Transition from High School to Postsecondary Education and Employment for Students with Disabilities

Issue:

People with disabilities experience higher unemployment rates and lower earnings than their non-disabled peers. They are less prepared to meet the challenges of adulthood, more likely to continue to live with their parents after high school, and engage in fewer social activities.

As the end of high school approaches, so does the termination of a structured environment and pre-college support systems. Many young people with disabilities have few friends and limited support from peers and mentors. The impact of social isolation is far-reaching, affecting not only friendships, but also academic and career success. Although higher education can enhance their employability and vocational success, fewer young adults with disabilities participate in post-secondary education and, of those who begin such programs, students with disabilities are more likely than non-disabled students to drop out of school prior to completion.

Students with disabilities can benefit from interactions with peers and adults with disabilities who are pursuing and participating in academic and career activities that they might otherwise have thought impossible for themselves. However, they are often isolated by great distances, transportation and scheduling challenges, communication limitations, and other obstacles that make it difficult for them to meet and interact in person. Computer-mediated communication (CMC), where people use computers and networking technologies to communicate with one another, can connect people separated by time and space who might not otherwise meet. Adaptive technology makes it possible for anyone to participate in computer-mediated communication regardless of disability. The combination of adaptive technology and Internet communication can help overcome the geographic, temporal, and disability-related barriers to establishing peer and mentor support groups and thereby reduce social isolation and allow independent access to information resources. A combination of in-person activities and CMC support has the potential to improve the postsecondary and career outcomes for young people with disabilities. Research is needed to identify the long-term impact of CMC and other supports. A thorough review of the literature indicates that
there are very few transition-related empirical research documents (Kohler & Chapman, 1999; Kohler & Hood, 2000; Kohler & Troesken, 1999).

**Research:**

Questions to be addressed in this study are:

- What is the impact of various aspects of a model program, that promotes computer-mediated communication with peers and mentors, on-campus summer study programs and other supports, on the transition of high school students with disabilities to higher education and employment?

- How can other programs apply the successful practices developed in this model program to improve academic and career outcomes for students with disabilities?

**Method:**

A follow-up survey study, building on earlier work (Burgstahler, 1997; Burgstahler, Baker, & Cronheim, 1997), was conducted to examine the role that CMC, summer study programs, and other support activities can play in easing social isolation and advancing the academic and career goals of students with disabilities.

**Participants.** DO-IT (Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology) has won many awards, including the President’s Award for "embodying excellence in mentoring underrepresented students and encouraging their significant achievement in science, mathematics, and engineering," the Golden Apple Award in Education, and the National Information Infrastructure Award. It is directed at the University of Washington. Operating since 1992, the University of Washington has been primarily funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF), the U.S. Department of Education, and the State of Washington. DO-IT programs work to increase the participation of students with disabilities in challenging academic programs and careers, such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. DO-IT Scholars, college-bound high school students with disabilities, meet face-to-face during live-in summer study programs at the University of Washington in Seattle. Year-round they use the Internet to communicate both with each other and adult mentors and to access information resources. A wide range of disabilities is represented in the group, including mobility impairments, hearing impairments, visual impairments, health impairments, and specific learning disabilities.

A total of 173 scholars participated in DO-IT from 1993 to 2000. Of the 173 participants, 155 with current contact information received a questionnaire and 75 scholars responded. Of these 75 scholars, 44 responded via Web-based questionnaire, 3 via e-mail, and 28 via regular mail, resulting in a 48 percent response rate. The scholars who began DO-IT in 2001 were not included in this study because some did not complete the first Summer Study. Consequently, they did not meet the study’s criteria to assess the long-term impact of DO-IT participation on postsecondary education and employment outcomes.

**Data.** The survey questionnaire was designed to assess DO-IT scholars’ perceptions of the impact that participation in the DO-IT project has had on their lives, and to evaluate the value of separate program features. The questionnaire was divided into four sections: (a) personal information, (b) Summer
Study programs, (c) year-round computer and Internet activities, and (d) changes in scholars as a result of participation. Personal information questions ranged from age and gender to postsecondary education and employment. The Summer Study section invited students to rate the importance of such items as computer and Internet use, social interaction, and career and college preparation. The year-round computer and Internet activities section asked students to rate these activities ranging from adaptive technology to on-line communication with peers and mentors. The final section asked respondents to assess their level of specific skills, ranging from Internet to self-advocacy skills, at three different points in their lives--before participating in DO-IT, after the first summer, and now.

Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were used to analyze the survey data. Statistical analyses consisted mostly of frequencies, means, and other descriptive statistics. For open-ended items, content analyses were performed to find general patterns in narrative evaluation.

**Findings:**

DO-IT survey respondents included 39 males and 36 females, mostly between the ages of 18-23, who listed impairments on mobility, sight, learning, hearing, and other multiple functions as their primary disability. Nine out of 10 graduated from high school to pursue postsecondary education and nearly half considered science, engineering, and mathematics as academic strengths. Their primary motivation for continuing their higher education was to "get a good job" in pursuit of financial security. Of those who were currently employed, social skills were deemed most important to secure employment followed by computer skills.

In regards to their DO-IT Summer Study and year-round activities, participants rated computer and Internet use the most valuable activity for enhancing their academic and career development skills. College preparation and developing personal relationships and social skills were also highly valued activities.

**Implications:**

Implications for researchers include the following: (1) further data should be gathered from parents, high school teachers and counselors, external evaluators, and DO-IT staff members and combined with participants' perceptions to add objectivity in the evaluation of the program’s effectiveness; (2) more empirical research is needed on long-term outcomes of participants from DO-IT and other transition programs in comparison with their non-program-participant peers.

Implications for service providers include the following: (1) Access to home computers and assistive technology, free Internet services, and technical consultants were identified as effective components of Internet support services that were most likely to result in high levels of consumer access and satisfaction in postsecondary education and employment. More secondary schools and other transition programs need to provide technology-integrated support services to help secondary school students become computer literate for better access to higher education and career options; (2) although year-round computer and Internet services provide critical support, some DO-IT scholars recommend a balance between face-to-face and Internet
support. On-line campus summer programs and regular follow-up meetings with participants and mentors were recommended.

References:


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