The Think College Transition (TCT) project is an inclusive dual-enrollment transition model designed to improve post-school outcomes for students aged 18-22 years who have intellectual disability and autism. The key feature of this model is assisting students to be involved with college classes, work experiences, and social networking opportunities on a college campus with their same-age peers, rather than having typical transition services in a high school.

Nine dually-enrolled students on two Massachusetts campuses accepted an invitation to participate in an action research project related to TCT, called Put Yourself on the Map. Students used multiple ways to describe their college experiences over one academic year.

The research facilitators and students collaborated to answer three questions:

1. How do college students participate in action research methods that include the use of digital media tools and apps?
2. How do college students who have taken at least one college class through an inclusive dual enrollment initiative describe their place and experiences in inclusive college activities?
3. What recommendations do students have to improve inclusive dual enrollment experiences for themselves and others?

RESEARCH METHODS

A number of research method strategies were used in this study to increase student participation in telling their own college stories (Bigby, Frawley, & Ramcharan, 2014; Paiewonsky, 2014; 2010). These included introducing students to an action research model, conducting initial interviews, asking students to chronicle their day with drawing and timelines, using mobile devices and the Livetrekker app to track and document their paths around the campus, and digital storytelling.
RESEARCH MEETINGS

Student researchers were invited to meet several times throughout the academic year of their research. In those meetings, research methods, research ethics, data collection, and data analysis were reviewed in a combination of group and individual meetings (Bigby, Frawley, & Ramcharan, 2014; Mactavish, Mahon, & Lutfiyya, 2000; Morgan, Moni, & Cuskelly, 2015). Given that the student researchers were also busy college students, on two different campuses, it was challenging to find a time to have as many group research meetings as individual ones. Also, the students were participating in inclusive, individualized activities so they did not necessarily see each other very often. The research facilitators needed to take advantage of time before and after a semester to meet with students. Initial meetings were held before a semester started to recruit students and orient them to the project. Follow-up meetings were held with students to review their data and to confirm themes from their combined work.

INITIAL INTERVIEWS

Initial interviews were conducted with student researchers, primarily as a warm-up research activity for discussing and mapping college (Mactavish, Mahon, & Lutfiyya, 2000), but also to promote and empower students to reflect on this unique transition experience (Tassé, Schalock, Thompson, & Wehmeyer, 2005). These interviews were usually done as a one-to-one meeting between the student researcher and research facilitator. Questions included topics concerning their college schedules, including courses, study times, times for relaxing, where they liked to hang out/ have fun, and where they preferred to study and with whom. The students were asked for details that would help clarify their familiarity with college, including how many semesters they had attended college, the sequence of their courses, and any job experiences on or off campus.

DRAWINGS AND TIMELINES

Student researchers were also asked to draw maps, free-hand, of where they go on campus. By doing so, the students reflected and gained a different perspective on their college experience. The map-drawing also gave both students and research facilitators a chance to discuss issues depicted in the drawings that might not have emerged in the interviews (Theron, Mitchell, Smith, & Stuart, 2011). What seemed to work better for students was to draw scenes from their day: taking transportation to college, starting the day at the campus coffee shop, and participating in class discussion and in group work. Students drew where the instructor stood or sat, and where their educational coaches and classmates were. A few students were initially hesitant to draw, but once they understood that the drawings did not need to be perfect, they drew more freely.
LIVETREKKER MAPS

To describe where students went on campus, what they did, and who they interacted with, the student researchers learned to use Livetrekker, a free mapping app, on mobile devices. By using mobile technologies, the students contributed to a geographic sense of place (the college campus) through a collaborative mapping activity (Sandy & Franco, 2014). Although the research facilitators hoped the students would track their days on their own, the students sometimes had difficulty getting the app to work on their smartphones, and some students said they didn’t have time to do it. In total, each student produced one or two Livetrekker maps. The Livetrekker app has built-in features for the user to take photos or videos or record narratives while tracking their movements. All the student researchers learned to use these features quickly, and enjoyed augmenting their campus trails with digital media.

WALKING AND TALKING INTERVIEWS

Walking and talking interviews were conducted with the students, sometimes as they were using Livetrekker to document their trails around college. Mobile methodologies such as walking and talking interviews shed insight into students’ experiences differently, because questions are asked in context and in real time (Clark & Emmel, 2010; Evans & Jones, 2011). Discussions often followed observations of how students navigated the campus on their own, used resources, shared greetings with friends and classmates, and prepared for class. The walking and talking tours also provided insight into how students were assimilating into the campus community. Similar to the work of Shorman and Wilton (2017), walking and talking interviews helped to answer questions such as: Where do students go? What do they do? Who do they see? Who do they talk to and engage with? Do they feel safe? Who gets to make the decisions about where they go? Are there other places they would rather go?

DIGITAL STORIES

An outcome of this research offered to students was to use their work to develop digital stories. The process of creating digital stories can lead participants to take ownership of their stories, rather than have others, such as researchers, construct their stories. Equally importantly, the media tools allow participants to create stories in a non-linear format and work towards developing a story to emphasize certain elements through voice, images, and soundtrack (Kress, 2003; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). All 9 students developed drafts of their stories and several recorded them. The research facilitators determined that more time is needed to fully support students’ digital stories that fully meet digital storytelling criteria.

REFERENCES

MEET THE STUDENT RESEARCHERS

**Erin Curran**
Erin, 21, has taken classes at Holyoke Community College for 4 semesters. She has focused on drawing and illustration classes, and was recently interviewed on the college radio station about these classes.

**Adriana Isham**
Adriana, 20, is a third-semester student at Westfield State University. She is pleased to be taking dance, music, and theater classes since she hopes to combine these interests into a career.

**Tatum Jordan**
Tatum, 19, is a third-semester student at Holyoke Community College. She is hoping to take electronic media classes to pursue her goal of making YouTube videos.

**April Lucia**
April, 20, has taken classes for 4 semesters at Holyoke Community College. Her favorite class is choir, and she plans to take additional classes so she can pursue her goal of doing a solo performance.

**Chris Mullins**
Chris, 20, attended Westfield State University for 3 semesters and hopes to be a football coach one day. He has taken several communications courses and worked at the campus fitness center.

**Alec Murray**
Alec, 21, has taken classes at Westfield State University for 3 years. They range from music theory to computer graphics to American Sign Language. Alec also works as the shot chart keeper for the WSU women’s basketball team.

**Ned Pavlak**
Ned, 21, is a third-semester student at Holyoke Community College. He has enjoyed taking classes in public speaking, photography, mathematics, and communications.

**Kyle Reardon**
Kyle, 22, has taken numerous classes at Westfield State University, including Intro to Journalism and History of Radio. He especially enjoyed participating in peer mentor activities.

**Tricia Torrey**
Tricia, 22, has taken classes at Holyoke Community College for 3 years. Art classes have been among her favorites, but she also passed the ServSafe training, paving the way to a culinary arts job.

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STUDENT REPORTS: FINDINGS FROM PUT YOURSELF ON THE MAP

Through the course of one academic year, 9 college students in an inclusive dual enrollment initiative participated in a collaborative research project to document the experience of being a college student with intellectual disability or autism. They used multiple methods to document their experience, with the support of research facilitators. Six themes emerged from this project: campus navigation, course access, campus engagement, supports, identity, and social connections.

CAMPUS NAVIGATION

Students indicated that they have a good handle on navigating the college campus. Whether at a small community college or a larger 4-year university, they have learned to get where they need to go without staff support. On a typical day, students are spending 4-6 hours on campus, and navigating through 3-5 buildings or departments. College is giving them the opportunity to meet college student expectations: making their way around campus in a timely fashion, and using the college resources that are meant for all students.

As a college student, we are provided with a free bus pass where you can use the bus unlimited throughout the semester to travel back and forth from home, to school, and to work.

I took my friend Gina on a tour [of HCC]. She really likes it. I think she wants to go to college. It made me feel happy and proud. I am a college student.

On Mondays, I go to Wilson Hall to put money into my Owls Bucks account.

COURSE ACCESS

Students discussed a variety of courses they were taking or had taken in past semesters. For the most part, classes that required them to be active through group activities or through presentations tended to be the easiest for them to recall and reflect on. Students talked about group work with classmates, rehearsing scenes, and doing field work to complete assignments. They also were engaged in more traditional ways, like listening to instructors’ lectures and taking notes.

When you take a picture, then you have to put it on the Mac computer and then you have to edit the photo. It was hard in the beginning and then it got easier as it goes.

I studied the book that was everything you need to know to work in a restaurant: proper attire, what to do if you are sick, how to purchase food. I had to take the ServSafe test.

This is the painting of my eggs. It was hanging in the art hallway. This is Alix, she is my painting teacher and she is very smart and happy.

CAMPUS ENGAGEMENT

Students discussed non-academic activities they participated in, including clubs, campus internships, fitness activities, and campus-wide events. Those who were on campus for 2 or more days and for longer periods of the day were more likely to be engaged in non-academic activities. Students shared how much they enjoyed participating in campus-wide events. Several students also talked about working time into their schedules to use the health and wellness facilities on the campus.

Dance club: I’m following my dreams to be a dancer because I am a dancer. Now I’m actually in a dance at Westfield State University. It’s really my dream to be in that part. Saw myself who I am.

Campus job: In the fall, I had my interview with Andrea, the head coach of the women's basketball team to be their shot chart keeper. We talked about how I am good with stats. At the end of the interview, Andrea said I got the job.

Campus event: That [college costume contest] was the best day! I had fun with my friend April.
SUPPORTS
All the students had some type of educational coach support, from as little as a daily check-in to full supervision. Through their pictures and drawings and through the interviews, the research facilitators realized how complicated it is to fade coach support when either the college or school requires that students are fully supervised. Coaches don’t always recognize how their supervision is interfering with students assimilating into college life, although a few coaches were fading support as much as possible. Students discussed how peer mentoring opened up opportunities for them to meet new people and to engage in social activities in the evenings and on the weekends.

IDENTITY
Students often discussed how their inclusive college experience differed from their high school experience. Since some of them were expected to return to the high school one or more days a week, students were able to directly compare how their expectations, social integration, and self-determination differed in each setting. Some students appreciated being able to shrug off an identity of being a special education student. Others noted that in college, you were not only accepted for who you were, but there was an expectation that you can speak for yourself and be respected as a mature college student.

SOCIAL CONNECTIONS
Students described a number of ways that their social connections had changed since coming to college. Some students re-connected with peers they knew in high school. Others connected with people they knew in different community contexts, such as through church or dance lessons. Students who were connected to a peer mentor club at the college were engaged in numerous activities offered at different times of the week, primarily because their peers were residential students who were available for day, evening, and weekend activities.