Transition Services Model: Partnership for Student Success

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Abstract: In 1995, the Southwest Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA) of the Los Angeles County School District, and El Camino College pioneered a partnership to serve students with disabilities on the community college campus. SELPA transition services serve as a model for alliances between community colleges and school districts throughout California. Area students receiving special education services have an opportunity to pursue postsecondary education while completing high school requirements. Students attend college classes, participate in social activities, and learn life and employment skills. Students learn to be successful at achieving goals through SELPA partnerships. The school district and community college alliance, activities, and services are described, using program theory as the means of identifying the flow and sequence of the program.

The years surrounding a student’s departure from secondary education and entry into the arena of adult services have been identified as transition years for individuals with disabilities (Wehman, 1992). Transition years have been studied extensively in recent years by researchers in their quest of methods to assist young adults with disabilities in their transition from the mandated educational services to the less structured, often frustrating, world of adult services. Madeline Will (1984), former Assistant Secretary in the US Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, focused on the transition from school to work, emphasizing the need for schools to provide work experiences for students with disabilities while they were still in secondary school. She voiced the need to prepare students for work as a way of helping them to make a successful transition to adult life. Halpern (1985) expanded on Will’s concept of transition by including independent living and personal/social issues. Halpern felt employment to be an important issue in the lives of young adults with disabilities, but also that other areas such as housing, social and recreational opportunities should be addressed when supporting an individual to plan his or her transition from school to adult life.

Recent legislative changes support individuals as they transition from the secondary educational system to adult life. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, PL 101-336, ensures the rights of individuals with disabilities to private sector employment, public services, public accommodations, transportation, and telecommunications. It is important for educators working with transition-aged students to understand the rights guaranteed by this legislation. In 1990, Public Law 101-476, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), with the goal of amending the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975), expanded on the educational rights of individuals with disabilities. The law mandated that transition planning activities were to be provided by schools to assist individuals with disabilities during the transition period. The goal of the IDEA was to ensure that all individuals with disabilities who are 16 years or development of this paper was completed as part of the Strategic Program of Research for the National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational Supports at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, which is a Rehabilitation Research and Training Center funded by grant # H133B980043 from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research within the US Department of Education. Opinions and views offered within this paper are those of the researcher involved and the funding agent implies no endorsement. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Lucinda Aborn, 16007 Crenshaw Boulevard, Torrance, CA 90506. Email: laborn@elcamino.cc.ca.us
older will have an educational plan addressing their transition needs. In 1997, IDEA (P.L. 105-17) was amended and added emphasis to a student’s interests and preferences in the transition planning process. The IDEA focused on a student’s move from school to post-school activities and stressed the need for schools to prepare students to transition to the adult environment(s) in which they choose to participate (McAfee & Greenawalt, 2001).

In 1992, the Rehabilitation Act Amendments, (PL 102-569) altered the way in which services are delivered for individuals with disabilities as they transition from school to adult life. Each state developed a plan. The California plan specifies formal interagency agreements between vocational rehabilitation and educational agencies to facilitate transition with a requirement that services be continued without interruption, and that school and vocational rehabilitation agencies coordinate and collaborate to determine eligibility for adult services. Educational and vocational rehabilitation agencies must work together as students transition from school to adult life, to develop an Individual Written Rehabilitation Plan, focusing on careers and based on individual interests, preferences, and family involvement.

Although the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 (STWOA) brought renewed attention to youths exiting the school system, the National Council on Disability (2000) reported that graduates did not possess the necessary skills to be successful on the job and that unemployment rates were intolerably high for youth with disabilities. Many students with disabilities of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, “young people [who] form a major source of human capital for the next century” are dropping out of school prior to graduation (National Council on Disabilities). The STWOA proposed a partnership between students, parents, schools, postsecondary institutions, employers, and appropriate government agencies, forming a link between school and work. This legislation sought to increase the number of youth, including those with disabilities, who graduate, transition into postsecondary education, and into meaningful employment based on their interests and goals.

Given the above legislation addressing transition of students with disabilities from school to adult life, current research reveals continued poor outcomes for individuals with developmental disabilities (Benz & Lindstrom, 1999; Nuehring & Sitlington, 2003; Wittenburg, Golden, & Fishman, 2002; Yuen & Shaughnessy, 2001). It is imperative that transition programs be reviewed to determine whether or not the current system of delivering services is meeting the legal mandates, as well as preparing individuals for the quality of life to which they aspire. Although literature describing postsecondary education for individuals is growing, it is still limited (Page & Chadsey-Rusch, 1995). An early program of this nature was implemented at a community college in Maryland (Low, 1975). Participants attended a 15-week course with self-paced reading programs, counseling services, and job search assistance. Hall, Klenert, and Kerns (2000) and Dolyniuk et al. (2000) have also described similar programs.

An early national survey conducted by McAfee and Sheeler (1987) was designed to explore the status of adults with mental retardation. Chief of ficer of 200 community colleges were surveyed about services offered to this population. Results indicated the chief officer plays an important role in the delivery of services to adults with developmental disabilities. However, over fifty percent of the respondents had not developed any type of program or services.

In a qualitative study conducted by Page and Chadsey-Rusch (1995), four young men attending a community college were interviewed about their experiences. Two students with developmental disabilities receiving services from their secondary school were compared with two non-disabled students graduating from secondary school. All students reported a benefit from attending college. The two non-disabled students felt the experience could lead to employment. The two students with disabilities described other benefits such as development of friendships, opportunities for recreation, and improved self-confidence. The literature indicates a need to improve programs and supports for students with developmental disabilities who are leaving secondary school (Neubert, Moon, Grigal, & Redd, 2001).

Colleges and school districts need to cooperate to develop programs, which do not iso-
late students with developmental disabilities. Students with disabilities who graduate from secondary programs are seldom adequately prepared to make a smooth transition into adult life (Patton et al., 1996, Sileo, Rude, & Luckner, 1988). If educational programs are to meet needs of students more successfully, changes may need to be made. Students need to be involved in planning their future, and coursework needs to be based on student needs, interests, and preferences (Neubert, 2003; Sidlington, Clark, & Kolstoe, 2000). Families need to be included in the planning, since they provide a major source of support after graduation (National Center on Secondary Education and Transition/PACER Center, 2002).

Transition services need to be evaluated on a regular basis to determine if they effectively meet the needs of the individuals and families they serve, along with follow-up studies which should be conducted with graduates to determine if the transition services provided to them helped them to achieve their desired post-school outcomes (Hall et al., 2000; Halpern, Benz, & Lindstrom, 1992). Data from current and follow-up studies would help programs in identifying ways school can serve students better as they transition from school to adult life (Everson, 1996; Everson & Moon, 1987; Neubert et al., 2001). Only through such examination and continuous assessment are services to be improved.

An individual’s quality of life is affected by many factors: family, socioeconomic status, education, and social and recreational activity (Halpern, 1993; Salkever, 2000; Schloss, Alper, & Jayne, 1993). Although schools and community agencies are moving towards providing more meaningful supports, outcomes for individuals with disabilities have not significantly improved (Kohler, 1993; Stodden, Whelley, Chang, & Harding, 2001). Young adults with disabilities encounter barriers in the pursuit of fulfilling their lives and continue to struggle with a lack of transportation, money, and work skills (Kregel, Wehman, Seyfarth, & Marshall, 1986; Skiba, 2001; Stodden et al.). Additionally, making friends with non-disabled peers is difficult. If individuals with disabilities are to achieve their goals, they need an opportunity to make informed choices. Schools need to teach self-determination skills and allow students to make choices for their education and life (Yuen & Shaughnessy, 2001). Studies have provided evidence indicating that individuals with disabilities are restricted from making critical decisions about their own lives and may lack decision making skills to do so as an adult (Schloss et al.; Wilson, Getzel, & Brown, 2001).

One factor increasing an individual’s quality of life is the opportunity to access postsecondary education (Salkever, 2000). However, research in this area is limited, due to a small percentage of individuals with disabilities participating in postsecondary education (Fairweather & Shaver, 1991). Page and Chadsey-Rusche (1995) found that students with disabilities who attended a community college felt a sense of personal growth and self-esteem. They suggested that attendance at a community college assists individuals with disabilities in meeting personal goals. It should be considered as an option when the student exits secondary school (Yuen & Shaughnessy, 2001). Links between secondary schools and postsecondary educational settings need to be improved so individuals with disabilities and their families are aware of additional options post-graduation (Lukose, 2000).

Method

Chen (1990) and Weiss (1998), along with Rossi, Freeman, and Lipsey (1999) propose a program theory approach to the evaluation of any program. Evaluation includes investigating and measuring change while the process of developing a program theory assists in understanding the implementation, normative phase, or outcome phase of a program. Program theory investigates the change process (input, output, or outcome) and enables evaluators and other stakeholders to investigate and determine: how the program works, why it works, and for whom it works. It is useful to know not only what a program intends to achieve but also how it intends to accomplish what it expects to achieve. It is important to understand the premise or theoretical basis underlying a program. If only outcomes are investigated, the manner in which the outcomes were achieved and what was unsuccessful if outcomes were not achieved will not be understood. This project sought to develop a program theory for the transition services from secondary school activities into the com-
munity college for students with disabilities. The theory in this sense reflects a set of assumptions underlying actions. A program theory does not have to be universally accepted, nor does it have to be right. Program theory consists of a set of hypotheses about how program plans are drawn out. Program theory proposes plausible explanations of the causal links tying program input to expected outcomes. Programs and how they function should be understood before they can be evaluated. The following guiding question for the model incorporates program theory:

*What are the underlying propositions or hypotheses of the transition program for secondary students moving to community colleges?*

In order to answer this question, a variety of sources were used. These included program records that provide a historical record of the program goals and objectives, observations of participants in the program, and interviews with program staff members. These sources were selected because they were judged to be the most informative about program processes and procedures and could provide the most complete information. All sources of information were analyzed so that a set of theories about the program could be created, input could be identified, and the flow of the program and causal links could be determined.

In developing a program, there are a number of steps that must be taken in order for the program to provide the services needed as well as for clients to participate in the program. Before there can be a program, there must be a staff member well trained to work with the project population in place, and a place to deliver the program. In reporting the results of this investigation of transition services using the program theory approach, the different facets will be discussed in the order they appear in the program theory model. Figure 1 is a visual representation of the theory model.

*Administrative Structure: Collaboration*

Transition students are residents of one of twelve local school districts forming a SELPA with services funded via SELPA special education funds and limited district general fund contributions. One district operates the transition services on behalf of SELPA and all program personnel are employees of the operating district (Manhattan Beach Unified School District, Manhattan Beach, CA). Expenses incurred by the program are covered by the SELPA. Transition services are based at El Camino Community College District in Torrance, CA with the Disabled Student Services (DSS) or the Special Resource Center (SRC). The SRC serves over 1,500 students with disabilities and the college has an enrollment of 23,000 students. The SRC consists of 42 full and part-time faculty and staff members, and with 25 hourly aides. All staff members have received specialized training in techniques for providing instruction and support services to individuals with disabilities. The SRC also has a High Tech Center laboratory of 15 computer stations and assistive technology for students use.

*Professional Staff: Transition Staff Selected*

The transition staff at SELPA consists of a program specialist, five special education teachers, and six full-time and four part-time vocational/instructional assistants. Members of the staff support students in the community, in college classes, and on job sites. A SELPA transition committee meets monthly to provide opportunities for educators, parents, and community agencies to network and to address common areas of concern. Staff members receive in-service training and identify topics of interest for future learning and are supported in their efforts to educate and work with students with disabilities.

*Students/Referral Process: Transition Students Identified*

Students participating in SELPA transition services at El Camino College are between the ages of 18-22 years old. They are students receiving special education services, and currently have Individual Education Plans (IEP). Eligible students are referred for transition services through their district of residence. Once a month, the program specialist offers a tour of the college campus and an explanation of SELPA services. If students are interested in participating in the program, the district of residence schedules an IEP meeting,
with the transition program specialist in attendance. Together, the transition program specialist, the IEP team, and the student make a decision regarding placement. Prior to enrollment, newly admitted students meet with transition personnel to develop their schedule and activities. Currently, SELPA serves 60 students with diverse disabilities on the El Camino College campus. Approximately 30 students are focused primarily on postsecondary education. The remaining 30 students are enrolled in one or two college classes and simultaneously focusing on employment, and development of independent living skills. Students continue to be eligible for services until they receive a diploma or until the semester of their 22nd birthday.

Program Design: Student Plans are Made

SELPA transition services are designed to provide flexibility for students, families, and staff...
to create experiences to meet the unique needs of each student. Staff members in SELPA Transition Support Center, located on the college campus, work closely with the college SRC counselors to assist SELPA students select and register for college classes. Transition personnel also provide tutoring and group study sessions. Some students focus on an academic program, while others incorporate job training and/or paid employment into their schedules; still others concentrate on independent living skills. Some students combine college classes and attendance at the local occupational center, while others work full or part time on the campus or in the community. Students who participate in vocational training classes and/or paid employment also have the assistance of transition staff to help them with job development and coaching. Staff is also available to teach students how to use public transportation to get from home and/or school to work.

If students are working toward a diploma, but have not yet met their district’s requirements, transition personnel work with students on the classes and/or competency exams they need to pass to earn their diplomas. Once students have met graduation requirements, certification is sent to the secondary school, the diploma is issued, and students exit the program. The goal of transition services is to prepare young adults with disabilities to live, work, and participate in their local communities. Curriculum and activities are based on the unique needs of the student and include different types of training beyond those required for graduation. Students receiving transition services through SELPA are enabled to participate in classes and activities on the community college campus and communities.

*Education: Student Enrolls in Classes*

According to the program theory developed for this project, administrative and program staff must be in place, trained and ready to work with students. In addition, program participants (students) should be identified and ready to start, and the program design, goals, and activities must be selected. Once all of these components are in place and ready to function, goals and activities need to be developed to help students reach the projected outcomes. Education in a community college setting combined with exposure to post-secondary education, enhanced activities including employment, social skills, life skills, and recreation functions as the primary vehicle for serving students with disabilities through transition services.

One of the first steps students take is to register with the El Camino College DSS. The DSS provides academic advising, career counseling, and liaison with college faculty as needed. The SELPA staff and DSS counselors assist students in selecting courses useful in terms of skill-development and enjoyable in terms of exposure to new and stimulating ideas experienced by all undergraduates. Transition students are expected to meet all requirements of the college course and abide by regulations for student behavior and conduct. SELPA personnel assist students to request needed accommodations through DSS.

Transition students take a variety of classes at the community college. Some of the courses students have completed include: English, math, science, educational development, theater, art, music, and physical education. Since 1997, 40 college instructors have worked with transition students to help them successfully complete classes on campus. Students have an opportunity to enroll in classes to complete their secondary school diploma requirements and/or receive college credit. Some of these students are interested in continuing postsecondary education after exiting secondary school. Throughout the transition process, the SELPA staff works closely with students to teach them how to set up appointments with their college counselor, select classes, and advocate for the accommodations they need in classes. Students have a file at DSS and meet with their counselor each semester to discuss their progress.

*Social and Recreational Skills: Develop Activities*

In addition to taking college classes, students participate in recreational or social activities on campus, as well as in community activities. Best Buddies, an international program designed to promote one on one friendship between individuals with developmental disabilities and typical peers, recently opened a chapter on the El Camino College campus. Persons with developmental disabilities have
an opportunity to develop their self-advocacy/protection and social skills in environments where they will live after graduation. Transition staff offers life skills instruction in areas such as “Family Life” and “Sex Education” and students have many opportunities to discuss their concerns about relationships, dating, and other issues of interest and to young adults. Throughout the transition experience, students are prepared to select and participate in social activities both on and off the college campus with peers who may or may not have disabilities. Students have an opportunity to participate in student clubs on the college campus, intramural sports teams, cultural events, as well as recreational opportunities. A priority of SELPA during the transition years is for students with disabilities to have an opportunity to develop friendships with other students on the college campus, as well as with co-workers.

**Work and Employment Skills: Develop an Employment Plan**

In addition to participating in college courses and activities while receiving SELPA transition services, students can also develop their employment skills. Students receive support to help them achieve their employment goals, including job development, job coaching, participation in vocational training classes, and paid work experience in local community businesses or on campus. A transition staff member interviews each student to help him or her to identify career interests, skills, and goals. Students and personnel then work together to chart a possible career path and identify the first step. If additional skill development is needed or desired, transition staff assists students to identify and enroll in classes through a regional center or nearby vocational training center. Students participate in general education, vocational training classes with support, as needed, from transition staff members. Examples of vocational training classes that transition students have taken in the past include automobile upholstery, automobile repair, floral design, silk screening, data entry, retail warehousing, web design, computer graphics, child-care, retail merchandising, and horticulture. Ultimately, students are prepared to work in competitive or supported employment. The collaboration with families and agency personnel, who assist individuals after graduation, is critical in the transition process. Transition teams work to develop supports that will remain in place after graduation and provide continuity as students graduate to postsecondary services.

**Living Skills: Develop a Life Skills Plan**

Independent living skills are addressed through the IEP process. Students and families are interviewed to determine which skills the student needs in order to live independently. Once areas of need are identified, transition staff members incorporate the needed skills into the student’s school curriculum. Increasing numbers of young adults with disabilities are living independently, without agency and/or family support. One of the key factors in preparing students for independent living is to present all options to them. This necessitates visiting different types of housing, talking with people who are living in a variety of settings, and helping students understand what skills, resources (including financial), and supports are needed to be successful in each environment. While receiving transition services, students have an opportunity to visit apartments, group homes, and talk with agency support personnel to help them decide what type of housing they are most interested in obtaining.

Students who need additional assistance with independent living skills have an opportunity to work with the transition staff in a classroom on the college campus. Additionally, curriculum is often introduced in the classroom and practiced on the campus, job site, or in the community. Transition staff members work closely with students, families, and the regional center to prepare students to be successful after graduation. In California, regional centers provide services to individuals with long-term disabilities. In order to be eligible, students must meet regional center criteria for age and disability to receive services such as: additional skill training, employment, transportation support, living, and navigation of the adult service system.

**Student Outcomes**

The goal of transition services from SELPA is to prepare students with disabilities to live,
work, and participate in community activities as independently as possible, based on their interests, abilities, and available supports. To that end, the SELPA staff strives to help students identify their future goals and aspirations, understand what they need in order to work towards meeting their goals, identify the support they need, and develop the skills required to reach their goals. Students are taught to explore various options, and collect information and weigh options before making decisions.

Conclusion

The concept of quality of life is currently a significant issue in education and services for students with disabilities (Halpern, 1993; Wehman, 2001). Its importance stems from a number of phenomena including the quality revolution, with its emphasis on quality of services, quality of management, and continuous quality improvement (Shalock, 1997). The SELPA transition service emphasizes access, inclusion, equity, equality, empowerment, natural supports, demonstrable results, personal development, social integration, affiliation, and acquisition of natural supports. However defined, quality of life generally involves a general feeling of well-being, opportunities to fulfill one’s potential, and feelings of positive social involvement.

The transition services program theory model provides a unique model of collaboration between local school districts and a community college. The model provides linkages to services, instruction, and community referral proven to redress an unmet need for students between the ages of 18 and 22 years. These linkages integrate students with disabilities onto the college campus and provide community college faculty with a better understanding of the supports and services available to students with developmental disabilities. The transition services model provides opportunities previously unavailable to students with disabilities broadening their horizons and enlightening their lives. The model can be easily adapted to other community colleges with the support of the institution.

References


