

## Activities of Students with Significant Disabilities Receiving Services in Postsecondary Settings

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*Abstract: Teachers in 11 public school systems serving students with significant disabilities ages 18-21 in 13 postsecondary settings were surveyed to collect information on students' access to college courses, employment training, activities in the community and on college campuses, and interagency linkages with adult services. In addition, teachers provided input on inclusion and follow-up activities. Results indicated that while students with significant disabilities were successfully engaged in employment training, access to college courses and extracurricular activities was limited. Interagency linkages between school personnel and adult service providers were evident in all sites and were a strength of this service delivery. Few teachers conducted follow-up studies to document outcomes for students with disabilities who had exited the school system. Implications for practice and research are discussed.*

Over the past two decades increasing numbers of students with disabilities have been attending postsecondary education (Mull, Sitlington, & Alper, 2001). Reported rates of enrollment vary from 6% (National Center for Educational Statistics, NCES, 1999) to 9% (Heath Resource Center, 1999) to 17% (National Council on Disability and Social Security Administration, 2000). The majority of the students accessing postsecondary experiences have learning disabilities, orthopedic disabilities, or sensory impairments (NCES). This same level of attendance has not been seen for students with more significant cognitive disabilities.

There has been, however, an increasing interest in postsecondary education for students with more significant disabilities between the ages of 18-21 among disability organizations (Smith & Puccini, 1995), researchers (Falvey, Gage, & Eshilian, 1995; Fisher & Sax, 1999; Moon & Inge, 2000), and school systems (Gri-

gal, Neubert, & Moon, 2001, 2002; Hall, Kleinert, & Kearns, 2000). The National Council on Disability and Social Security Administration (2000) recently recommended the advent of programs on college campuses as one strategy that might lead to more successful postschool outcomes for individuals with disabilities age 18-21. Families are also requesting the expansion of such services and programs in postsecondary settings. In a recent survey of 234 parents of secondary students with high and low incidence disabilities, college was the most desired postschool outcome, regardless of the student's disability (Grigal & Neubert, in press).

Increasingly, students ages 18-21 with significant disabilities are being afforded the opportunity to participate in postsecondary experiences at two and four year colleges. Many of these opportunities are provided by local school systems via programs created in response to parents' and students' desires to attend class in more age-appropriate settings (Grigal et al., 2001; Hall et al., 2000). In some cases these opportunities are provided on a more individual basis by supporting students one at a time in one or more college classes (Doyle, 2003; Hart, Zafft, & Zimbrich, 2001; Weir, 2001).

The current body of literature addressing students with significant disabilities in postsec-

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ondary education consists of program or model descriptions (Hall et al., 2000; Hart et al., 2001; Neubert, Moon, & Grigal, 2002), position papers (Agran, Snow, & Swaner, 1999; Smith & Puccini, 1995), and case studies (Page & Chadsey-Rush, 1995; Tashie, Malloy, & Lichtenstein, 1998; Zafft, 2002). However, with the exception of Zafft, Hart, and Zimbrich (2002), there is little data available, qualitative or otherwise, regarding student activities and outcomes. Through a matched cohort study of 20 students with significant disabilities who participated in postsecondary education and 20 students who remained in high school, Zafft et al. found that participation in postsecondary education correlated positively with two employment variables: competitiveness and independence.

While this study looked at small numbers of students receiving supports through a federally funded model demonstration grant, it provides us with valuable preliminary information about the potential benefits of students receiving services in postsecondary settings. In addition to employment, other crucial elements that lead to successful transition outcomes must also be addressed such as student interactions with peers and instructors without disabilities, participation in social and recreational activities, and connections with adult agencies and services. If the impetus for providing access to postsecondary experiences is to ultimately improve students' transition from school to adult life, documenting student activities and outcomes must be part of the research agenda regarding this service delivery. As the provision of services to students with significant disabilities in postsecondary settings continues to proliferate, student experiences and participation in these settings, as well as in employment, and various types of community involvement, must also be documented. Only then may conclusions be drawn about the impact postsecondary experiences have on the outcomes for students with disabilities.

In 2001, Grigal et al. provided an overview of programs in postsecondary sites in Maryland that served students with significant disabilities ages 18-21. While this overview provided descriptive information on the settings, staffing, funding patterns, and general information on the curricular focus of student ac-

tivities, it did not provide specific data about the activities in which students participated. To address this, the authors created a follow-up survey in which teachers in postsecondary sites in Maryland were asked to provide information regarding their students' level of inclusive activities on college campuses and in the community. This descriptive data provides a preliminary look at how students spend their time in programs in postsecondary settings, which can serve as an initial structure for teachers to collect data on students' activities and outcomes. These initial steps might provide school system personnel, adult service providers, and students and families with a possible framework, as they think about monitoring, evaluation, and follow-up activities in postsecondary settings.

## **Method**

### *Instrument*

A survey instrument was developed in collaboration with a special educator who served students with significant disabilities in a postsecondary setting in fall 2001. The survey was based on needs identified in a review of literature (Neubert, Moon, Redd, & Grigal, 2001) and from interviews with teachers to collect information on practices and challenges in postsecondary sites in Maryland (Grigal et al., 2001). Specifically, teachers were asked to describe their inclusion and integration efforts at the postsecondary site, in the community, their interagency efforts, and the types of follow-up activities through open-ended questions. They were also asked to provide the following information for students served during 2001-02 school year: (a) college courses attended (including the name of the course and if taken for credit); (b) college and community activities; and (c) employment training sites (including wages, benefits, and hours worked per week). For the purposes of this survey, employment training was defined as paid employment or unpaid vocational training in the community or on a college campus. For students exiting the school system in spring 2002, teachers were asked to identify the number of students linked to adult agencies, receiving Supplemental Security Insur-

ance (SSI) benefits, and working during the summer.

### *Participants*

In April 2002, surveys were mailed to the teachers in 17 postsecondary settings in Maryland, encompassing all of the local school systems that were serving students age 18-21 at the time. These teachers had direct responsibility for providing services to students and had been identified through previous work with a federally funded outreach grant, On-Campus Outreach. All teachers were certified secondary special educators and all students were eligible to receive special education services through age 21. While student demographic data was not collected on this survey, it was we acknowledged through previous interviews that these students' IEP objectives were generally related to vocational training, functional academics, and community-based instruction (Grigal et al., 2001). All students received a certificate upon completion of their public school years rather than a high school diploma.

### *Data Collection and Analyses*

Teachers were asked to return the completed surveys by the end of June 2002 for a small honorarium. Email reminders or phone calls were used to contact non-respondents in June to determine if they had questions regarding the survey, or if additional copies of the survey were needed. In addition, the response deadline was extended through the summer. Thirteen (72%) program teachers completed the surveys by August 2002. Nine (69%) of these teachers were at sites on community college campuses, two were located at four-year university sites, and two teachers operated within the community (one at a community mall and one at an adult education building with the local school system). The 13 sites served 163 students during the 2001-02 school year with an average of eight students per setting (range 5 to 24 students). Fifty-eight of these students (35%) were reported to be exiting the school system in Spring 2002. Of the four teachers who did not return the surveys, two were located on university campuses, one at a com-

munity college campus, and one in a community rehabilitation facility.

Descriptive data on number of students participating in community and college activities, college courses, and employment training were compiled, and links to adult services were entered into an Excel spreadsheet for data analyses. Open-ended questions from the survey were grouped according to themes of inclusion, transition planning, interagency efforts, and follow-up efforts.

### **Results**

One of the goals of this survey was to describe activities in which students with significant disabilities engaged while receiving services in a postsecondary setting during their final public school years. Specific information on number of students in college activities after school hours, college courses, and employment training opportunities during the 2001-2002 school year follows, along with exit data for 58 students who left the school system in 2002. Transition planning, interagency efforts, and follow-up activities are also summarized.

#### *College and Community Activities*

Teachers were first asked a series of open-ended questions regarding their inclusion and integration efforts. Ten (77 %) of the 13 teachers reported that inclusion was a main priority at the postsecondary site when asked "Do you see inclusion as a main priority of your program?" Eleven (85%) teachers indicated that they knew of specific activities in the community or on campus that had the potential to increase students' involvement in inclusive activities; all but one teacher said this was a priority for the future.

Teachers were asked to list the students that attended college events after school hours. Two teachers did not report this data ( $n = 26$  students). For the 137 students for which data was provided, 37% ( $n = 51$ ) did not attend college events after hours while 64% ( $n = 86$ ) did. These college events included dances, sporting events, fashion shows, computer labs, plays, and Best Buddy activities. When asked if students participated in community activities with friends and families, all teachers responded yes. Activities included religious ser-

vices, shopping, movies, athletic games, volunteer work, park and recreation activities, travel, bingo, amusement parks, and Special Olympics. However, when asked, "Do you assist students in participating in community activities with friends and family?" only three (23%) teachers responded that this was a common practice.

Finally, 10 (77%) teachers reported that students had experienced increased opportunities for inclusive experiences as a result of participating in the program at the postsecondary site. Three teachers located on community college campuses reported a decrease in inclusive activities for the following reasons: it was difficult for students to meet new people on campus, students did not spend enough time on campus due to working in the community, there was limited interest in the Best Buddies program on the college campus, and transportation was an issue (e.g., students could not return to campus after normal school hours or after working in the community).

*College courses.* The majority of the teachers ( $n = 11$ ) were serving students at community college or university campuses. One teacher who served students in a community setting also had access to the local community college for courses and activities. Sixty-three (36%) of the 163 students were reported to have enrolled in some type of course on a

college campus. Two of the 13 respondents indicated that none of their students were enrolled in college courses and three others reported having one to two students enrolled in courses. Only four (2%) of these students were reported to have taken a college course for credit (two in strength-training and two in keyboarding). Of the 59 students enrolled in non-credit or audited courses, the majority of courses were in the health and fitness area including adventure sports, karate, weight training, swimming, water aerobics, aqua fitness, aerobics, wellness, health education, dance, basketball, yoga and self-defense. Art related courses included art 3-D design, crafts, ceramics, drawing, and jewelry. Other courses included introduction to computers, computer literacy, reading, and adult or remedial basic math.

*Employment training.* One hundred and forty-two (87%) of the 163 students were reported to be employed or in vocational training positions (see Table 1). The majority of these students (86%) were in sites in the community while only 19 (14%) students were at college sites. Of the students in employment training, 103 (73%) were in paid positions with an average wage of \$5.91 per hour and an average of 15 hours per week (range 1.5 hours to over forty hours). However, data on wages was incomplete for many of the students. There were several students that earned un-

**TABLE 1**  
**Student Employment Training During 2001–2002**

<i>Program</i>	<i>Number of Students</i>	<i>Employed Students</i>	<i>Community Employment</i>	<i>Campus Employment</i>	<i>Paid Employment</i>	<i>Unpaid Training</i>	<i>Receiving Benefits</i>
1	5	5	3	2	3	2	0
2	8	8	2	6	2	6	0
3	10	4	4	0	3	1	2
4	8	6	6	0	5	1	0
5	14	13	13	0	13	0	0
6	18	16	16	0	16	0	0
7	24	24	24	0	7	17	0
8	15	6	5	0	5	0	1
9	13	13	13	0	13	0	0
10	16	16	14	2	11	5	0
11	16	15	15	0	11	4	2
12	8	8	5	3	6	2	5
13	8	8	2	6	8	0	0
Total	163	142	122	19	103	38	10

der minimum wage and it appeared that some of the jobs were created through a community rehabilitation program. It was also noted that some students participated in both paid and unpaid jobs during the year. It was not clear from the data how long students participated in these opportunities or how many participated in both activities at the same time.

Five of the programs did not use unpaid vocational training sites. Eight of the 13 program teachers reported that none of the students received benefits. Only 10 students were identified as receiving benefits (e.g., sick leave, vacation pay) and eight students received lunch as a benefit of working in a college cafeteria. There was no record of health benefits listed for any student.

#### *Transition Practices, Interagency Collaboration, and Exit Data*

Eleven (85%) of the 13 teachers indicated that they had a formal or written transition process in place to connect students and their families with adult service providers before students exited the postsecondary site. All teachers had met with representatives from the Developmental Disabilities Administration (the state's long term funding agency) and 12 had met with representatives from vocational rehabilitation to discuss eligibility and availability of support services. Ten (77%) of the 13 teachers indicated they had visited adult service or community rehabilitation programs to increase their understanding of services or collaborate with these service providers. Interestingly, 11 (85%) of the teachers reported that personnel from these adult agencies were involved in providing some type of service to students *prior* to their leaving the school system. These services included vocational assessment services, lessons on independent living and job seeking skills, mobility training, tours of adult agencies, conferences or IEP meetings with students and their families, job coaching, or job placement services (during the school year and in the summer). Teachers were asked if they addressed residential services as part of transition planning and only five (38%) responded that this was a common practice.

Fifty-eight (35%) of the 163 students exited the school system as of June 2002. All of these

students were linked to an adult service provider (e.g., vocational rehabilitation, community rehabilitation programs, and developmental disabilities agencies) and 46 (79%) had qualified for SSI benefits. In terms of employment, 38 (65%) of these individuals were exiting the school system with a paid job and all but one student was expected to continue working in these jobs. Forty-nine of these students (84%) had summer employment for 2002.

#### *Follow-up Activities*

Eleven (85%) of the teachers indicated they did not collect formal follow-up data on their students after they had exited the school system. However, four teachers indicated they collected informal follow-up data through phone calls and emails with students or through contacts with rehabilitation counselors. Two teachers indicated that a program coordinator from the school system was in the process of developing follow-up procedures. Two teachers reported that their local school system had a formal follow-up system; one system followed up all students who exited the school system while the other system had a follow-up process in place to document outcomes of special education students. Five teachers indicated they did not know if their local school system conducted follow-up of students exiting the system.

#### **Discussion**

Results of this survey provide descriptive data on activities and exit data for a select group of students age 18-21 who received public school services in a postsecondary site. Some obvious limitations exist for those interpreting this self-reported data. All data were provided by a small number of public school teachers, from the same state, who provided services to multiple students in one postsecondary location. It is not necessarily representative of or generalizable to students receiving services in postsecondary settings in other states or through other models of service delivery (such as individual supports). However, this preliminary data does provide insight into practices that are currently being implemented by some local school systems. It also

helps to clarify issues that continue to challenge those who are trying to increase students' access to postsecondary experiences. Finally, the data raises unique questions that need to be asked in order to continue to study and evaluate activities and outcomes that transition services facilitate in the postsecondary setting.

#### *Participation in College and Community Activities*

Results regarding students' inclusion in college and community activities were somewhat conflicting. While the majority of teachers (10 of 13) reported that inclusion in college, community social, and recreational activities was a main service delivery goal, only three teachers assisted students and families in finding such activities. However, all teachers reported that students engaged in a variety of community events with family and friends. It is not clear if this is due to the fact that families and students with disabilities are accessing community activities on their own and are satisfied with these activities, or if, as has often been the case, is because of the perception that facilitating participation in recreational activities is not seen as part of the teacher's role.

Additionally, participation in college and community activities does not necessarily imply the development of social connections or friendships. As noted by Doyle (2003, p. 311), "the social life is for many students at the very core of college/university life." It is unclear from data collected if students who did engage in college and community activities actually were able to make connections as well as establish and sustain friendships with individuals without disabilities.

Teachers did report some logistical problems in accessing activities on campus due to transportation issues, conflicting student employment hours, and lack of peer support structures such as Best Buddies. These challenges should be considered by those who are planning to serve students in postsecondary sites, as there may be environments in the community other than college campuses that offer greater opportunities for social and recreational activities. It may also be that school systems need to examine and restructure teacher's positions to create more flexible options for hours worked outside of a typical

school day or calendar year (Certo, Pumpian, Fisher, Storey, & Smalley, 1997).

#### *Inclusion in College Courses*

As students with disabilities are increasingly included in general education courses in high school, it is logical that students and families will desire to have access to postsecondary education opportunities (Doyle, 2003; Grigal & Neubert, in press). However, only four students were taking classes for credit and 59 students were taking noncredit or audited college courses. Therefore, 100 students were not participating in any college courses. This finding is disappointing as attending college with peers of the same age is one of the primary rationales for creating alternative postsecondary service. This finding also demonstrates that in some ways, little has changed over the past 30 years, as individuals with developmental disabilities have historically participated in segregated programs and enrolled in non-credit courses on college campuses (Neubert et al., 2001).

Certainly barriers such as entrance exams, attitudes of professors, lack of appropriate supports or accommodations, and prohibitive financial aid eligibility requirements may play a role in how students with disabilities access classes at college (Grigal et al., 2001; Stodden, 2001). However, it is not clear whether these are the kinds of issues that prevented students in this study from attending courses, or if the low rate of access was rooted in postsecondary considerations not being made a priority by the teaching staff. It is also possible that attending a college class was not a goal of the students being served. If this is the case, then the logical question is: Why are these students being served on a college campus? As school systems consider the option of providing services to students with significant disabilities outside of the high school, they must clearly identify the priorities for instruction and inclusion and then determine if these priorities would best be met on a college campus. Equally important is for school and community personnel to engage in person-centered planning processes (Holburn & Vietz, 2002; Mount, 2000; Sax & Thoma, 2002) with students and their families to identify their goals

and dreams for college and community participation.

These findings also lend credence to using an individualized support model of service delivery for students with significant disabilities (Doyle, 2003; Hart et al., 2002; Weir, 2001). Using this model, students, school system personnel, and adult service providers identify a student's goals and desires, and then identify the environments and supports that are necessary to meet those goals. It may be that for some students, staying on the high school campus and increasing after school and weekend access to postsecondary environments would meet their needs. Others may be better served by accessing a business setting for employment opportunities. To date there is no research indicating which of these alternatives may be most effective in promoting optimal outcomes for students with significant disabilities.

#### *Employment Training*

Employment training appears to be a strength of this type of service delivery. Almost all students (87%) were involved in employment training in the community or on a college campus. Although some of the data were incomplete for specific students, the range of hours worked per week (1.5 to over forty hours) shows wide variation in how students spent their time. These findings support those of Zafft et al. (2002) who also found that students with significant disabilities who received services in postsecondary settings had improved employment outcomes.

An unexpected finding was that a number of students who were reported to be involved in paid employment and unpaid training situations (for example, working at a grocery store in the community and training at the campus dining hall) at the same time. This finding merits further investigation to determine if students were using unpaid sites to engage in exploration activities or if participation was part of the program structure. The lack of benefits recorded for students was disappointing, as these individuals will not be able to live independently on minimum wages without employee benefits. Another unexpected finding was that only 5 of the 13 programs used college campus sites for training

or employment opportunities. This may be an indication that it is difficult to develop training opportunities in college settings. Or this finding could indicate that employment options were not limited to the college campus and that students' vocational interests might be better met in the community.

Finally, it was unclear how many students were working in enclave or supported employment options associated with a community rehabilitation program. Promoting competitive employment for students in their final years of school should be the ultimate goal for school and adult service personnel involved in this type of collaborative effort.

#### *Transition Practices and Interagency Collaboration*

An encouraging finding was that formal transition planning and linkages with adult service agencies were evident at all sites. That 11 of the 13 teachers had a formal, written transition process and all involved adult agency personnel with students prior to graduation supports the positive efforts in this area. In addition, the majority of students exiting the school system were linked to adult services, SSI benefits, and summer employment. One advantage of being off the secondary school campus might be that it allows teachers to develop stronger links with community personnel. This affords students and their families the opportunity to become better prepared for transition from school to adulthood. In some programs, staff from community rehabilitation programs provided job coaching services or classroom instruction to students with significant disabilities. These partnerships have been described as a valuable part of the transition process for young people with disabilities (deFur & Taymans, 1995) and may allow for an easier transition to the realm of community rehabilitation programs once the student leaves the public school system (Hasazi, Furney, & DeStefano, 1999; Johnson, Emanuel, & Williams, 2000; Williams & O'Leary, 2001).

An area of concern in transition practices was the exclusion of residential planning reported by most teachers. This could be due to the reality of limited resources and supports for independent living opportunities with

more significant support needs (Klein & Nelson, 2000). As we continue to document the services that can be provided in postsecondary settings, it will be important to examine the potential this learning environment has for enhancing independent living skills since this is an area of transition that is often overlooked (Sitlington, Clark, & Kolstoe, 2000). One example of how this could be done has been seen in Pennsylvania, where the State College Areas School District successfully partnered with Penn State College to create an apartment for students with disabilities to live in on campus (Penn State Intercom, 2002). This partnership demonstrates that staff in postsecondary settings may be in a unique position to create independent living options by partnering with the college and other community agencies.

#### *Follow-up*

Clearly, systematic follow-up to document student outcomes is an area of need as 11 of the 13 program teachers reported they did not engage in these efforts. It was encouraging that two program teachers reported these efforts were in the process of being developed by their program coordinators. If program teachers, administrators, families, and students want to demonstrate that providing services and/or programs in postsecondary settings increases access to inclusive and age-appropriate activities, this information needs to be documented.

Collecting data on activities and outcomes is often time-consuming and a task that teachers may have received little pre-service or in-service training to undertake. Since evaluation, follow-up, and accountability must be addressed in providing transition services (Johnson, Stodden, Emanuel, Luecking, & Mack, 2002), school systems should consider how to support teachers in collecting this information. One unintended benefit of this survey was it provided a structure for teachers to record and analyze descriptive information about their students' activities. Portions of the survey were modified by the authors and disseminated to teachers in Spring 2003 to provide them with a tool to document student involvement in college courses, community and campus activities, and employment train-

ing. As in other areas of special education, there is a critical need to rethink how educators are being prepared to become competent in collecting such monitoring data, then using it to expand or redefine the services and supports they provide to students.

#### *Implications for Research and Practice*

Like most initial investigations, findings of this study provide more questions than answers. The trend to provide students with significant disabilities access to postsecondary environments obviously has great potential to open the door to higher education and raise the often low expectations that are placed on students with more significant disabilities. This method of service delivery also has the potential to raise the bar for the professionals serving these students, eliminating the real or perceived inflexibility in the structure that persists in secondary special education. Yet, this new flexibility is also a challenge. Teachers may have difficulty seeing the wide array of possibilities for students in postsecondary education and therefore focus on those activities with which they are most comfortable, such as employment. To understand students' lack of participation in college courses and campus activities, researchers must examine the factors that might influence enrollment, including student goals, family values, teacher priorities, and, of course, the attitudes and level of acceptance of college personnel.

In addition, it is necessary to get a better picture of the planning that is involved in creating students' schedules. Are students limited in their options due simply to staffing and transportation availability? Is this the reason for a lack of emphasis on social and recreational activities? If so, teachers will need to be trained to access the natural supports of family, friends, and fellow students that allow individuals with significant disabilities the full range of possible social outlets available in the postsecondary world. While formal supports from the school system may be necessary (or desired by parents) initially, as students get closer to leaving the public school system their schedules and supports should resemble what they will experience in the adult world. This fading of school system supports and increased reliance on the structures, systems,

and people that will remain with the student after high school is the heart of transition planning.

The increased level of interagency collaboration and the connections that exiting students had in place (SSL, summer employment, adult service providers, etc.) are positive signs that school system personnel have begun to make this transition planning a reality. It is not clear, however, the extent to which students' friends and families are involved. These individuals can be a source of great support, as they are familiar with the particular student's needs and desires and the most effective and appropriate ways of helping them to access new experiences. Strong partnerships must be made with families to ensure that students continue to access those activities and experiences that are not traditionally supported by the adult service systems. Students who have been able to attend a college class with support from the local school system at age 18 should still be able to attend a college class or event when they are 25 years old. Engaging natural supports such as family and friends in this process from the beginning will open the possibility of students seeing themselves as life-long learners. It is also crucial to address residential needs as part of the formal transition process for these older students and their families. Living in the community will require these individuals and their families to identify formal and natural supports that will change periodically.

Finally, the need exists to know more about how to monitor and evaluate the practices that are occurring in postsecondary settings for students with disabilities. All of the students represented in this study were being served by local school systems, which, for the most part, seemed to have few means of documenting student activities and outcomes. Accountability has long been an issue in special education and teachers will come under increasing pressure to meet the content standards, assessments, and outcomes required in state assessment systems and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, P.L. 107-110. Teacher educators will need to address these issues in pre-service training and assist school personnel in providing relevant in-service training on these topics.

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