

Person-Centered and Collaborative Supports for College Success

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Abstract: Recent studies of innovative supports and services in postsecondary education reveal more effective and cooperative mechanisms with which to provide supports to individuals with disabilities (Stodden, Jones, & Chang, 2003; Whelley, Hart, & Zafft, 2003). Colleges and universities can design supports that permit consumer choice while avoiding establishment of isolating parallel "service systems." Providing individual supports for students with significant disabilities will establish new and creative alliances driven by wishes and dreams of the students. This paper is a participant observation, discussing individual and collaborative supports, providing a discussion of and recommendations for effective strategies, and presenting successful students who have pursued their dreams of postsecondary education.

Kathy is a college student labeled by others as "blind," "developmentally disabled," and "palsied." Many people believed that these labels defined her and would determine her future. When she was a student in segregated special education classes, Kathy longed for the challenges, choices, and opportunities not provided for special education students. She was determined to make college an ordinary, challenging experience, where she could learn and grow, as do other students without disabilities. Through the creative, collaborative teamwork of her school district, vocational rehabilitation, good friends, and community based supports, the barriers of limited academic preparation, low placement test scores and low expectations have been overcome. Today, as a result of creative perseverance and teamwork, Kathy is pursuing an associate's degree at a community college close to her home, and anticipates graduating in 2003. Kathy is one of a growing number of students

with labels of significant disabilities who are pursuing their dreams of a postsecondary education through utilization of creative individual supports and collaborative partnerships.

Individual supports for college can be designed around the desires and unique needs of students. In such environments, students are not part of a specially designed program for students with disabilities, but individuals who avail themselves of existing supports available through the college, the local school district, Vocational Rehabilitation, and other relevant support agencies in a collaborative and empowering way. Collaboration and person-centered planning are both key features of this approach to postsecondary education. Family, friends, Vocational Rehabilitation, local school districts, and the college all have a role in the planning process (McGrath & Van Buskirk, 1999; O'Brien & Lovett, 1993; Weir, 2002). Any student who is interested in college may pursue the goal to attend regular college classes and participate in normal activities. Flexible, individualized support can be helpful to students in their pursuit and achievement in higher education.

Some educators, wishing to include students with disabilities in postsecondary education, view the establishment of "programs," run by human services agencies and housed on a college campus, as a possible approach (Neubert, Moon, Grigal, & Redd, 2001). How-

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ever, these programs tend to offer a menu of options from which a person must choose, rather than a full array of college opportunities. The primary distinction between group centered and person centered planning lies in the *individual* nature of the supports offered to students (Hart, Zafft, & Zimbrich, 2001). In contrast to special programs which are developed on campus with the goal of addressing the needs of a *group* of students, where students are compartmentalized by needs and directed into a pre-designed program, individual support systems start out with the unique needs and desires of the student (Hart et al.; Weir, 2002). There are three key factors that differentiate individual supports from program supports. The first is a significant difference in the quantity of colleges that disabled students can attend. A second important distinction is in the role the student plays on the college campus, i.e., independent student vs. program participant or “special” student. Individuals who are supported by person-centered planning to attend college are autonomous; they do not enter as program participants, and thus are more likely to be seen as fully integrated college students. Finally, a program that is located at a college campus may be provided only for the “transition” years, and students only have the option of attending college while affiliated with the transition program.

Through use of individual supports and service teamwork from the beginning, students are empowered to continue their college education on their own timetable. School district employees can use their experience and expertise to collaborate with adult supports on behalf of an individual student, and widen the base of support for each student in this way.

Method

Participant observation was used as the data collection method for this project. This method is the most commonly used form of qualitative research. It is characterized by development of casual relationships with informants by an investigator in the field who keeps field notes and accounts of observations, records and recurrent events. The field worker may not only observe, but play a direct role in the events, and can be considered as

part of the observation. Participant observation is considered by some to be less biased than other avenues of research because of its internal checks and responsiveness to data. It allows direct and intimate contact with the study participants and increases the researcher’s understanding of the complex interdependencies of the individuals and social systems involved (McCall & Simmons, 1969). Quality of the method, or “goodness of fit” in qualitative methodology, is measured by trustworthiness data and response validity, or accuracy of reporting (Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Zelditch, 1969). Trust in this project was achieved via long-term (one to three years) engagement of the author and participants.

To obtain participants for this project, students and colleges were approached as part of a three-year model demonstration project designed to enhance the enrollment of individuals labeled as cognitively disabled in postsecondary education in one Northeastern state. Students were selected through outreach efforts to high schools, developmental service agencies, and family groups via snowball sampling or chain referral. This technique is one of non-random sampling, but is often utilized with special populations. When appropriate candidates are hard to locate, a local support group or even a well-known individual within a community is asked to assist in obtaining participants with a specific disability or with specific characteristics needed for a research study.

In this case, project staff made several regional presentations about the project and the supports it offered to individuals interested in attending college with the team support of these groups. Moreover, colleges were matched to students based on individual choice. The intervention of the model demonstration project was designed through initial person-centered planning to determine the wishes and goals of each participant for his or her postsecondary education. Because of the individual nature of the planning process, interventions would vary by participant, but typically involved creation of a collaborative team of individuals and agencies that could offer support to the student while in college. Each participant received ongoing contact and support from project staff. Annual reports

to the funding agency (OSEP) reflected what project directors were learning from these participants as well as information regarding what worked in supporting individuals with cognitive disabilities in postsecondary education.

Qualitative Results

Successful strategies for supporting students to attend the colleges of their choice identified through this project are best described through use of the stories of the individuals who have embarked on this journey towards educational fulfillment. Such personal accounts illustrate the manner in which individuals with significant disabilities are overcoming them through use of creative support strategies. Supports, illustrated here by students labeled as having “significant” disabilities, or as developmentally challenged also increase the likelihood of success for all students with disabilities in higher education.

Gary

As a high school student, Gary was considered to be a person that was “uneducable,” a person who would not benefit from academic studies, due in part to the lack of a formal communication system. Once a communication system was provided to him, he expressed his desire to get the education he had been denied for so long. However, he had no high school diploma, and had little academic preparation. A support collaboration that involves Gary’s mother, vocational rehabilitation, two fellow college students and a great college professor allows Gary to attend a university and finally experience the challenges of academic studies.

Pam

Pam, like many other students with disabilities, does not perform well on standardized tests. Students like Pam are prevented from participating in college classes because of poor scores on placement tests in Math and English, making them ineligible for college level classes. For Pam, poor scores were the barriers to her dream of a college education. She took the tests, and her scores indicated

that she would have a very difficult time in college level classes. She was advised to forgo her dream of a higher education and move on. Pam insisted that she could succeed in the classes in which she had an interest, and enrolled in a class that did not require placement scores. She and her support team met with the professors to design effective evaluation methods for her learning style. Pam uses the supports available to all college students, and aides from her community support agency stay in touch with the college and help her with assignments.

Linda

Linda was advised by the disability support coordinator at the college of her choice not to pursue a college education due to her labels of significant learning challenges. For “her own good,” she was discouraged from pursuing her dream because of the perceptions that others had of her. The potential for failure that they feared for her created a barrier for Linda. Undaunted, she chose to pursue her dream anyway. With the collaborative support of family, friends, and a community based tutoring service to help her with her schoolwork. She still visits the disability support person each semester to receive legally required accommodations in her classes, but creatively uses other supports in the pursuit of her dream.

John

When John shared his dream of being a writer with his vocational rehabilitation counselor and high school transition team, the team did not immediately think of college courses in writing, because labels and test scores suggested that John did not have the “ability to benefit” from college level classes. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act states that colleges do not need to accommodate students with disabilities unless the ability to benefit with accommodations is evident. John insisted that this was the way to improve his skills and be able to have his dream job. In the end, the vocational counselor agreed to pay for tuition for one course, to see how John fared and, in this way, accurately determine his “ability to benefit.” John completed his first college En-

glish course with a “B.” Despite preconceived ideas about his potential, John proved his ability to benefit. He continues to take one writing course per semester, paid for by Vocational Rehabilitation.

Lynn

Lynn was enrolled in non-academic classes that focused on daily living and vocational skills while in high school. However, this track would not prepare her to pursue her desired profession. Lynn’s dream was that of working with children at a daycare center. In order to complete the requirements for daycare workers, Lynn needed six college credits. Vocational Rehabilitation financially supported her to meet this state licensing requirement by completing two college courses in child development by doing the following:

- ◆ Helping her enroll in school.
- ◆ Identifying needed courses.
- ◆ Meeting with professor.
- ◆ Identifying a support person who attended classes with her.
- ◆ Creating alternative assessments.
- ◆ Paying for professional tutoring for the student, to supplant the peer tutoring available at the college. The student and her tutor developed grids for the child observations and in so doing assisted ALL students in this assignment.

Jenny

Although Jenny had been labeled as cognitively disabled, she and her family believed in her ability to get a college education and a rewarding career. Together with her college advisor, Jenny was able to design a major that highlighted her strengths and interests. For those classes that were particularly difficult, Jenny audited the class first, and then took the course for credit, allowing her more time to learn the essential material. Jenny takes advantage of various supports, such as:

- ◆ College-provided peer tutors.
- ◆ Working regularly with the instructors at the college learning center.
- ◆ Meetings with her academic advisor.
- ◆ Her mother’s help with homework.

Jenny is a college student. Like many of her classmates, she works diligently, failing some classes along the way, like many of her friends at school. One of the things she is fond of saying sums up the way she feels about how her dreams were supported: “When I was born,” Jenny says, “my parents were told that I would be in an institution, and I now I am, but it’s another kind of institution—a college!”

Mark

Mark is a young man with Down syndrome who has completed four years of high school and expressed his dream to attend college. He wanted to learn more about computers so that he could work in the field. His school district organizes and provides supports that will allow him to attend college once he completes his four years at high school. Availing himself of supports from a community based support agency, his family and the community college he chose to attend, Mark is currently enrolled in a college class. In the “Introduction to Computers” course, he is increasing his computer skills. He also uses the Learning Center at the college to improve his writing skills and often chooses to have lunch at the college’s cafeteria. When he is not at class or working on schoolwork at the college, he occupies himself with a part-time job at an office supply store.

Andrew

Andrew graduated from high school last year, with the other young men and women he had been with since first grade. His school district will still be supporting his educational goals until he turns twenty-one, but because of creative, person centered transition planning, those supports provide him with the opportunity to take college classes, rather than three more “senior years” at the high school. Through the efforts of a collaborative team including Andrew, his family, local community resources for young men and women, the school district, and an adult support agency works to assure that Andrew has the life he imagined, not the one that fit into anyone’s pre-conceived ideas of what a person labeled autistic might want to do.

Recommendations

In working with several students with the designation of significant disabilities, and supporting their individual goals for attending college, several key factors likely to support success were established. Following are steps that were shown to be effective when providing individualized, community centered supports for students with disabilities who are planning to go to college.

Meet with student and identify goals through the use of a person-centered planning approach, such as PATH, that helps the student articulate his or her dreams for the future and how college fits in to those dreams. The student and a team of people representing both personal and professional relationships meet to identify dreams, goals, and supports needed to attain that goal. The essence of individual supports is that they are person-centered (Falvey, Forest, Pearpoint, & Rosenberg, 1994). Supports are student driven and may be coordinated by the student or a person chosen by the student. This may be a friend, a case manager, a high school teacher, a vocational rehabilitation counselor, a family member or a staff person from an adult support agency. Because of the collaborative and responsive nature of individualized support, ongoing communication between the student and those people involved in his or her support is required.

Determine college of choice. This can be done through talking with the high school guidance counselor and other students, attending college open houses, visiting campuses through tours provided by college admission offices, and attending college fairs. College catalogs will describe courses of study available and will outline the supports provided through the disability support offices and the learning centers at the college.

Develop knowledge of the college culture and the supports available on the college campus, including those that are specifically designed for students with disabilities and those that are provided to all students. It is important to understand the protections afforded by the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Because they differ from those provided under the IDEA (1993), students and their advocates

would be much better able to locate and advocate for supports with the college when they understand these distinctions.

Identify partners and potential resources. These resources include the community agencies that are available to support postsecondary education, such as Vocational Rehabilitation and adult developmental services agencies. For those students who are 18–21 and still eligible, services and supports are available through the high school. Potential resources also include college-based supports, college financial aid services, and family and friends.

Schedule a meeting with disability support services personnel at the colleges the student is interested in attending. Be prepared with questions about the types of supports and the resources available at the college. Be sure to discuss strengths and support needs of the student. Look for commitment on the part of the college to provide ongoing support to the persons with disabilities who have chosen to matriculate there. Discuss how the partners that have been identified will provide additional supports.

Support the student to pick the classes they wish to take. The student may apply for admission to the college and a particular program, or may choose to take courses through the Division of Continuing Education as a non-matriculated student. For students who do not meet all the requirements for matriculation into a college or course of study, such as a standard high school diploma, this is a very useful option to exercise. There may also be extracurricular activities that the student may want to participate in at the college, including special interest and discussion groups.

Meet with the faculty members teaching the classes the student will attend. This allows the student to find out what is required in the class, and to determine the supports he/she will need to be successful. If a student chooses to audit a class, there is flexibility in the work requirements. If the course is taken for credit, the student will be expected to meet the established goals of the class. Determine what accommodations are needed to make that possible, and who will be providing them.

Meet regularly with the team that is supporting the student to solve problems when concerns or issues arise.

In addition to these activities, which were

found to be effective in supporting individuals with significant disabilities to attend college, there are also important underlying beliefs and values that were observed to be present in teams successfully supporting individuals in college. These values and beliefs can be characterized in the following ways:

- People with labels of disabilities have a right to pursue their dreams, including those that involve a postsecondary education.
- A creative and positive approach to potential barriers and ability to collaborate with others to overcome these barriers is essential.
- Attitudinal barriers that exist for persons with labels of disabilities must be confronted.

Discussion

Participation in postsecondary education for individuals with significant disabilities described in this paper illustrates the impact that new ways of thinking about resources, support and control can have on the lives of individuals. These stories, and others like them, would not have happened without some key ingredients:

- Pre-planning which emphasizes the goals and dreams of the student,
- Creative use of existing community resources,
- Interagency collaboration, and
- Willingness to challenge assumptions about the capacity of individuals with disabilities to learn and succeed.

Although colleges and universities have experienced an increase in the numbers of students with disabilities that they support in recent years (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996), and more students with labels of significant disabilities are considering college or attending college, their participation in postsecondary education is still very limited. When students with labels of significant disabilities attend college as typical, fully participating students, they challenge long-held assumptions about disability, about the nature of intelligence and the role of postsecondary education. These

challenges call for a significant paradigm shift for many people, and barriers still remain to full participation. An analysis of systemic barriers is implicated by this project's findings. Each student profiled here was successful because of a creative and flexible support system that was willing to figure out ways around existing systemic barriers to collaboration and financial support. For example, federal financial aid regulations currently have regulatory procedures that unduly hinder students with disabilities who require financial aid to continue their education.

This project showed that in order to have a greater chance for success in secondary school, students with significant disabilities should take academic course work that will prepare them for college, and eschew the common practice of limiting curricular options to community-based and life skills instruction. The expectation for and support of academic goals while still in high school has an obvious positive impact on the success of students in college. These courses may be modified according to the regulations of IDEA '97, but care should be taken to maintain the high expectations that these courses have. The course of study in secondary school needs to support a career track. The identification of a career may be best integrated if a person-centered plan (e.g. PATH) is used before a transition plan is written as part of the IEP.

The shift to college preparation has implications for families and teachers as well as students with significant disabilities. Some families of students with disabilities may need to increase their expectations for youth with disabilities, and consider the value of postsecondary education in pursuit of a desired lifestyle. Teachers and all secondary education professionals for youth with significant disabilities may be challenged to adapt to these higher standards for students with significant disabilities. There will need to be adaptations in expectations of post-school outcomes for some students that lead to curricular change and new collaborations with community agencies. New initiatives such as Individual Transition Plans, No Child Left Behind and standards based testing support these developments.

Person-centered planning was found in this

study to be a critical factor in designing appropriate supports and goals for postsecondary education. Although this planning method has been supported by many model demonstration projects, its use is not yet commonplace. Although the creativity and flexibility of this method may be threatened by the systematization of it, use of person-centered planning needs some financial support to survive and flourish.

Postsecondary education for students with cognitive disabilities should be a choice that is available to students and their families. Supporting this choice requires flexible service systems. At this point there are few situations that systemically support the choice of postsecondary education for students with significant disabilities. The alignment of supports and services on the local, state, and federal level is a place to begin to discern where supports and services currently exist to support students with significant disabilities in colleges.

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