participate in a variety of campus experiences with similar-aged peers without disabilities, such as student organizations, sports activities, and cultural events. The nature of each postsecondary experience is based on the goals and needs of the individual student, the location of the program, and the availability of support personnel. In most cases, students are still receiving IDEA-funded services from Local Education Agency (LEA) personnel, but on a college campus. Thus some use the term "postsecondary dual enrollment programs" to describe such services. However, it should be made clear that in most cases students receiving transition services in postsecondary settings are not enrolled in college as matriculating or degree-seeking students.

Recent studies have demonstrated that these transition services in postsecondary settings have the potential to increase students' access to integrated employment, education, and social activities, as well as improve interagency collaboration between LEAs and adult service providers (Hart et al., 2004; Neubert et al., 2004; Zafft, Hart, & Zimbrich, 2004). The principles applied in this model reflect knowledge and strategies from research and effective practice on promoting employment and active participation in community life, including:

- understanding the local community and community resources through ecological analysis and community-based instruction;
- continually determining student preference and interests and parental needs through person-centered planning;
- formally collaborating with persons and agencies outside the school systems who may support the student;
- teaching academic, social, and vocational skills that lead to competitive or supported employment; and
- balancing vocational training with inclusion in age-appropriate social and academic programs (Falvey, Gage, & Eshlilian, 1995; Kohler, DeStefano, Wer-muth, Garyson, & McGinty, 1994; McDonnell, Mathot-Buckner, & Ferguson, 1996; Moon, Inge, Wehman, Brooke, & Barcus, 1990; Sitlington, Neubert, & Leconte, 1997; Wehman, 1996).

The trend to serve older students with intellectual disabilities in postsecondary settings has recently been documented by the Transition Coalition, a project of the Department of Special Education, University of Kansas. This project has compiled a database of community-based transition programs that serve students ages 18-21 on its Web site (www.transitioncoalition.org), which to date lists 113 programs located on college campuses. A recent national survey conducted by Hart et al. (2004) further documents this growing movement toward postsecondary education by identifying 25 programs that serve students with intellectual disabilities enrolled in public school on a college campus.

Models of Postsecondary Transition Services

The most prevalent model for serving students with intellectual disabilities in college and community settings is the program-based model in which a group of students are served in one postsecondary setting (Grigal et al., 2001; Hall et al., 2000; Hart et al., 2004). This model features opportunities for these youth to receive public school services in an environment with same-aged peers without disabilities who have exited high school, while

continuing to benefit from mandated educational services to which they are entitled. Students can attend college courses and participate in social activities on campus with degree-seeking college students, but can also receive individualized instruction by an LEA special educator on self-determination, socialization, and life skills. Students generally participate in employment training activities and plan for life in the community after graduation by connecting with state and local adult service system personnel. The needs and desires of students determine the percentage of the day spent on each of these activities.

Another approach is the individual support model. This model differs from the program-based model in that only one student is supported in the postsecondary setting of his/her choice (Hart et al., 2004; Weir, 2004). Students receiving individual supports are guided through a person-centered planning process by a team of support persons to identify their goals and determine the best college or other community setting in which to meet those goals. Students may attend college classes and participate in campus or community activities. Ideally, students receiving individual supports are provided greater choice in postsecondary settings, and their participation in college is not necessarily dependent upon their enrollment in public school. However, this model requires a great deal of service coordination, interagency collaboration, and parental support to be successful.

While these models differ in their methods of student support and coordination of services, the goals are usually the same: (a) to provide students with transition services in a college setting in order to facilitate job attainment, (b) to provide the opportunity to participate in college classes and recreational and social activities, and (c) to foster a new level of independence and self-confidence. The following describes one program-based model that was successfully implemented in an urban setting and demonstrates the positive outcomes that can be achieved by students served in college settings.

Profile of an Urban Model:

The Baltimore Transition Connection

The Baltimore Transition Connection (BTC) is a community-based transition model implemented in the Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS). BCPSS is a unified school district that encompasses the entire city of Baltimore, MD. In the academic year 2003-04, BCPSS had 91,738 students enrolled, of whom 15,313 (16.7%) were receiving special education services. Approximately 667 of the students receiving special education services were ages 18-21.

Prior to implementing the BTC program, students ages 18-21 with intellectual disabilities served by BCPSS

received special education services in either segregated “special education only” schools, segregated classrooms in regular high schools, or integrated classrooms accessing the same 12th grade curriculum for the last three years. Historically, very few students who exited BCPSS from these classes did so with paid work experience, and most did not have positive employment outcomes one year after exit.

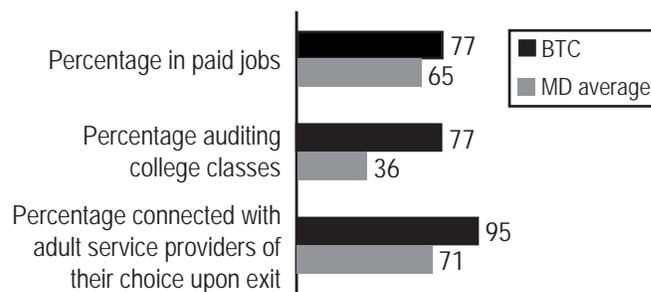
The BCPSS BTC began in September 1999 at the Baltimore City Community College campus, serving 10 students with intellectual and other disabilities. During the 2000-01 school year, an additional cohort of students began receiving services at Coppin State College, a four-year institution also located in Baltimore. The 2001-02 school years welcomed a third group who received transition services on the Johns Hopkins University campus. All three sites have been active since then, serving no more than 10 students at each site, with an instructor and instructional assistant, and often an Individualized Education Program (IEP) aide assigned to a specific student. Any student receiving an IEP-designated related service (such as speech, physical, or occupational therapy; assistive technology support; or psychological services) receives those services at the college campus. A minor portion of instruction occurs with fellow special education classmates at the college site; however, a majority of learning takes place in the community through classroom assignments in small groups (at grocery stores, malls, restaurants, banks, government offices, etc.), paired with degree-seeking college students, on volunteer or paid jobs, during career exploration and search, and during the auditing of college classes. The students receive ID cards for the college they attend, which gives them access to campus facilities and activities. Students also use the campus student centers, cafeterias, and other college resources throughout their day. Each student has an individualized schedule based on IEP goals, work schedules, career exploration and job search needs, audited college class schedules, chosen campus and recreational activities, and required related services.

BTC Student Outcomes

As of February 2004, the BCPSS BTC had served 52 students. On average, students remained in this program for 2.5 years. From September 1999 through December 2003, 70 students applied for services in the BTC program. Several students were not served due to a variety of factors such as their families declining the offer, or students and families not completing the application process. As of June 2004, 37 students have exited BTC and the school system, with 95% of those students connected to the adult service agency of their choice upon exit (see Figure 1).

In terms of general community integration other than employment, 77% of BTC-participating students audited a course of their choice at either the community college,

Figure 1: Comparison of student outcomes of the Baltimore Transition Connection and the average of similar programs across Maryland as of December 2003



the local YMCA, or Coppin State College. Eighty-nine percent of the exiting students have learned to independently use the public transportation system in Baltimore, and 50% of the students have accessed the local YMCA or their college campus gym for weekly sports activities. Within the last two school years, 66% of the students were registered with and regularly accessed their local OneStop Career Center as part of their job search activities.

The most significant results are in the areas of employment (see Table 1). Seventy-seven percent of BTC students had paid employment during their participation in the program, and 71% had volunteer positions in the community. Every student who has participated in the BTC program has had at least one volunteer position within the community, and many have had both paid and volunteer positions at the same time. Each year that BTC has exited students, at least 70% of those students have left with paid employment already secured. Seventy-eight percent of all students who have exited from BTC with employment were still employed as of June 2004.

Implications and Strategies for Success

Obviously, the BTC program has been successful in supporting students toward positive transition experiences and outcomes. However, there are a variety of important factors that must be in place for this to occur. The first step in creating transition services for students with intellectual disabilities in college and community settings is to create an interdisciplinary committee representing each of the

Table 1. Factors related to paid work: BTC vs. Maryland state averages

Program factor	BTC	MD average
Average hourly rate of pay for students in paid work	\$6.65	\$5.91
Average hours worked per week	13.5	10.78

major players or organizations involved, including the local school system, students and their families, college or university personnel, local and state rehabilitation personnel, state developmental disabilities personnel, adult service providers, employers, and representatives from local One-Stop Career Centers (Grigal, Neubert, & Moon, 2002). This committee must have a shared vision of the services that will be created and an understanding of the activities that are needed to make them a reality. Committee members should conduct a needs assessment of current student services and community partnerships, determine the scope and focus of services, and familiarize themselves with the resources, strategies, and models of postsecondary transition services available in the literature and on the Internet.

Often those interested in developing postsecondary transition services mistakenly believe that simply changing the location of services from a high school setting to a college setting is sufficient to improve student outcomes. While location is one of the factors that promote change, it is certainly not the most important. School systems must approach the development and implementation of postsecondary transition services first and foremost from a change standpoint by asking, “What do students need that they are currently not receiving in high school?” Then, and only then, should they ask, “Where is the best location to provide those services?” In some cases the answer may be a college, but not in all cases. It is essential that those embarking on this process continually ask themselves, “What will students be doing differently in this setting than they did in high school?”

This model requires changes at the systems level and the student level. At the systems level, those who are trying to expand or promote services in postsecondary settings need to:

- Engage administrative support for collaborating with outside agencies and organizations;
- Develop mutually beneficial partnerships (e.g., determine how colleges can benefit from student enrollment and how local employers can be assisted with their hiring needs);
- Understand the differences between the rights and responsibilities of students in high school and those in college, and the legislation that supports those rights;
- Cross-train staff in the areas of teaching, job development, marketing, time management, scheduling, travel training, and counseling in order to deal with the needs of the various players in various environments;
- Ensure the establishment of institutional mechanisms that will maintain the integrity of the program;
- Base the location of services on identified students’ needs rather than on convenience or preconceived ideas of “what a college program should look like;”

- Consider availability of resources such as transportation and proximity of available colleges and employment options;
- Assess the impact of community and culture in the geographic area (rural vs. urban) including factors such as poverty, crime, racial issues, and safety;
- Increase the flexibility of service provision to mirror a college schedule of activities; and
- Engage in program evaluation activities to document the process and outcomes of students’ transition services.

At the student level, those trying to expand or promote services in postsecondary settings need to:

- Commit to a person-centered planning process to identify student goals and support needs;
- Prepare students to successfully access college coursework by building both academic and functional skills in high school from ages 14-18;
- Increase expectations of student self-determination and independence;
- Focus on student ability to self-advocate and articulate support needs in college, community, and employment settings;
- Connect college coursework to current or future employment and engage students in paid integrated community employment prior to graduation;
- Engage students in all aspects of accessing college coursework (e.g., reviewing the class schedules, participating in the registration process, paying tuition or applying for tuition waivers, and asking for accommodations from professors) so they gain skills in accessing postsecondary education; and
- Help students and their families make informed choices, including the choice of adult service providers that value and promote integrated experiences.

Expanding postsecondary opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities is an exciting trend, one that has the potential to impact not only special education, but higher education as well. Yet it is important to move toward creating these options while holding fast to the tenets that make transition services effective: individualized, student-centered planning; integrated community experiences; interagency collaboration; and an outcome-oriented process. Outcomes are key to the success of this expansion. With the current educational climate of high-stakes testing and increased accountability, it is vital to demonstrate that transition services in postsecondary settings are effective. To do so there must be continued efforts to gauge the impact of such services via frequent and meaningful evaluation of student progress and outcomes.

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For more info on postsecondary options for students with intellectual disabilities:

HEATH Resource Center: National Clearinghouse on Postsecondary Education for Individuals with Disabilities, The George Washington University
<http://www.heath.gwu.edu/>

On-Campus Outreach, University of Maryland
<http://www.education.umd.edu/ocol>

Transition Coalition, University of Kansas
<http://www.transitioncoalition.org/>

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