AUDIENCE: Rehabilitation Counselors, Rehabilitation Agencies, College Disabilities Counselors, Transition Specialist, Special Education Teachers and Directors, Students with Disabilities.

ISSUE

The U.S. Department of Education in their Strategic Plan of 1998-2000 has reported that postsecondary education is the entryway to professional and technical training and higher wages. While youth with disabilities are pursuing postsecondary education in greater numbers, they are having limited success in college and training programs. Given the present vacancies in the workforce and the projected future needs, it is critical that persons with disabilities enter and be able to succeed in postsecondary education and training in order to access higher-skilled jobs and compete in the workforce. There is a compelling need for strong transition programs and practices to address the issues of postsecondary education and services for youth with disabilities. The active involvement of Rehabilitation Counselors in transition planning is crucial in assisting students with disabilities in career planning and goal setting, as well as the supports necessary to achieve them. Many questions arise regarding their role in high schools and postsecondary education settings. Additional questions surface regarding the types of services and supports necessary for students with disabilities to experience success in postsecondary education and the workplace.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the nature of the relationship between Rehabilitation Counselors and high school special education teachers/transition specialists in transitioning youth with disabilities into postsecondary education?
2. According to rehabilitation counselors, special education teachers/transition specialists and
students with disabilities, what is the role of the Rehabilitation Counselors in transitioning students to postsecondary settings?

3. What supports services do students with disabilities believe are necessary to succeed in postsecondary education?

4. How does a Rehabilitation Counselor support students with disabilities enrolled in postsecondary education?

5. What is the role of an effective Rehabilitation Counselor in facilitating students with disabilities access to employment after completion of postsecondary education?

METHOD

In order to gain a more holistic understanding of providing transition services to youth with disabilities the perceptions and experiences of the key players in this process and the dynamics of these relationships need to be investigated. This study is designed to take an in depth look at the role of a Rehabilitation Counselor and the nature of these relationships through a careful examination of the counseling practice. These 4 counselors provide transition services to youth with disabilities in 36 school districts encompassing urban, suburban and rural settings in a tri-county area in a mid western state.

Each of the counselors will identify students with disabilities on their case list that have completed a 2 year degree, 4 year degree, or a college certification program. The data sources for this study will be Rehabilitation Counselors, the special education teachers/transition specialist, and the 12 college students with disabilities. The Rehabilitation Counselors and the special education teachers will be interviewed separately about their role in the transition process for the respective college students.

The 12 students with disabilities will be interviewed about the role of their Rehabilitation Counselor in transitioning them through postsecondary education/training to employment and the supports they believe have been necessary for their success.

The research method will be an in-depth interview developed for each of the players in the transition process. In-depth interviewing is the method selected for this study as it is one of the best ways to discern peoples’ perceptions towards various events in this process. The principal investigator will conduct the interviews. All of the interviews will be audio taped and transcribed. A team of three researchers will analyze the data.

The final results from the data will be analyzed and presented as a case study of the best practices of Rehabilitation Counselors in providing transition services to students with disabilities as they transition from high school to postsecondary education/training to employment. The case study will include descriptions of the nature of the relationships between the players in the transition process, the role of an effective Rehabilitation Counselor, and the supports and services students with disabilities believe necessary for success.
in postsecondary education/training and in accessing employment.

PRELIMINARY IMPLICATIONS

Significant Preliminary Findings

Study Status

We are nearing the end of data collection. Three of the 4 Rehabilitation Counselors have been interviewed, 10 of 12 college students with disabilities have been interviewed, and 2 of 9 special education teachers. All of the interviews completed to date have been transcribed and read three times by the lead researcher.

Themes that have emerged regarding the role of the Rehabilitation Counselor from initial readings of the interviews are:

Special Education Teachers’ Interviews regarding the Rehabilitation Counselors’ role:

- To assist the student with a disability in thinking about their strengths, interests, and their future career goals.
- To provide students with monetary support for college/training in the form of tuition and books, as well as the technology that will support their success in college.
- To connect with the students in high school so that there is an established relationship which allow the counselor to serve as the students’ cheerleader and encourage his/her efforts in college and the workplace.

Rehabilitation Counselor Interviews regarding their role:

- To help the student take charge and think about what they really want to do.
- To help them meet their potential and provide them with an opportunity to try things in college and in the workplace.
- To provide supports that are above and beyond what they can access from other sources, i.e., tuition, books, specialized tutoring, assistive technology.
- To assist them in developing vocational goals and provide ongoing vocational counseling.
- To work closely with the special education teachers as a resource in career development and counseling and bridge the supports to college and work so that the students are not left floundering.
- To nurture the development of students' self-determination and self-advocacy skills.

The themes that have emerged from the interviews of college students with disabilities about the supports in college they felt were most important:

- The majority of students reported that a phone call at the beginning and the end of the semester to find out how they were doing in school, what assistance they needed, and to encourage and acknowledge their progress was very beneficial. One male college student with a learning disability stated, “I felt good to know someone out there cared about me and wanted me to be successful besides my family.”
- A second major support was having their own computer available to them 24 hours a day. This provided them
with the quiet time to focus, work at their own pace, and take courses on-line. One male college student with a learning disability stated, "It is true you have computer access in a lab 24 hours per day at college, but if you are a person with a disability sometimes you like to be alone and be able to focus and be able to work so that the world moves at your own pace."

- Several other supports were reported as very beneficial in their completion of college and finding employment.
  - Monies for tuition and books
  - Specialized tutoring in their areas of difficulty
  - Career/employment counseling, job coaching, job developer

**Preliminary Implications**

- Developing a working relationship with students with disabilities in high school is critical in order for the rehabilitation counselor to be able to provide them with ongoing career counseling and emotional support.

- Rehabilitation counselors need to know that college students with disabilities highly value their contact at the beginning and the end of the semester. They view these conversations as a strong source of positive emotional support from someone besides their family that encourages and motivates them.

- Rehabilitation agencies need to know that providing funds for students with disabilities to have their own computer in college provides them with the flexibility and the quiet to learn at their own pace and access on-line courses.

**CONTACT INFORMATION**

Information on this brief can be obtained by contacting Dr. Peg Lamb, Project Director for the Bridges Project funded by the National Science Foundation, Division of Persons with Disabilities at Holt High School, Holt, MI. Phone (517) 694-2162 ext. 434 or e-mail: mlamb@holt.k12.mi.us. Mail should be sent to the following address:

Dr. Peg Lamb  
Holt High School  
1784 Aurelius Rd.  
Holt, Michigan 48842