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**Center for School Counseling Outcome Research**

**Effective College Transition Planning for Students with Learning Disabilities:  
What Does the Research Tell Us?**

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Aune, E. (1991). A transition model for postsecondary-bound students with learning disabilities. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 6, 177-187.

Colleges and universities have seen the steady growth of students with disabilities on their campuses over the past several years. Much of this growth is attributed to the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) which extended anti-discrimination legislation, under Section 504, to all higher education institutions regardless of whether or not they receive federal funding. With the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) in 1997, secondary schools are required to plan for the transition process when students with disabilities turn fourteen (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services, 1997). This transition requirement has encouraged students with disabilities to consider all of their options after high school, including college.

What role does the school counselor play in aiding students with learning disabilities in the transition process? The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) posits that, “Professional school counselors work with students with special needs both in special class settings and in the regular classroom and are a key component in assisting with transition to postsecondary options” (2004). School counselors are a “key component” in assisting students with transitioning planning because they are often the gatekeepers of postsecondary education information and options. They provide students with information regarding college entrance exams, the application process, program design, career information, etc. In spite of the school counselors expertise in this area, studies show that students with special needs do not often meet with their school counselor to discuss postsecondary options or receive transition services (Hitchings, Luzzo, Ristow, Horvath, Retish, & Tanners, 2001; Milsom, 2002).

One specific group that has the highest rate of enrollment on college campuses is that of students with learning disabilities. Overall, an estimated 428,280 students with disabilities were enrolled in colleges in the United States in 1997-1998; almost half of whom were diagnosed as learning disabled (Skinner & Lindstrom, 2003). According to the National Council on Disability (2003), students with disabilities are estimated to represent nearly 10 percent of all higher education students in the United States. Furthermore, learning disabilities is the fastest growing disability category among college freshmen (Cobb, 2002).

The rise in the number of students with learning disabilities in the postsecondary education setting has also brought to light that there is a large failure rate for this population. Vogel and Adelman (1990) refer to this phenomenon as the “revolving door syndrome” (p. 331). In fact, students with disabilities, in all disability categories, who enroll in postsecondary institutions, are less likely to complete a degree or certificate than are their peers without

disabilities (Post-outcomes Network of the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, 2002).

There are several contributing factors for the low graduation rates of students with learning disabilities, such as: a lack of preparedness for the academic rigor of college, poor independent learning skills, less intense support services (offered by postsecondary institutions), the learning disabled student's lack of self-awareness of their learning strengths and weaknesses, and the student's lack of skills and/or desire to self-advocate for their academic rights and needs (Raskind, Goldberg, Higgins, & Herman, 1999; Brinckerhoff, 1993; Brinckerhoff, Shaw, & McGuire, 1992). A lack of transition counseling and planning is often pointed to as the culprit. In addition, there are very few articles that describe transition programs for college-bound students with learning disabilities, and even fewer studies that evaluate the effectiveness of such programs. This type of information is needed to aid school counselors in counseling this population through the transition process.

Aune (1991) investigated a federally funded transition program, sponsored by the University of Minnesota that spanned over a three-year period. The program was developed for students with learning disabilities who appeared to have the potential to enter into a post-secondary program.

#### *The Program Model*

This program (see Figure 1) was implemented over a three year period with two groups of students, one group in their senior year and one group in their junior year. Students were assigned a secondary transition counselor to act as a support for the participants and to aid in coordinating team members and meetings. The focus of the program for students starting the program in their junior year consisted of the identification their educational needs, the development of a transition plan and implementation of the plan's objectives. The counselor played an integral role in coordinating with the student and with school personnel, ultimately developing transition teams for each student. However, each student was responsible for carrying out the objectives of his or her plan with the transition team and the counselor serving as support and providing guidance. Typical activities during the students' junior year consisted of: coursework selection, study strategies, career exploration, and developing awareness of postsecondary options.

During their senior year students' progress was reviewed and their objectives were updated. Furthermore, a postsecondary education counselor was added to the transition team and a vocational rehabilitation counselor often joined the transition teams. Typical activities during the participants' senior year consisted of: learning about academic accommodations, self-advocacy and their educational rights under Section 504, improving interpersonal skills, college selection and application, and a course that explored postsecondary options.

Finally, during the participants' first year post-high school, they met with and maintained regular contact with their postsecondary counselor. The transition plan was updated and revised to meet the students' goals and needs. Activities during this period consisted of: orientation to campus and disability services, obtaining accommodations through self-advocacy, and participating in an academic support group.

## Methods

The participants (n = 53) were selected from a pool of 200 students who were recommended for the program by special education personnel from various schools in the Minneapolis area. Students were selected based on the following criteria: 1) had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP); 2) documentation of a learning disability; 3) full-scale IQ of 90 or above; 4) achievement commensurate with their peers in at least one academic area or scoring at or above grade level on an standardized academic achievement test.

In-take information about the students was gathered from the students' files, from their teachers, their parents, and the students themselves. In addition, researchers gathered extensive pre and post-test data, including the following:

1. The Janis-Filed Feelings of Inadequacy Scale, used to measure self-concept (pre and post-assessment survey)
2. The Career Assessment Inventory (CAI), a 370-item instrument used to measure general and specific career interests on three scales: Nonoccupational, Theme, and Occupational (pre-assessment survey)
3. A transition questionnaire with a video component whose purpose was to measure the students' perceptions of their strengths and weaknesses, knowledge of postsecondary options, study skills, and interpersonal skills (pre and post-assessment survey)

## Results

The participants who started the program in their senior year were tracked from their senior year through the end of their first year after completing high school. Of the students in this cohort (n = 31), 58% completed one year of postsecondary education (2-year and 4-year college programs) with 26% of this cohort working full-time or in the military. The participants who began the program in their junior year were tracked until the end of senior year. Of the students in this cohort, 21 graduated high school at the end of the third year of the program with 67% planning on pursuing a postsecondary education, 19% planning to work full-time, and 14% undecided in their plans.

Descriptive statistics were calculated on the survey data. The results revealed that students reported an increased knowledge of services offered in postsecondary settings, an increased awareness of their skills, and an increased ability to define their need for academic accommodations. They were able to effectively role-play self-advocacy behaviors and they reported that they were more likely to identify themselves as having a learning disability. Additionally, many students reported using effective study strategies taught in the program. No significant changes were found on The Janis-Filed Feelings of Inadequacy Scale.

Other comparisons found that the students reported to be less comfortable in asking an instructor to provide classroom accommodations upon completing the program. In addition, there was an increase in the number of participants who reported feelings of embarrassment in admitting they needed help from teachers. On the other hand, postsecondary service providers reported that the majority of the students involved in the program were more likely to ask questions and be assertive, in comparison to students not involved in the program.

## Implications

This study reveals that transition programs can aid in preparing students with learning disabilities to enter the postsecondary education setting. However, without long-term follow-up we cannot determine if the students who participated in the program implemented and maintained the skills they learned, or if they completed a 2-year or 4-year degree. The program is fairly well-defined and appears to be flexible to the extent that it can be molded to meet the individual needs of the student. Moreover, the program demonstrates the importance of interaction between secondary and postsecondary educational institutions. The joining of high school personnel, college personnel, and the student in transition planning can establish an environment for open communication on what the student needs to do in both settings to be successful.

## Critical Perspective

The author described the instruments utilized in the study, but did not provide reliability or validity data of the instruments, specifically the Janis-Field Feelings of Inadequacy Scale and the Career Assessment Inventory. It appears that the third survey, a transition questionnaire, was developed for the study and it did not appear to have reliability and validity data. However, the researcher did pilot the survey on students with learning disabilities who were similar in age, grade, and met the project's selection criteria. Finally, it is not clear how the Career Assessment Inventory (CAI) was used in the study. This instrument is rather lengthy, 370 items, and it is only mentioned as a pre-assessment survey with no explanation given as to its purpose and/or use to the study.

No statistical comparisons were conducted between pre and post-assessment data. The researcher provided descriptive statistics (in the way of percentages) to represent change from pre to post. Without statistical methods (such as dependent t-tests) we are unable to determine if the changes from pre to post are significant, and are unable to draw any real conclusions from this study.

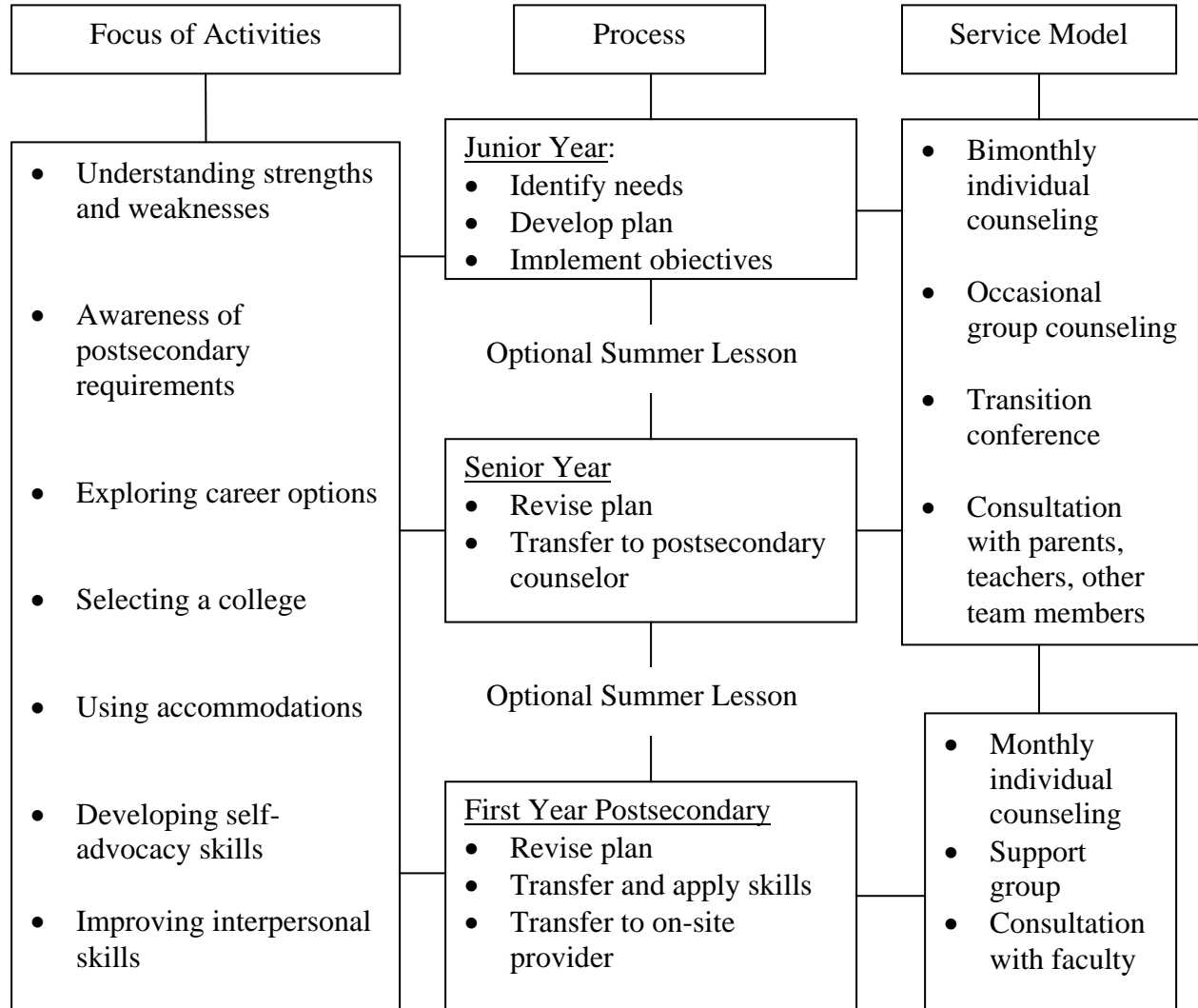
The study's design did not include a comparison or a control group. This is a limitation of the study and does not allow one to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of the intervention. Additionally, there was limited follow-up of the progress of the participants. One cohort was tracked until the end of the first year after their high school graduation (and they were regularly meeting with the postsecondary transition counselor) and the other cohort was not tracked past their senior year. Therefore, there is no evidence is available regarding long-term effects of the intervention.

The project and the implementation of the model appear to be coordinated by the transition counselors. Unfortunately, there is no information regarding the training of the transition counselors or the specific role of the transition counselors. It is clear, however, that there are two types of transition counselors, a secondary counselor and a postsecondary counselor, but it is unclear as to how many total counselors it took to implement this project and the amount of time each counselor spent meeting with students and transition teams, communicating with school personnel, gathering information, etc. This piece of information would be valuable to school

counselors who are considering implementing a similar program in their setting and would help them determine if such a program were feasible.

In closing, students with learning disabilities are entering postsecondary education institutions at ever-increasing rates, but are not completing their degrees at the same rate as their non-disabled peers. A review of the research literature tells us that transition programs can aid in preparing these students to meet the demands of college. In spite of this, very little information is available to provide us with detailed descriptions of transition programs and there are even fewer studies that examine the effectiveness of transition programs. The study reviewed here attempts to fill in some of these gaps, but we are unable to draw evidence-based conclusions about the effects of the program. School counseling researchers can utilize existing transition programs, such as the one presented here, to carry out studies that provide the evidence we need to determine if such transition programs are indeed helpful to students with learning disabilities and provide long-term benefits. Furthermore, such studies would help in defining the role that the school counselor plays in providing this population with the services they need to successfully transition to the post-secondary setting.

Figure 1  
 Reproduction of the program's model



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