

## Engaging Parents in Conversations About College-Based Transition Services

By Maria Paiewonsky, Leslie Hughes, and Julia Landau

College-based transition programs, established partnerships between secondary schools and colleges and universities, are making it possible for a growing number of transition-aged students with intellectual disability/autism (ID/A), to receive transition services on college campuses (Think College, 2018). These programs offer students access to college classes alongside peers without disabilities, as well as increased opportunities to participate in campus activities, use college resources, and develop friendships.

Preparation and ongoing support is needed for these experiences to be successful for both students as well as for parents who may not be aware that college is an option or how these college transition experiences may differ from high school transition experiences (Freedman, 2017; Yarborough, Getzel, & Ketzer, 2014). Parents of transition-aged students with ID/A need information and ongoing communication to support their son or daughter in a college setting. They also need information to prepare for their own changing role in postsecondary education settings (Francis, Fuchs, Johnson, Gordon, & Grant, 2016).

Without preparation, some parents may be hesitant to support college participation. They may express concerns about campus safety and the risks their son or daughter may face. The potential impact on benefits such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI) may be an additional concern if the program includes employment. Some parents may

also have doubts about their child having the ability to learn and thrive in college (Freedman, 2016; Griffin, McMillan, & Hodapp, 2010).

Efforts to engage parents in college-based transition experiences can pay off. With information and preparation, parents are in a better position not only to support their son or daughter's experience and increasing independence, but also to serve as mentors to other parents who might not know about these kinds of transition opportunities.

Informing parents helps them to:

- Develop students' self-determination through a range of opportunities to set goals, make choices, and make decisions.
- Increase students' level of independence through travel training and engagement in campus life.
- Open up paths to accessing integrated paid employment.

Different information about the services and supports is needed by parents at different stages of the student experience (Francis, et al, 2016). In spring 2017, college-school partners, including staff and parents, at three college-based transition programs were asked to share their strategies for engaging parents in college-based transition services. This brief outlines the kind of information and suggested activities that can help parents during four stages of an inclusive college-based transition experience.

## STAGE 1: INTRODUCE COLLEGE-BASED TRANSITION SERVICES

**In this first stage, professionals introduce college as an option, sharing examples of these student experiences and providing many opportunities to explore and ask questions.**

- ❑ Start conversations early and often with parents about college opportunities in formal IEP meetings and in meetings specifically set up for parents.
- ❑ Request opportunities to present inclusive dual enrollment information at local special education parent advisory group meetings and Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings, local school district committee meetings, and meetings attended by state agency staff such as developmental disability agency service coordinators and vocational rehabilitation counselors
- ❑ Feature college-based transition services in monthly newsletters, on transition websites, and on blogs or in social media channels accessed by parents.
- ❑ Encourage families to take college campus tours with their son or daughter, even as early as when their child is in middle school.
- ❑ Provide opportunities for parents to hear directly from students with ID/A who have participated in college, through school open houses and transition fairs. Encourage students to use various multi-media modalities such as videos, pictures, and PowerPoint presentations.
- ❑ Invite a student participating in college-based transition services and a peer mentor to participate in a panel discussion at a college open house.
- ❑ Request to present to middle school & guidance staff as well as middle school parents about college-based transition services opportunities.
- ❑ Set up an annual college-based transition services table at each high school partners' college night as well as at open-houses at the college.
- ❑ Provide written materials and articles about college-based transition services throughout a student's transition years.
- ❑ Arrange for students to attend college campus-wide events that are open to the public (e.g., annual outdoor spring parties, theater productions, and art shows).

**"I try to get on the agenda of the local and regional Special Education Parent Advisory meetings to share information and answer any questions."**

## STAGE 2: SUPPORT PARENTS AS STUDENTS PREPARE FOR COLLEGE

**In the second stage of engagement parents and professionals work together to prepare the student for college. Plan for ongoing communications with parents and prepare to:**

- ❑ Discuss how a college-based transition services schedule reflects a college schedule rather than a high school schedule. Discuss how these elements fit in: college classes, campus job, transportation, travel training, academic support services, campus activities.
- ❑ Review the role of an education coach and/or peer mentor and support services on campus, including academic learning centers, career services, and disability services. Discuss how an accommodation plan is developed to support student success.
- ❑ Use fact sheets to describe the differences between high school and college. Highlight how a student's IEP and postsecondary education goals are met on a college campus when enrolled in college-based transition services.
- ❑ Prepare parents for the new self-advocacy role their son/daughter must assume in college.
- ❑ Inform parents about Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) during student and parent orientations.
- ❑ Provide information to students and parents about different student expectations, including expectations about transportation and travel training.
- ❑ Provide clear guidance and expectations for parents about how/who to communicate with at college with concerns and questions. Clarify how parents' access to college staff differs from the communication with school district staff.
- ❑ Create a closed Facebook page for parents that can be used for sharing information and answering questions.
- ❑ Provide an opportunity for parents to discuss any safety concerns and the protocols that are in place to help students stay safe on campus.
- ❑ Share any information about student mentoring programs for new students.
- ❑ Inform parents of the steps required before starting college, including admission, course registration, orientation, and meeting with disability services to request accommodations.

### STAGE 3: MAINTAIN PARENT ENGAGEMENT THROUGHOUT STUDENTS' COLLEGE-BASED TRANSITION EXPERIENCES.

**Communication and collaboration continue to ensure parent-professional partnerships are strong and support students while enrolled.**

- ❑ Review how requirements of FERPA will impact students with disabilities who are attending college. Explain to the student that they can provide written permission allowing staff to speak directly to their parents.
- ❑ Discuss the college code of conduct, including student expectations regarding maturity, sexuality, academics, and use of social media.

**“I make an effort to connect parents of students in college to talk to new parents to help alleviate any misgivings they may have about college-based transition services.”**

- ❑ Establish the format for regular parent communications (phone, text, in-person). Determine which staff member communicates with a parent when issues arise and get student consent for parent communication with staff.
- ❑ Familiarize parents with college and faculty protocols when issues come up (e.g., late cab or bus; getting lost on campus; student absenteeism, class tardiness, etc.).
- ❑ Share information with parents about social opportunities available to students on campus. Explain the importance of utilizing peer mentors to facilitate these opportunities and discuss travel logistics for evening and weekend events.
- ❑ Continue providing students and their families information regarding campus resources such as academic supports, career services, internships, etc.
- ❑ Host a benefits planning workshop to provide counseling about the impact of employment on benefits (e.g., Social Security).

**“We use the transition meetings to put together a comprehensive plan for college. We spell out the new schedules and new expectations as well as different vacation and transportation schedules.”**

### STAGE 4: ENGAGE/INFORM PARENTS ABOUT ADULT SERVICES AS STUDENTS AGE OUT OF TRANSITION SERVICES.

**Plan for students' transition from college-based transition services to support desired next steps such as pursuing full-time employment or continuing on to a new higher education experience.**

- ❑ Offer a meeting with families to review opportunities for their son/daughter to continue with college after existing special education.
- ❑ Provide information and resources to parents regarding accessible transportation options.
- ❑ Ensure that adult service agencies are participating in IEP meetings to discuss employment, continuing education and independent living goals, and the related services need to achieve these goals.
- ❑ Partner with local independent living center programs to provide training and resources to students and families.
- ❑ Provide in-service trainings for parents regarding how adult service agencies (vocational rehabilitation services, disability services, employment, benefits) can support young adults with disabilities to attend college.

**“We advise parents to inform adult service providers that their son or daughter is going to college so that a seamless transition to extended college experiences or work are taken into consideration.”**

## CONCLUSION

Ongoing parent-professional partnerships can be facilitated by introducing college options, supporting families as students prepare for and participate in college, and linking families with adult services. Keeping the focus on student independence and self-determination will lead to positive postsecondary outcomes for students with intellectual disability/autism.

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The Think College Transition Model Project, in collaboration with three Massachusetts Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment partnerships developed and implemented a college-based inclusive dual enrollment transition model for students with intellectual disability and autism between the ages of 18-21.

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[www.thinkcollege.net/TCT](http://www.thinkcollege.net/TCT)

### Think College:

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**Westfield State University.** Pictured from left to right: Amy Galaska, Judi Bean, Sherry Elander, Naomi Murcock, Jen Bedore, Robyn Nelson, Kim Cass, Lyndsey Nunes



**Holyoke Community College.** Pictured from left to right: Julia Landau, Maria Paiewonsky, Ty Hanson, Ingrid Ardivinson, Naomi Murdock, Sherry Elander, Jessica Bolduc, Ron Oparowski, Lori Merriam, Joyce Butler, Karen Milch, Christy Parent, Andrea Hojnacki, Jacqueline Walton, Carole Carlson



**Bridgewater State University.** Back Row: Bill Meehan, Mary Price, Ashley Rodrigues, Kathy Beaulieu, Elizabeth Cabral-Townson, Maria Husted, Zack Chipman, Danina Rodrigues, Steve Clements Front Row: Theola Sweeney, Kelly Fraser, Travis Dupuis, Tina Raeke, Elizabeth Hintz

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