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## Promoting Transition to Postsecondary Education: Creating Opportunities for Social Change

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## **Cover Page Footnote**

We would like to acknowledge that many partners in our community have contributed to our understanding of the issues of transition to postsecondary education for students with disabilities. We are grateful for their thoughtful feedback about how to make the Gateway to Success program effective, practical, and a community partnership. We are particularly thankful for our student participants who allow us the opportunity to understand their experience and how to better support their transition.

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# PROMOTING TRANSITION TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION: CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

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## ABSTRACT

*Multiple studies document that students with disabilities participate at significantly lower rates than their peers without disabilities in post-secondary education, post-school employment, independent living, and community participation. This article expositis a program model at Ohio University, Gateway to Success, which addresses this inequity through a combined effort of various stakeholders. Particular consideration is given to evidence based predictors related to post-school success, the need for intervention, and the social justice implications of increased participation in post-secondary education for students with disabilities.*

## BACKGROUND

Rates of participation in postsecondary education vary with economic, political, and social changes. However, one constant remains: students with disabilities do not participate in postsecondary education at rates similar to their peers without disabilities. According to the Ohio Longitudinal Study (OLTS), as recently as 2014, 33.7% of students who had IEPs enrolled in postsecondary education within one year of leaving high school (OLTS, 2015). Further, while a full 59% of students with IEP's intended to enroll in 2-year and 4-year colleges after graduation, only around 34% had actually enrolled a year after high school graduation (2015).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004, section 300.1, mandates that all students with disabilities have the ability to receive appropriate public education that includes preparation for further education, employment, and independent living (IDEA, 2004). Despite this legislation, multiple stakeholders find themselves in a scenario in which a student must be prepared to identify and achieve their post-secondary goals, a formalized plan must be put in place to achieve these goals, yet the intended outcomes are often not achieved. This is particularly true with plans for postsecondary education. While high schools have a legal responsibility to provide this transition planning, they alone cannot counter the societal barriers faced by students with disabilities.

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## **Social Justice and Disability**

The concept of social justice as fairness in opportunity, resources, and power across social groups (Constantine, Hage, Kindaichi, & Bryant, 2007; Fouad, Gernstein, & Toporek 2006; Prilleltensky & Nelson 2002) is prevalent throughout social justice scholarship. At a very basic level, social justice requires that access and resources be fairly distributed amongst all individuals regardless of their place within a traditionally oppressed group (Fouad, Gerstein, & Toporek, 2006) and realizes that basic human rights are interdependent. A truly just society requires extinguishing all forms of oppression (Adams, 2000; Wronka, 2008). Furthermore, Israel (2006) realized that the common experience shared by disenfranchised groups is the subordinate/dominate relationship between the oppressed group and others. The very heart of social justice recognizes that the discrimination against oppressed people is inextricably linked with quality-of-life for many individuals (Vera & Speight, 2003).

Beyond documented discrepancies in postsecondary educational enrollment, people with disabilities are more than twice as likely as people without disabilities to report that they have a household income of \$15,000 or less (Kessler Foundation and National Organization on Disability, 2010). These statistics are particularly important as the National Center for Education Statistics states that in 2014, average salaries for young adults with a college degree were 66% higher than those with a high school diploma (National Center for Education Statistics. [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_cba.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cba.asp)). In considering these facts, it becomes clear that people with disabilities as a whole do not experience the same level of access to financial stability, social engagement, employment, and education. It also becomes clear that increasing access to postsecondary education may facilitate greater access in other areas. This creates a compelling case for those who work in postsecondary education to take an active role in addressing the historical exclusion of students with disabilities by partnering with stakeholders.

## **Evidence Based Predictors**

Thirteen evidence based predictors have been identified by researchers as positively impacting postsecondary outcomes for students with disability (Landmark, Ju & Zhang, 2010; Test & Cease-Cook, 2012; OEF 2015). These predictors are: Interagency Collaboration, Career Awareness, Community Experiences, Occupational Courses, Inclusion in General Education, Exit Exam Requirements/H.S. Diploma, Paid Employment/Work Experiences, Parent/Family/Guardian Involvement, Program of Study, Self-Advocacy/Self-Determination, Self-Care/Independent Living Skills, Social Skills, and Student Support (Test & Cease-Cook, 2012; OEF, 2015). While these evidence based predictors are positively correlated with increased post-school success, several predictors closely aligned with increased post-secondary success in particular are the focus of the Gateway to Success program at Ohio University.

**Interagency collaborations.** In essence, interagency collaboration may best be viewed as a partnership in which agencies with different expertise and mandates work to collaboratively meet

the overall needs of a student. Appropriate interagency collaborations ensure that resources are well utilized, services are not duplicated, and, that a student's various needs have a greater likelihood of being met by those most qualified to provide a given service.

**Career awareness.** Career awareness might best be conceived as a dynamic and ongoing process. Interest exploration is essential because it helps to identify and build upon what excites and energizes a person. Rather than limiting choice to a single potential career, or even career field, this approach allows for the broadest possible exploration while simultaneously allowing a student to self-limit options based upon lack of interest. This continuing exploration can prevent the development of a potentially misguided belief on the part of the student that they are unsuited or incapable of achievement in a given area.

**Community experiences.** Put simply, community experiences are intentional activities, formally arranged and occurring outside of the school setting that create and extend opportunities for students to employ academic, social, and general work skills (OEF, 2015). Specific goals are created with student, parent/guardian, and pertinent agency input by those responsible for transition planning, and formalized through inclusion in the Individualized Education Plan (I.E.P.).

**Parent/family/guardian involvement.** Parents/Family/Guardians play an integral role in the transition planning process, and, should be included in all aspects of transition planning (ODE, 2015). It is possible that at times, student identified goals, transition team recommendations, and parent/family/guardian requests will not align. This creates an opportunity to discuss realistic, near term goals that build toward more long-term, postsecondary success. The multitude of voices involved in transition planning can be viewed and utilized as an asset, rather than a detriment.

**Self-advocacy/self-determination.** Self-determination is central to both transition planning and post-secondary success. However, rather than a stand-alone intervention or skill, self-determination and the ability to self-advocate are better conceived as part of a life-long developmental process that can be informed and fostered through the assessment, intervention, and transition process. Cheney (2012) writes that since transition plans should necessarily be unique to the individual, allowing for and encouraging self-determination in developing transition plans is a primary way of ensuring this individual focus. In order for students of any level to be effective self-advocates, they must understand their disability in order to more effectively communicate their needs. This form of self-advocacy is transferable and necessary regardless of the post-secondary goal.

**Student support.** Student supports include communication and collaboration with all involved parties, encompass both formal and informal networks, and are essential to successful outcomes (OEF, 2015). Through collaborative effort, transition students should be supported by an identified network of supports with pre-determined areas of strength, expertise, and services provided, thus increasing effectiveness and decreasing duplication of services.

## **Installation of Hope**

Numerous factors, both internal and external, effect transition outcomes for students with disability. In addition to assisting a student to meet reasonable self-identified goals, partnering agencies have a unique ability to instill an additional, somewhat less easily defined, but no less essential element into the lives of students with disabilities: hope. Hope has been defined as the ability to envision one's goals, and the belief that one can achieve those same goals (Snyder, 1995). Therefore, the support provided to students who may not be able to articulate or envision future goals is far more than a required service. Without the ability to determine a future in which they can realistically view themselves, the likelihood that transition students with disabilities will achieve anywhere near their peers without disability becomes quite small.

This collaborative effort from all student support providers can be done in such a way that students come to believe in the process, and in which they also come to believe in their own ability to reach their goals. Hope is where self-determination meets self-efficacy. The goal is not merely to assist a student in identifying and pursuing appropriate goals, but also to support them in a way that allows them to believe that they can achieve those goals. In this way, all of the efforts by collaborating agencies build not only appropriate, well designed transition programs, but also confident, self-directed young people.

## **GATEWAY TO SUCCESS**

There is no "one size fits all" solution to the gap in postsecondary enrollment for students with disabilities. At Ohio University we have approached our support of high school students with disabilities as a collaborative effort with high school personnel in southeast Ohio. The Gateway to Success (GTS) program was developed with significant input from high school counselors, teachers, disability services staff, vocational rehabilitation counselors, and independent living specialists in order to bridge the gaps between systems and create the opportunity for sustained success and positive student outcomes.

Utilizing the evidence based predictors as a framework for organizing the input from multiple stakeholders, GTS was developed. The program specifically incorporates interagency collaboration through the purposeful collection of feedback for program design as well as the multiple agencies or offices on campus who provide programming during GTS. This is also the first step in assisting a participant in envisioning and developing a team that will support the unique goal of transitioning to postsecondary education. GTS is also a form of community experience which allows for students to begin to understand the skills required to be successful and to practice their skills during the course of the program. Perhaps the most significant connections to evidence-based predictors include developing career awareness, as described below, and allowing students to begin enacting self-determination regarding their future plans. An overarching goal of the program is to instill in participants a sense that postsecondary education is an option that is obtainable.

GTS is a one-day, on-campus experience created to address the unique transition needs of students with disabilities in their junior year of high school. The program begins with significant attention to career exploration in which participants work with program volunteers to complete a career assessment and receive basic career counseling. The self-assessment assists participants in thinking about careers as a spectrum of opportunities that may match their interests and may require differing amounts of education and training. Participants also begin to explore the earning potential, employment outlook and options for postsecondary education. After a break for lunch in the dining hall, participants receive basic information in applying for financial aid, receiving services from vocational rehabilitation, an introduction to assistive technology, and information related to obtaining accommodations and support in postsecondary education.

Ohio University is located in Athens County, in Appalachian Ohio, which requires consideration of unique cultural implications of the region for successful and effective program development. Working in Appalachia can be facilitated through an understanding of culture that values the importance of personal connections, the commonality of present-time orientation, and an emphasis on ordinary language (Salyers & Ritchie, 2006; Presley, 2013). Further, in Appalachia, a personal relationship often precedes a trust relationship (2013). Due to these unique expressions of culture, it is possible that individuals working with students with disabilities, and their families, have an increased opportunity to improve outcomes by working directly with students to build trust even before they enroll at the University. Likewise, this consistent interaction over time creates an opportunity for advocacy, and allows for the possibility that secondary and post-secondary options not currently considered by a student and their family may be considered as viable options. A trusted advocate may be more likely to be heard and considered than an individual viewed as a stranger, an outsider, or a professional who is merely doing a job, rather than someone sincerely invested in the well-being of the student.

## CONCLUSION

A social justice view of disability must move from a concept embraced by professionals in higher education to a call to action. Active participation in bringing together stakeholders to create solutions to improve access to higher education is key to facilitating full inclusion of people with disabilities in all aspects. While the historical exclusion of people with disabilities from full participation in our society is not the singular responsibility of disability services professionals, by serving as a mechanism to utilize and connect all available resources and potential service providers, disability services professionals can lead this change. Through a concerted, long-term commitment grounded in research and evidence-based predictors, relatively simple transition programs can maximize the possibility of students with disabilities clearly identifying post-secondary goals and charting the most direct path to achieving these goals.

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