Follow-up Study of the Postsecondary Educational Experiences of Twenty Youth with Cognitive Disabilities

AUDIENCE
Students with disabilities, family members of students with disabilities; high school Special Education and School to Work teachers; college disability support coordinators and career center personnel; and, those interested in public policy across educational environments.

ISSUE
Postsecondary education has been seen as an important step in developing a productive adult life, particularly in gaining employment that offers a livable wage. Information regarding individuals with more significant cognitive disabilities, such as mental retardation, who use the vocational rehabilitation system, reveals that participation in postsecondary education correlates positively with competitive, rather than sheltered, employment (Gilmore, Schuster, Zafft, & Hart, 2001).

In recent years, organizations such as the Council for Exceptional Children and others have supported keeping students with developmental disabilities, age 18-22, with their peers in postsecondary settings (Moon & Inge, 2000; Tashie, Malloy, & Lichtenstein, 1998; Smith & Puccini, 1995). With rare exceptions (Page & Chadsey-Rusch, 1995), few studies have examined the experiences or outcomes of youth, age 18-22 years, with significant disabilities attending inclusive postsecondary education. In addition, parents and educators, while interested in seeing students go on to postsecondary education, have many concerns about their student’s ability to be successful in this new and challenging environment.

RESEARCH QUESTION
What do 20 students with significant cognitive disabilities, age 18-22 years, their parents and educators note as important aspects and outcomes of
participation in inclusive postsecondary education?

1. What types of inclusive postsecondary education options did 20 youth with significant disabilities participate in and what employment outcomes did they experience?

2. How did their employment outcomes compare to 20 youth (matched cohort) who did not participate in postsecondary education?

3. What academic accommodations, supports, and services did students with significant cognitive disabilities use while in postsecondary education?

4. What adult life experiences and outcomes do parents and educators identify for students who participate in postsecondary education, and what concerns does postsecondary education raise for parents and educators?

METHOD

Little information exists about the participation of youth with significant cognitive disabilities in inclusive postsecondary education. For this reason, a mixed model of quantitative and qualitative inquiry is called for to identify outcomes (inventory and survey information gathering) and explore expectations and concerns (semi-structured interviews).

For quantitative survey: A quantitative component, using a survey instrument addressing postsecondary education and employment outcomes, will be given to the 20 students and a matched cohort, to gain comparison data. Efforts will be made during sampling to establish similarities of the groups on key variables. In the event that intervention and control groups are not equal on particular measures, Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) will be used in order to account for the existing differences. Finally, before the comparison between the groups occurs, statistical power will be estimated using Cohen’s (1988) method of determining power for independent groups. Statistical analysis will be carried out using SPSS. In addition, a checklist of academic accommodations, supports, and services recently identified by the National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational Supports (NCSPES) will be administered to the 20 students who participated in inclusive postsecondary education to obtain data on accommodation use. Additions by students to this list to promote access for individuals with significant disabilities will be requested at the end of the survey.

For semi structured conversational interviews: Three student-(his/her) parent-(his/her) educator units will be identified from the students participating in the survey portion of the investigation and a parallel series of open-ended questions will be developed for each member of the unit (student, parent, educator). Along with several foundational questions, such as description of educational experience from each person’s perspective, a conversational interview format will be used to generate information about experiences and outcomes which students, parents, and educators identify. Included in the questions will be a prompt addressing how individual student, parent, or educator overcame barriers to participation in inclusive postsecondary education.
The qualitative components of the study will not only strengthen the inquiry process but will allow the researchers to fully describe the findings and paint a picture of the context in which the research takes place (DeVellis, 1991). Credibility of the data depends on how closely findings reflect the system under investigation. Prolonged and persistent engagement and triangulation will be used to ensure that data are credible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer debriefing and member checks will be used as well.

The semistructured interviews will involve qualitative data analysis including coding and memo writing (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Myles & Huberman, 1994). A reconciliation method will be established to reach consensus on the coded text. Once the initial coding of the data is completed, the data will be sorted into categories and the analysis of over-arching themes will occur. Memos provide the conceptual link between the coded data and the development of themes (Strauss, 1987). The memos will serve to focus the discussion of themes, codes, and the research questions.

**SIGNIFICANT PRELIMINARY FINDINGS**

**Study Status**

Surveys have been completed on 20 students with significant cognitive disabilities and a matched cohort. Initial survey findings show that regarding variables associated with employment, statistical significance was found in a comparison of the two groups of student regarding competitive compared to sheltered employment. Comparing work settings, 100% of the students with postsecondary educational experience who were working were in competitive employment compared to 42.9% for students without postsecondary education who are working. Furthermore, 66.7% of the students with postsecondary education in competitive employment used no work-related supports (e.g., job coach) compared to 28.6% of students with no postsecondary educational experience. In addition, no student with postsecondary education experience worked at a pay rate below $6.75 while two students from the group without postsecondary education did piece working generating a pay rate of $.50 per hour and 1 student reported a pay rate of $4.10 per hour.

When examining academic accommodations (e.g., extended time for testing, readers, scribes, for a total of 17 possible accommodations including “other”) used by students participating in postsecondary education, one student was offered academic accommodations and declined use in high school and college while 19 used some form of academic accommodation in postsecondary education. Students were more likely to use academic accommodations and a wider variety of accommodations in postsecondary settings compared to high school.

On-going inventories of student experiences show that postsecondary education is accessed in a variety of ways – workshops, continuing education courses, audit, and credit courses, and on a reduced course load of one to two courses per semester.

Student-Parent-Educator units have been identified for semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions have been framed.
PRELIMINARY IMPLICATIONS
- Initial analysis suggests a link between postsecondary education and competitive employment and reduced need for employment supports.
- Students in the study tended to use a greater number and type of academic accommodations in postsecondary education than in high school.
- During this transition period from high school to adult life, postsecondary education was accessed in a manner that matches the student’s preference and level of comfort.

REFERENCES


CONTACT INFORMATION

INFORMATION ON THIS BRIEF CAN BE OBTAINED BY CONTACTING:

Cynthia Zafft & Debra Hart
Institute on Community Inclusion
University of Massachusetts/Boston
Morrisey Boulevard
Dorchester, MA
Cynthia.Zafft@TCH.harvard.edu