Issues to be addressed:

There are a wide range of educational supports and services potentially available to students with disabilities in postsecondary institutions. However, findings from a series of National Focus Groups and the National Survey of Postsecondary Supports for Students with Disabilities (NCSPES, 2000) indicated that the availability of such supports varies from school to school, that there may be additional supports needed as well as better coordination of existing services, and utilization of these services depends on students knowing about and valuing them. Also, there are important natural supports that are not provided by postsecondary institutions or government agencies.

It is clear that the supports and services for students with disabilities in postsecondary settings are not equally effective and that some which could be effective are not always available. To better understand the effectiveness of available postsecondary supports and services, an important measure is the quality of student outcomes. What supports have actually helped people with disabilities to successfully complete a postsecondary education and subsequently obtain meaningful employment? One way to answer this question is to locate former students and find out which supports contributed to their success (and if there were missing supports that would have helped). Since there is no definitive measure for student success, this study will examine a set of converging indicators of success and satisfaction, such as: course grades; access to classes; level of satisfaction; successful graduation; subsequent employment; and personal factors including quality of life.

Research Questions:

- What supports, both individually and in combination, have actually been effective in helping people with disabilities to successfully complete their postsecondary education and to subsequently obtain meaningful employment?
- What are the exemplary models of people with disabilities who have successfully negotiated postsecondary education and have obtained quality employment? How might these models help to guide and support current and incoming students?
**Methods:**

This study was designed to occur in two phases. The goal of the first phase was to locate informants in California and Hawaii for the second phase of the study; namely people with disabilities who have successfully negotiated postsecondary education and subsequent work settings. A brief questionnaire was developed to help identify those informants that were graduates and/or exiters who met the criteria suggested by the aforementioned indicators for success. The questionnaire was sent to former students of several postsecondary institutions nationwide. In Hawaii, the Vocational Rehabilitation office distributed the questionnaire to eligible informants. In California, UAP staff member(s) distributed the questionnaires to eligible informants.

**Subject selection**

Four respondents were chosen from those that completed and returned the questionnaires to be informants in the main phase of the study. This study utilized a qualitative sampling strategy for this selection process, wherein subjects are chosen to maximize the potential range of information to address the research questions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Guba, 1981; Glaser & Strauss, 1967); Guba (1981) notes that this sampling “is not intended to be representative or typical” (Guba, 1981), in contrast to quantitative sampling methods. The candidates for the study were selected partly on the basis of diversity in terms of both disability and postsecondary setting (e.g., 4-year, 2-year, and vocational), to include a broad range of experience and resultant data. Informants were also selected on their basis of geographic availability to the interviewers.

The goal for phase two of the project was to build case studies of the selected informants through two interviews. These interviews were designed to: (a) reveal and describe the supports that contributed to each student’s success in college and in subsequent settings; (b) indicate the student’s level of satisfaction with the services provided; and (c) elicit suggestions for improvement. The first interview with each participant was exploratory in nature, revealing topics for further discussion and establishing rapport between the interviewer and informant. A basic protocol for the interview was developed using guidelines from the literature (Stiles, 1993; Schneider, 1991) and consisted of questions and prompts concerning the role and impact of secondary school, family/community factors, the role/impact of postsecondary faculty, postsecondary education supports, the impact of support providers, the role/impact of person factors, uses of technology, transition to subsequent employment or workplace participation, the role of age, gender, minority status, and SES, and disability specific factors.

All interviews were tape recorded (with permission of the interviewee), transcribed and notes were taken on relevant nonverbal information. The transcripts and notes from the discussions were then studied carefully by the researchers, and a list of significant topics was generated. This list was utilized to sort transcript passages into categories based on content. Content categories were then examined for similarities and
differences, and then grouped into themes, using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984; Stiles, 1993). Results were offered to the informants for feedback and testimonial validity or member checks, wherein participants verify the accuracy of the researcher’s interpretations and conclusions (Kotre, 1984; Stiles, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A case study was prepared and written up for each of the informants, taking care to maintain confidentiality. Aggregate findings across the case studies are summarized below.

**Findings:**

**Themes in the 3 Dimensions: Secondary - Postsecondary - Employment**

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<tr>
<th>Secondary</th>
<th>Postsecondary</th>
<th>Employment/Workplace</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher:</td>
<td>Faculty:</td>
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<td>a) Expectations</td>
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<td>Peer:</td>
<td>Peer:</td>
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<td>a) Socialization</td>
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<td>Strategies to Succeed</td>
<td>Strategies to Succeed</td>
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**Themes Beyond the 3 Dimensions**

- **Personal (or Person/Internal/Individual) Factors** - Informants talked about the importance of social and communication skills, as well as moral strength, discipline and persistence.
- **Overcoming Challenges** – Informants indicated that they felt that learning survival skills aided in their fighting the same battles repeatedly.
- **Impact of Nature of Disability** – Individuals also indicated disability specific factors that affected their ability to achieve success. The onset of acquired disability, and variable disability types were two commonly discussed dimensions that create different needs.
Implications for models/guides for individuals with disabilities to follow

- People with disabilities should compromise/negotiate with faculty and administrators.
  “…, I can understand how it’s more difficult for them in a regular classroom setting when you’re trying to fit learning for all kids. You’ve got bright kids that get things, and then you’ve got those of us who have difficulty in learning. I can understand how difficult it must be to try to reach out to everybody, and yet I know that some teachers do it better than others. . . That’s the way I think you reach people; you should try to learn their style, but that’s not always easy to do.”
- Family and other natural supports are important through college and subsequent employment.
  “I got supports in many different ways. I got moral supports – mainly from my parents. Without my parents I wouldn’t be here. No matter who or what other supports I may have if I didn’t have moral supports I don’t think I’d be here today.”
- People should adapt to the environment and not always adapt the environment to people.
  “The only concern I had [in school] was my eyes. . . The thing that helped me learn was that through the years I had gone to different workshops on my own, or had people that could teach me, or had read other things that taught me that there are other ways to learn. And now I even teach people how to do that. It’s one of those things that you should try to focus on, ‘Where are your learning skills?’”
- One positive role can make all the difference.
  “Fortunately I ran into a woman and she took an interest in me. She would sit with me after school and help me, and I went from making a D- to an A. I had the top grade in the class, because somebody gave me a chance and said ‘You know, you don’t have a problem.’”
- Work hard, persistence pays off.
  “So I eventually had to drop out because I was flunking. But when I went to college I took college-prep math to try and catch up. . . I worked really hard to catch up and once I had the fundamentals I was fine, and then I started understanding calculus and started making excellent grades in physics and stuff. I went on to Texas A&M, my parents agreed to send me, and I was going to try to do this engineering thing.”
- Models should take the onset and type of disability into account.
  “I tested horrible so I didn’t always finish the tests. . . At that point [in college] they hadn’t figured it out yet; nobody told me that I had dyslexia. It was only a friend later on who went to college herself that suggested that I might have dyslexia, and she explained what it was. It made me feel different; I don’t know that it necessarily made me feel better, but at least there was something I could work with.”
References:


