

Life After High School: Supporting Students' Transitions

by Shannon Simonelli Ph.D.

Purpose

This Brief features current research and resources from the fields of general education, disability studies, and vocational education, which highlight how to best support all students in their successful transition to life after high school. This brief also proposes that the field of disability studies can give clues on how to better support all students, while leading the way in adequately supporting students with disabilities in this life changing transition.

Overview

Transitioning from high school and maturing into an independent and responsible adult are the ultimate outcome measures of education. It is what educators, families and communities need and want for our students. However, this transition, as with many others, is full of possibility, danger, uncertainty and, change – it can be disorienting and hard, that's why many of us "don't like change"! Lewis Carrol, author of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* captures the experience,

"Who are you?" said the Caterpillar...

"I – I hardly know, sir, just at present," Alice replied rather shyly, "at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then."

Our students are experiencing similar changes and challenges – including greater levels of responsibility, more freedom and choice, bigger systems to navigate, new faces and places, potentially new living arrangements, and greater pressures and expectations. There are a variety of possibilities for adolescents making this transition and students with and without disabilities often require similar supports in varying degrees to successfully negotiate these changes. For all of our students' life after high school can include: 2-4 year colleges or universities, trade, technical or vocational schools, gainful employment and/or micro business development.

What the Statistics Say:

- Postsecondary education significantly increases and individual's employability (Horn & Bertold, 1999; National Center for Education Statistics, 1999; Roy, Dimigen, & Taylor, 1998; U.S. Department of Labor as cited in Stodden, Conway, & Chang, 2003).

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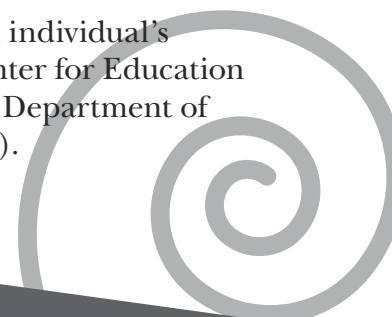
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- Nationally, 73% of high school graduates without disabilities transition to postsecondary education of some type, compared to only 37% of those with disabilities who transition to postsecondary education (as cited in Stodden et al., 2003).
- Many students do not take the college preparatory courses necessary to get them into college; instead they enroll in a mixture of courses that do not meet college requirements. Almost 50% of students who enter college never graduate (Bragg, 1999).
- Many of the incoming students at Honolulu Community College are not ready for college level classes and need remedial coursework during their first year of college. According to college placement test scores in 2002, 53% of students were below the college level in reading skills, 68% were below in writing skills, and 90% were below in math skills (Honolulu Community College, 2002).

What All Students Need:

As educators, we have a significant opportunity to support all students beyond high school by linking school academics with work or service learning and job training experiences (National Center on Secondary Education and Transitions, 2003 Do-IT; NECSET, 2003 Self, Astin et al., 2000). Additionally, transitioning to life after high school requires guidance and support, life skills, a well developed transition plan, and interagency coordination. Adequate preparation for the transition to adult life –whether it be through college, trade school or employment – is a long process that accelerates and intensifies as students get older. Building a transition plan by starting with a vision for the future is a process that should begin for some students in early childhood. Other students can begin exploring their general interests and options for life while in elementary school, and then continue with more specific planning beginning in middle and high school. Students who have IEPs can begin to formally plan for postsecondary transitions at age 14, while it is a requirement by the age of 16.

Research shows that in this transition process all students need:

- **Opportunities for learning about themselves, their interests and options**

Students need opportunities to make choices, to explore possibilities in their daily lives, to plan for their future, to take calculated risks, to practice problem solving and to learn how to recover from bad decisions (NCSET, 2003 self determination). These are aspects of self determination – directing one’s own life, along with knowing what options are currently available, making an educated decision, self advocacy – knowing what one wants and needs and speaking up for it, and evaluating the effects to change or alter the plan. (NCSET, 2003 Self)

- **Support to build a transition plan**

Transition plans should cover the following areas and should be personal to each student.

- 1–Postsecondary Education Options – college, adult education, a technical/trade school, apprenticeship programs or vocational training programs
- 2–Employment Options – job shadowing, internships, sheltered employment, entry level positions, and in-school job skills building: hall monitor, teacher’s assistant, office worker, supported employment or opportunities to shadow people in the community and take interest inventories
- 3–Independent Living Skills – money management, home economics, health and safety

skills, hygiene, and transportation skills (this is important for all students, but may be more in depth and require practice in the community for those with disabilities)

4–Community Participation – voting, participating in in-school elections and activities, volunteering, community and service learning opportunities
(Adapted from CT-ASRC, n.d.).

- **Skill development opportunities that translate to life after high school**

- Self-sufficiency or life skills (doing laundry, shopping, cooking etc.)
- Self-advocacy skills (knowing what you need and speaking up for it)
- Self awareness, communication, and behavior management skills
- Money management skills
- Time management skills
- Technology skills (a central resource and accommodation for students with disabilities)
(Adapted from Stodden et al., 2003)

- **Support to evaluate their efforts and change plans as necessary**

Any successful planning incorporates reevaluating the plan and making adjustments or revising the plan. This also allows for making “mistakes” and teaches how to recover from “bad” decisions. (NCSET, 2003 Self).

At the postsecondary education level, students with disabilities are responsible for declaring their disability, producing documentation that verifies their disabilities (and necessary accommodations) and for working with the appropriate offices to coordinate the supports and services required for their education. These skills require practice prior to students arriving at their new educational settings. This practice is called self-advocacy and is related to self determination or student-centered and student-driven planning.

“Not in his goals but in his transitions man is great.” Ralph Waldo Emerson

Tips for teachers and counselors:

The opportunity for students to learn about personal interests, make plans for life after high school, develop and practice real world skills through applied learning, and learn to evaluate and make changes to plans are elements that can be built into the curriculum and daily learning experiences. You might consider some of the following suggestions and reflect on your current practice along with new possibilities.

1. Encourage every student to consider all forms of postsecondary education and training: universities, community colleges, vocational training programs and apprenticeships are all viable options for students after high school.
2. Connect students with disabilities directly with disability student services in postsecondary settings to discuss support options and set up communication before the transition.
3. Start a portfolio for each student that contains their records, transcripts, awards, training experiences and resume. This can be a useful system for housing all the information a student will need to enroll in any type of postsecondary education or training program.
4. Provide opportunities for students to take interest inventories and aptitude tests to identify career possibilities. Explore the education and experience requirements for careers that interest the student to help them plan ahead for entrance into that field. Connecting future career possibilities with time oriented goals in secondary education or train-

ing programs allows students to plan ahead and take active steps toward achieving their ambitions after high school. (Adapted from NCSET, 2003 DO-IT; NCSET, 2003 Self)

Resources

These resources can aid in your deeper exploration into better supporting students as they transition to life after high school:

- National Center on Secondary Education and Transition (NSCET) has teleconferences and research based publications to support students with disabilities achieve successful futures. www.ncets.org (808) 956-6166
- My Future My Plan – video and curriculum designed to motivate and guide students with disabilities and their families in transition planning for life after high school. <http://ici.umn.edu/products> (612) 624-4512
- Transitions: Strategies for coping with the difficult, painful, and confusing times in your life By Willian Bridges – a best seller taking a very human and heartfelt look at change and transitions.

Summary

The transition to life after high school is a shared responsibility between schools, students and families where communication, collaboration and cooperation build on years of development for student outcomes – independent and successful adults who contribute to their families and communities. Assisting students in this transition requires patience, planning and guidance along with appropriate supports once they begin their life after high school.

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