



# College and Career Ready: Transitioning from High School to College for Students with Disabilities



School of EDUCATION

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## Concordia University Abstract

### Concordia University, Mequon, WI

- \* Private, not-for-profit university founded in 1881.
- \* A Lutheran university with more than 8,000 graduate and undergraduate students. About 2,500 are traditional undergraduates on-campus.
- \* In collaboration with a non-profit organization, CU hosts a two-year post-secondary certificate program.
- \* Located in Mequon, WI, a Milwaukee suburb on Lake Michigan. www.cuw.edu



## The Value of Transition from High School to College

What is transition? The process of moving from one status to another. Transition = Change Preparation for independence and adult living. Questions for students: "What am I going to do after high school?" "What am I going to do after college?" Transition planning is a subset of planning for adult life.

**Transition Essentials:** According to the National Center on Learning Disabilities (NCLD) (2008) transitioning students need to:

- 1) know about their disability and how it affects them;
- 2) know the accommodations they use and why;
- 3) learn and practice self-determination and self-advocacy skills beginning in elementary school;
- 4) attend and actively participate in IEP and transition meetings from a young age.

The U.S. Department of Education recommends school personnel be familiar with the transition needs of students and help them prepare for the transition to college and adult life. The rate of college matriculation for students with significant disabilities is low as reported by the U.S. Departments of Education and Labor. College transition can help these students graduate.



**The transition bridge** is a visual that helps students see that they are on a bridge moving from high school to college to adult life. Transitions occur throughout life. Once out of high school students become more aware of the need

to learn and practice skills they need for adult life. One of the best ways to learn and practice these skills is from their peers in college.

### Students need time in college to learn how to:

- \* make good decisions on their own;
- \* practice time management;
- \* follow a schedule independently;
- \* ease into academic classes;
- \* explore and experience a career path;
- \* be a college student;
- \* maneuver academic, social, and other activities to live and work on their own.

**The importance of time to learn is substantial.** Students with significant disabilities need time and support to successfully negotiate transition to adult life with college being a stepping stone to independence. Students often do not have the skills to successfully navigate college because of their unique needs and the complex college environment. The independence and personal responsibility that colleges expect of students is often something that students with disabilities have never experienced because of the comprehensive system of special education supports and services provided under IDEA in K-age 21 education. College is often the first time these students are expected to make decisions on their own, keep up with high academic expectations in classes, navigate the complex social/emotional aspects of college and adult life, and glimpse the reality of work in their internships. Post-secondary college programs can provide support and time students need to successfully transition from high school to college student.

## Theoretical Framework

**College and Career Ready:** According to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2016) "...college and career ready students with disabilities should have both the academic and functional proficiencies needed to demonstrate independence, self-determination, critical thinking, collaboration, leadership, creativity, responsibility, and persistence." Transition planning should begin in elementary school to prepare for adult life.

### College and Career Ready IEPs to Prepare Students for Transition to Post-High School:

#### Five Beliefs:

- 1) High Expectations
- 2) Culturally Responsive Practices
- 3) Student Relationships
- 4) Family and Community Engagement
- 5) Collective Responsibility

#### IEP Five Step Process with transition in mind:

- 1) Understand Achievement
- 2) Identify Effect of Disability
- 3) Develop Goals
- 4) Align Services
- 5) Analyze Progress (WI DPI, 2016)

**HEOA:** In 2008 amendments to the *Higher Education Opportunity Act* (HEOA) further provided access to higher education for students with Intellectual Disabilities (ID). This enabled students to attend college and experience a right of passage like their peers and siblings. Some universities serve students with any type of disability, not just ID.

An article published by the Institute for Community Inclusion states "The growth that students experience in college can be measured in a number of areas, including academic and personal skill-building, employment, independence, self-advocacy, and self-confidence...Being part of campus life, taking classes (whether auditing or for credit), and learning to navigate a world of high expectations develops the skills needed for successful adult life" (Hart et al., 2006).

**Research Reports** "A matched-cohort follow-up study of 40 students with intellectual disabilities looked at 20 students who had some type of college experience and 20 with no college experience. Findings revealed that students with intellectual disabilities who had some type of college experience were much more likely to obtain competitive employment, required fewer supports, and earned higher wages. Additionally, students had increased self-esteem and expanded social networks that included students without disabilities" (Hart et al., 2006, p.3). Another study showed positive employment outcomes for students with disabilities who attend a postsecondary college program when compared to students who do not attend such a program (Moore & Schelling, 2015).

"An important question is not just "How are we helping students develop" but more specifically "how are we helping students develop *in the context* of the social systems" to which they *do* belong and *will* belong?" (Moore & Schelling, 2015, p.5). This raises the issue of learning in natural environments such as a university campus to assimilate students with significant disabilities into the whole campus community because they will be living in the dorm with others with and without disabilities. These are the adults from whom students with disabilities learn and who will be their neighbors and friends after college.



**Self-Determination Learning Model of Instruction:** Can be used to help students think about their college experience (Wehmeyer, 1997).

### Phase 1 – What Is My Goal?

- a. What do I want to learn?
- b. What do I know about it now?
- c. What must change for me to learn what I don't know?
- d. What can I do to make this happen?

### Phase 2 – What Is My Plan?

- a. What five things can I do this week to work toward my goal?
- b. What could keep me from taking action?
- c. What can I do to remove these barriers?
- d. When will I take action?

### Phase 3 – What Have I Learned?

- a. What actions have I taken?
- b. What barriers have been removed?
- c. What has changed about what I didn't know?
- d. What has changed about what I didn't know?
- e. Do I know what I want to know?

### Phase 1 – Repeat-New Goal

**Unexpected Surprises:** students who were unprepared from high school and transition programs; students with poor basic skills in reading, math, writing, money, and technology; students unaware of their disability and accommodations; students unable to use accommodations because they had an aide who did things for them in K-12 school.

### Needs in Higher Education:

- Transition skills need to be taught early to have years to practice and increase skills;
- Students need the supports provided by the college program to be successful;
- Students need time to mature, grow, and learn how to be a college student;
- Living in the dorm is one of the most important aspects of college for students with significant disabilities due to the skills acquired by observing peers and used to gain independence and successfully live in the community;
- Students with significant disabilities have enriched the entire campus and provide a means for natural inclusion in a normalized environment for everyone on campus often for the first time in their lives.

### Gains in learning from CU student survey data shows:

- 1) Close relationships develop among students that would not have occurred without the joint interaction on campus.
- 2) CU students state that they learn far more from students with disabilities than what they teach to the students.
- 3) Collaboration among students is vital as it enhances community and provides an opportunity to educate everyone beyond academics.



### Transition Tips for Parents and Educators:

- \*Begin early planning for college and career; elementary school is not too early.
- \*Give students a firm foundation in basic skills - math, money, reading, writing, social skills, and communication.
- \*Use and teach technology. It is a tool for accommodations and success.
- \*Ask students what works for them and what they need.
- \*Educate students about their disability and accommodations.
- \*Write meaningful IEP/transition plans with student input and participation, and relevant skill development. Middle and high school students should run their IEP meetings.
- \*Learn the difference between services in K-12 under IDEA and college without IDEA; college is an access system not an entitlement system, based on ADA and Section 504.
- \*Learn about the many different types of guardianship, if any is needed at all.
- \*Expose students to the academic expectations of real coursework.
- \*Teach self-advocacy and self-determination skills and provide practice opportunities.
- \*Complete a Triennial Review or Reevaluation every three years throughout school, especially in high school-it is the pathway for accommodations at college and work.
- \*Visit post-secondary college programs to see the possibilities.
- \*Keep the long view in mind. Every minute of every day matters when learning.

**Students Speak:** "Self-advocacy is something that needs to be taught to us long before we reach college. It should begin at around 14 years of age when we are supposed to become an active participant in our own Transition planning at the IEP meetings. Unfortunately, most people with disabilities sit in those meetings while everyone else decides our fate. This encourages and perpetuates 'learned helplessness'. Then, we reach college...or the workforce, and have no idea what to do, let alone how to do it! We need to be taught, starting at an early age, to make choices and take care of ourselves!"

"Specifically for most of us with disabilities, living independently is like taking a leap off of a cliff without a parachute because this [college] is the first time practicing true independence without the help of parents or a full time aide in the classroom. Unlike our able-bodied peers who get forced to set their own alarm clock, get dressed, do laundry, prepare meals, and slowly work into independence two or three years before they leave home at the start of their high school career. This is due to the inherent thought processes of our parents that their son or daughter with a disability will never leave their care."

### CU Student Comments:

"Students are more than students with disabilities. They are my friends."

"I'll be a more effective teacher because of this experience with these students."

"Giving students choices helps them be more engaged. I now realize that."

"This experienced changed me. I would have never thought to focus on transition and the possibility that students with disabilities could go to college."

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