



Postsecondary Options for Students With Significant Disabilities

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Danny is 18 years old and has been in high school for 4 years. He has worked on his individualized education program (IEP) goals in general education and special education classes. He has participated in community-based instruction once a week on Fridays for the past 2 years. He has had unpaid work experiences in the school cafeteria and at a local gas station, and just recently started a part-time job in the grocery store on the weekends. He has expressed an interest in working with animals. Danny likes to listen to rap music, loves his dog MJ, dreams of being a basketball star, and is probably not too different from many of the students you work with every day. Danny, however, has a significant disability; (see box “What Is a Significant Disability”) according to his IEP, he will remain in high school until he is 21 years old, when he will exit with a high school certificate of completion.

What’s wrong with this picture? Danny, like many other students with significant disabilities, will remain in high school for 3 years longer than his classmates who leave with a general high school diploma at age 18. Although public school support for students like Danny is vital to a successful transition to adult life, this support does not have to be provided in the confines of the high school campus. There are other ways that public school special education services can be provided that allow students with significant disabilities the opportunity to participate in meaningful, age-

appropriate learning experiences in postsecondary settings during their final years of school.

Through our work with On-Campus Outreach (OCO), a federally-funded outreach grant, we have provided technical assistance to 17 programs in 11 local school systems in Maryland and other states serving students with significant disabilities between the ages of 18 and 21 in postsecondary settings (see box). This article is based on observations, interviews, and experiences gained through this work. We will describe the goals of these educational services, where services are being provided, and what it takes to make them happen.

What Are the Goals of Providing Educational Services in Postsecondary Settings?

The overall goal of providing services in postsecondary settings is to give older students with disabilities age-appropriate settings for their final public education and transition experiences. Specific goals are designed through a person-centered planning process to meet the needs, preferences, and interests of the individual students.

These goals may include the following:

- Obtaining employment in a full- or part-time paid position in the community.
- Participating in college classes.
- Increasing mobility in the community.
- Engaging the support of adult service agencies.

- Improving social and communication skills.
- Improving self-determination skills.
- Developing friendships with other people of similar ages.
- Developing age-appropriate leisure and recreation pursuits.

Figure 1 shows a schedule for Danny that indicates how his goals could be met in a postsecondary college setting.

Many of the students’ educational goals are met by providing services on college campuses where some students participate in general college classes. Other students may audit classes or take

What Is a Significant Disability?

A student with a significant disability is defined as an individual who requires extensive ongoing support in more than one major life activity to participate in integrated community settings and to enjoy a quality of life that is available to citizens with fewer or no disabilities. Support may be required for life activities such as mobility, communication, self-care, and learning as necessary for independent living, employment, and self-sufficiency (TASH, 2000). Students may have a variety of disability classifications including, but not limited to, mental retardation, learning disabilities, traumatic brain injuries, orthopedic disabilities, autism, or behavior disorders.

On-Campus Outreach Resources

If you are interested in learning more about the options described in this article, please visit us at the On-Campus Outreach Web site (<http://www.education.umd.edu/oco/>), where you will find a list of programs in postsecondary settings in Maryland and fact sheets on program development, individuals supports, needs assessment, curriculums, and other related topics.

noncredit or continuing education courses. Participation in classes depends on level of course content, student interest, and class schedule. Students who attend college classes continue to receive support from school system staff in much

the same way they would in inclusive high school situations.

Public school personnel who are planning to provide services in postsecondary sites must make sure that students are integrated in campus and community life. In the past, adults with significant developmental disabilities who participated in programs at colleges were often segregated from the general student population (Neubert, Moon, Grigal, & Redd, 2001). Providing students access not only to classes, but also to other college resources such as the library, career center, computer lab, fitness center, and student activities center will allow students with significant disabilities to become an expected and accepted part of the campus community. For example,

Danny's schedule shows that he participates in two classes, weight training, and ceramics; and he regularly uses the student union and library.

What Is a Postsecondary Setting?

Postsecondary settings can include just about any setting adults have access to after high school, including 4-year colleges or universities, community colleges, and various locations in the community (e.g., businesses, apartments, and community rehabilitation programs). Participation in each type of setting, described here briefly, requires a great deal of planning by school and community personnel. Each setting has its own benefits and challenges.

Figure 1: Danny's Schedule for Spring Semester at State University

Time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
7:00	Danny rides city bus to college campus				
8:00	Functional Academics with Special Education Teacher in classroom on college campus	Career Planning or Self-determination skills class with special educator	Free time—Danny gets to campus in time for Weight Training Class	Career Planning or Self-determination skills class with special educator	Functional Academics with Special Education Teacher in classroom on college campus
9:00	Weight Training Class at Fitness Center	Ceramics Class in Art Building		Ceramics Class in Art Building	Independent Study and tutoring from Special Education Intern at Library
9:30	Class at Fitness Center	Travel Training/Community skills training with teaching assistant and 2 other students	Weight Training Class at Fitness Center	Travel Training/Community skills training with teaching assistant and 2 other students	Lunch with fraternity brothers
10:00					
10:30	Computer Tutorial with Special Education Intern (peer tutor)	Computer Tutorial with Special Education Intern (peer tutor)	Lunch with peer tutor at student union food court	Lunch in community	Review schedule for following week with special educator in classroom
11:00	Lunch with other students and/or best buddy at student union food court	Lunch in community	Lunch with peer tutor at student union food court	Lunch in community	Review schedule for following week with special educator in classroom
12:00	Go to city bus stop on campus, go to job site	Travel Training and go to SPCA for volunteer work with teaching assistant and 2 other students	Go to city bus stop on campus, go to job site	Travel Training and go to SPCA for volunteer work with teaching assistant and 2 other students	Go to city bus stop on campus, go to job site
1:00	Works part-time at PetSmart	School bus picks Danny up on campus	Works part-time at PetSmart	Works part-time at PetSmart	Works part-time at PetSmart
2:00	Parents pick Danny up from work		Parents pick Danny up from work	Parents pick Danny up from work	A friend picks Danny up from work
3:00					
4:00					
5:00					

Four-Year Colleges or Universities

One option for serving older students with significant disabilities is a 4-year college. In some states, like Maryland and Kentucky, school systems have established programs at 4-year universities, which serve from 5 to 17 students with disabilities ages 18-21 (Grigal, Neubert, & Moon, 2001; Hall, Kleinert, & Kearns, 2000). In other states, like New Hampshire and Massachusetts, students with disabilities may attend a university by working with their families, the school system, the college, and others to coordinate individual supports to meet their needs at the college, rather than attending a “program” (Hart, Zafft, & Zimbrich, 2001; Weir, 2001).

Benefits. Four-year colleges provide many opportunities for integrated experiences for students with significant disabilities. These institutions offer coursework such as ceramics, stagecraft, and Tai Chi that students with significant disabilities may not have had access to in their high school. Colleges and universities have a variety of social outlets and organizations, such as fraternities, sororities, hobby clubs, Best Buddies, and religious groups, which provide students with significant disabilities the opportunity to engage in nonacademic activities alongside same-age peers without disabilities who have similar backgrounds or interests. For example, Danny became an honorary member of a fraternity on campus, and took part in some of the activities they sponsored (see Figure 1).

Another benefit of 4-year colleges or universities is that they generally have departments in social sciences, education, speech, and occupational and physical therapies. Students in these fields of study are often in need of practical experiences. By collaborating with the faculty in these departments, high school personnel have helped students form partnerships that serve both the students with significant disabilities and the college students. Students may work with one another in classes, field placements, and student service-learning experiences. For example, on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, Danny receives tutoring in the computer lab and the library from an undergraduate student interning in special education.

Four-year institutions also provide housing for college students. This arrangement affords access to a constant student population during the daytime, evenings, and weekends that may be absent in a community college. It may also offer an opportunity for some independent-living experiences for students with significant disabilities.

Challenges. One of the challenges of providing services to students with significant disabilities ages 18-21 in a 4-year setting is that these institutions are less prevalent than community colleges and may not be located in areas that are easily accessible by public school transportation. Accessibility is also affected by the admission requirements and application process of many of these institutions, which may necessitate a high school diploma and scores from tests such as the SAT to attend general college classes.

A final challenge of providing services to students with significant disabilities in this setting is that many of the faculty and staff at the college or university may have difficulty understanding why students with significant disabilities should be at a college. This attitudinal barrier is one that takes time and patience to overcome. It is important to engage the support of personnel who are in positions of authority like a President, Provost, or Dean to help provide information to faculty and staff about how and why students with significant disabilities can benefit from experiences in a college environment.

Community Colleges

Community colleges are attractive locations for providing programs and experiences to students with significant disabilities ages 18-21. These institutions often have open door policies, which may facilitate access for nontraditional students. In addition, these institutions are more prevalent and closer in proximity than many of the 4-year institutions. Community college is the first postsecondary experience for many students exiting high school and provides a natural setting for students with significant disabilities to have integrated experiences with students without disabilities, perhaps even students from their home high school.

Benefits. The costs of tuition and fees at community colleges are lower than those in 4-year colleges and universities and therefore, more affordable to families. Many community colleges also have a policy of waiving tuition for senior citizens and individuals with significant disabilities who receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI). Students with significant disabilities may be able to benefit from this policy and need only pay for their student fees. This setting also provides access to continuing education courses. These nonacademic courses provide a chance to learn about many new topics such as ethnic cooking, dance, and art, and may encourage students to pursue other continuing education courses after they exit public school.

Challenges. One drawback of providing services to students with significant disabilities in a community college setting is that the student population in community colleges is often transient. They come to the campus to attend their classes and may leave campus soon after class has ended. This may limit opportunities for social interactions and participation in clubs and organizations on campus and impact the opportunities to access college students to serve as peer buddies. Despite this drawback, the community college remains an excellent option for providing services to students with significant disabilities and one which is being used by school systems in many states (Grigal et al., 2001; Highhouse, 2001).

The Community

The community offers many potential environments for students with significant disabilities who are 18 or older to receive educational services. Because community-based instruction is a common element of the curriculum used to teach students with significant disabilities in high schools, a natural progression of this practice is to increase a student's access to community settings during the final years of high school.

One possibility is to provide services to students in a business setting. One local school system in Maryland provides students with significant disabilities with services in the Sheriff's Department, which is located in a shopping mall

(Grigal et al., 2001). This setting allows students access to employment options in the retail and food service establishments and provides students with the opportunity to become partners with a recognized and respected community agency, the Sheriff's Department. Three days a week, students in this program take a bus to the local community college to participate in classes and other activities. The remainder of their time is spent receiving individual instruction in functional and independent-living skills in their program site, and working in paid positions in the mall and in other community job sites.

Benefits. Providing educational services in the community allows students to be a part of adult environments and practice adult responsibilities, while still benefiting from the support system provided by supervision from trained school system staff. In a program in Oregon, students with significant disabilities receive services in an apartment in the community and at a local college (Highhouse, 2001). In the apartment, students learned to prepare meals, wash clothes, and spend time with others or alone in a natural setting. At the local college, they take classes, use public transportation, and participate in other college activities.

Support for Other Options. The community examples discussed here demonstrate that the use of college and community settings is not mutually exclusive. Also, by providing educational services in the community, school systems may avoid some of the pitfalls of trying to obtain classroom or office space at a college, which can be difficult. Access to employment opportunities may also be increased by providing services in community locations. If a student's postsecondary goals involve employment and community access, rather than college experiences, participating in educational services located in the community may be a good alternative for his or her final school years.

How Do You Begin to Serve Students in Postsecondary Settings?

Providing educational services to students with significant disabilities in postsecondary settings requires careful planning and collaboration with members from the

school system and the community. After visiting programs in postsecondary settings and speaking with personnel from many states, we propose the following steps to help school staff create such services. These steps provide a framework from which teachers, parents, community members, and rehabilitation personnel can explore the possibility of developing alternative options for students with significant disabilities during their final years of public school.

Step 1: Create and Convene a Planning Committee

School staff should create a planning committee to include representatives from key organizations, such as school personnel, college representatives, community businesses, employers, local community rehabilitation personnel, and students with significant disabilities and their parents. This committee should plan to meet regularly, initially to conduct a needs assessment, and then continually to monitor progress, discuss difficulties, and make changes to a program or services in a postsecondary setting.

Step 2: Conduct a Needs Assessment

Based on interviews with teachers in Maryland programs, we have developed a Needs Assessment Tool to help committees consider alternative options in secondary programming (see Figure 2). We have included one page from the Needs Assessment Tool here, but other pages can be obtained from our Web site (www.education.umd.edu/oco).

Committees should perform a needs assessment for the following reasons:

- To create a profile of the number of students who might be interested in receiving services outside of the high school.
- To identify the services they are currently receiving.
- To describe the changes that are needed to meet students' needs.
- To discover community partnerships that may assist in developing options in postsecondary settings.

Step 3: Write an Action Plan

The planning committee must create a list of the students to be served, the actions to be taken, the person or per-

sons responsible for each action, and the timeline in which the activities listed on the action plan will be accomplished. The following are some activities that may be included:

- Identifying potential goals and outcomes for students (integrated college experiences, increased use of public transportation, accessing community employment).
- Determining potential partners (Vocational Rehabilitation, Office of Mental Retardation or Developmental Disabilities, local community providers).
- Locating potential settings (local universities, community colleges, vocational/technical schools, businesses, community rehabilitation programs, apartment or housing complexes).
- Setting a preliminary budget (staff, equipment, and materials; and other costs such as rent, transportation, and tuition).
- Creating a process for students to access services (referrals, person-centered planning, application packages).

Step 4: Decide Where Services Will Be Provided

Based on the information gained from the Needs Assessment and Action Plan, the committee must then make a decision about where and how services will be provided. Some school systems have developed programs on college campuses or in community settings that serve a group of students with significant disabilities who have similar needs and goals. Others have developed individual supports, which allow students to receive educational and community supports outside of high school without attending a program. Examples of this option can be found in New Hampshire and Massachusetts (Hart et al., 2001; Weir, 2001) and are illustrated in case studies in the literature (Tashie, Malloy, & Lichtenstein, 1998).

An important point is that we need not view program-based and individual support models as mutually exclusive. These two models complement one another by providing a group of students with similar goals the opportunity to access a new environment through the development of a program, while offering students with

Figure 2: Needs Assessment of Students and Current Services

School Year: 20__-20__

School: _____

Number of students who will receive special education services until they are 21 who are/have:										
Age	SSI or SSDI Eligible	Receiving a high school certificate or non-standard diploma	Included in general education	Not included in general education	Paid job experience	Unpaid job experience	Participated in recreation activities in/out of school	Received travel training	Require 1:1 assistance	Interested in new option(s)
21=										
20=										
19=										
18=										
17=										

Note: SSI—Supplemental Security Income; SSDI = Social Security Disability Insurance. For a copy of the complete Needs Assessment Tool, please go to the On-Campus Outreach (OCO) Web site at www.education.umd.edu/oco and click on Resources.

other interests a chance to attain a goal outside of the normal realm of that program by providing them with individual supports.

Step 5: Deal With Logistics

As with the provision of any new service, the hardest part is often the logistics. The planning committee must address many issues when trying to provide services outside of the high school. Here are some important issues:

- Staffing (secondary special educators, transition specialist, or job coaches with experience in transition planning, inclusive education, job placement, and community instruction)
- Hierarchy and protocol of new setting(s) (policies, procedures, who's who)
- Transportation issues (availability, cost, location, use of school or public systems)
- Graduation participation (students will or will not participate in graduation ceremony)
- Recordkeeping (where student records will be kept, how attendance will be reported)
- Administrative issues (who is administrator in charge of program or services, where IEP meetings will be held, how free and reduced lunch will be provided)
- Medical and emergency procedures (how students will receive medication, the procedures for medical emergencies and disruptive behavior)
- Scheduling (inclement weather, schedule discrepancies between school and other settings)

Final Thoughts

The five steps we have outlined show how school systems, families, and students with disabilities can explore the possibility of providing services in post-secondary settings to students with significant disabilities between the ages of 18 and 21. These steps, however, simplify what can be a complicated and challenging process. Developing options for students in postsecondary settings takes a great deal of time, cooperation, flexibility, and a firm commitment to the idea that students with significant disabilities can benefit from age-appropriate experiences in postsecondary settings.

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The preparation of this article was supported, in part, by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (Grant #H324R990032). The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of the U.S. Department of Education.

TEACHING Exceptional Children, Vol. 35, No. 2, pp. 68-73.

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