

***The Role of Families of Students with Disabilities in
Postsecondary Education
Brief***

Melanie Yehahey

Sibel Mestanova

***University of Hawaii
Center on Disability Studies***

Postsecondary education students have a range of independent, dependent and interdependent relationships with their families. Some students live apart from their families, are financially independent and have their own social networks. Other students live at home, are financially dependent, and still depend on family members for instrumental support, e.g. transportation and assistance with daily living. Students with disabilities often take a longer time to establish adult relationships within their families.

Faculty /student relationships can be very empowering in support of persons with disabilities during the postsecondary education years. Often faculty or peers can serve as role models and become mentors. They with the student's family may assist in providing transition plans and services so crucial when for youth with disabilities in preparing for adult life. Comprehensive transition planning needs to address several domains, including education, employment, personal responsibility, relationships, home and family, leisure pursuits, community involvement, and physical and emotional health.

All families go through a developmental sequence called a life cycle. It would be easier if parenting challenges were predictable, but, in fact families are complex, each having their strength and weaknesses. Parenting falls into three recognizable stages. A late stage, the launching stage, occurs as parents are sending their adult children to college, careers, or marriage, i.e. launching them out of the nuclear family. Transition from stage to stage is complex and sometimes life events can propel a family into unexpected situations. The launching process could be especially difficult for families with teens with disabilities.

Rationale

Transition planning is mandated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), formerly the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142). The transition planning requirements in IDEA, which include development of an individualized transition plan, ensures that planning is initiated in middle school and continued through high school. Transition planning and services focus on a coordinated set of student-centered activities designed to facilitate the student's movement from school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education. Transition planning for students with disabilities must remain flexible and reflect the developmental and educational needs of the students at different grades and times. It also must reflect a clear understanding of the disability, as well as the specific abilities and needs of the student. Planning should link the student's transition goals to effective and efficient services.

Roles and Responsibilities

Transition planning is a student-centered activity that requires a collaborative effort. Responsibilities are shared by the student, parents, secondary personnel, and postsecondary personnel, all of whom are members of the transition team.

The primary role of parents, after secondary education but during transition planning is to encourage and support students to plan and achieve their educational goals. Parents' legal rights for decision making is terminated at the exit of the student from secondary education. Parents should encourage students to develop independent decision-making and self-advocacy skills before the completion of secondary education.

To contribute to successful transition planning, parents should

- be involved in transition planning and ensure that the student is also included;
- help the student develop realistic goals;
- encourage the student to develop future educational plans and to explore realistic postsecondary options;
- help the student select high school courses that meet postsecondary requirements;
- collaborate with secondary and postsecondary staff to make decisions regarding programs, services, and resources;
- help the student collect and maintain an ongoing personal file that includes school and medical records, IEP, resume, and samples of academic work;
- communicate confidence in the student's ability to be successful in a postsecondary setting; and
- encourage the student to develop maximum independence in the learning, study, and living skills critical to success in postsecondary settings

Research in the area of family roles in postsecondary education was conducted as part of the National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational Support. The following attitudes, concerns, feelings were revealed during this research:

- ***Encouragement*** - encouragement from families to students is appreciated by all stakeholders. Some families show delay of encouragement, some students feel they need to prove themselves before receiving needed support.

- ***Toward self-determination*** – in this study parents and disability support find it difficult to balance between advocacy (for students) and self-determination. Mostly disability support coordinators expressed concerns about self-determinations, while students did not.
- ***Transition*** – the most problematic area for the most participants in the focus group was the transition process. Concerns regarding the differences of expectations, laws and procedures in secondary and postsecondary educations were expressed.
- ***Instrumental Supports Family*** – presently the immediate family is still the basic instrumental support
- ***Inner Family Support*** – The desire to count both on the family and on the support coordinators was expressed by the student and the family members of the students with disabilities.

Future Recommendation

This study revealed the tension and confusion among students with disabilities, their families and disability support personal. Although the focus group research method was useful for this study in order to understand some basic behaviors and attitudes, it was limited in terms of ability to generalize findings to a whole population. More research is needed that is definitive of the issues and outcomes in families of students with disabilities in postsecondary education..