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Preparation Starts Early: High School-to-College Transition Activity

Calendar

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The Need for Transition Services

A growing body of literature has emerged about the importance of effective transition services for high school students with disabilities, particularly those who are blind or visually impaired, to prepare for appropriate employment or readiness and acceptance into college. Making the move from high school to college, while a long-awaited rite of passage, is fraught with challenges and trepidation, as well as excitement, for all young people. For students who are blind or visually impaired, there is a broad array of extra steps to assist in making the transition smooth, and a systematic sequencing of activities to make the process more manageable (Dote-Kwan & Senge, 2002; Trief & Feeney, 2005).

Many of the tasks that are necessary require early preparation that many students do not think about or consider important for getting into college, such as volunteer or part-time work experience or assuming an active or leadership role in a high school committee or organization. Not all students have access to the expert guidance and support they need in order to make for a smooth

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progression through each grade. Students need to know the importance of advocating for themselves, such as being an active participant in their Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings as early as possible. They need to be involved when important decisions are being made about their future—such as course selections, opportunities for advanced placement and taking advantage of many summer transition programs to prepare them for college. Without these opportunities, many students find themselves struggling in their senior year of high school to complete activities that they should have been engaging in throughout high school and earlier.

Knowing that you want to go to college is not enough. The road is arduous, and it is helpful to have a road map to direct you through the process. For students who are blind or visually impaired and heading to college, a sequential map of steps to be accomplished enables most to be “raring to go” on the first day of class.

Development of a Transition Tool

The National Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision at Mississippi State University (MSU-NRTC), as part of their transition grant (number H133A070001) from the National Institute of Disability Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR), has developed an online Transition Activity Calendar for students, their families, and those who work with them. This new online transition calendar is an extensive checklist starting in middle school and progressing through the high school years until the student starts college. It is an updated,

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expanded, and redesigned version of the popular Transition Activity Calendar (McBroom et al., 1996), also a product of the MSU-NRTC. The new online Transition Activity Calendar is a tool that provides suggestions for identifying a career goal and taking the necessary classes toward that career, and shows how to take every advantage of the transition services available in each student's community. From selecting the right major to learning to use the most efficient assistive technology, from finding the college best suited to a particular course of study to participating in campus life, the demands of good preparation start early and continue through high school and into the summer before the fall semester when college begins.

The Transition Activity Calendar may be used by individual students or in groups in conjunction with their special education teacher, and it may be a useful tool for existing transition programs. Most U.S. states have some type of transition program for college-bound students with disabilities, but some may not include specific programming for students who are blind or visually impaired. Programs vary considerably and may be sponsored by education agencies, local schools, vocational rehabilitation services, private nonprofit agencies, or through colleges themselves. The Transition Activity Calendar can be useful in all these settings and also in preparing students to attend such programs.

The NIDRR grant that provided for the Transition Activity Calendar contained several research points related to a variety of factors that enhanced students' abilities to become employed after high school or college. College is a major step toward certain types of employment, and integrating many of the

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following factors into both college preparation and employment preparation can be beneficial to the student to give them tools to enhance their employability.

According to research by McDonnall and Crudden (2009), some factors associated with positive employment outcomes include early work experience in a variety of settings, academic competence, self-determination, use of assistive technology, and locus of control. Other research-identified issues were good communication and independent living skills, problem-solving skills, and career development activities (Crudden, 2011). A systematic research review by Cavanaugh and Giesen (2011) identified experimental studies addressing factors such as career exploration, social skills, assertiveness training, and paid work experience, and how these factors made an impact on certain aspects of employment. In preparing for college, there are also other factors that students who are blind and visually impaired need to address, such as selecting a college with various supports that the student may identify as important, the logistics of getting into college, arranging for accessible textbooks, and learning the self-advocacy skills necessary to discuss their disabilities with professors (Dote-Kwan & Senge, 2002; Trief & Feeney, 2003; Trief & Feeney, 2005; Wolffe, 2000). Designed with college as a step to employment in mind, tasks and activities in the Transition Activity Calendar include many of these factors as part of a checklist of activities that can supplement and impact college planning.

Based on the many requests for the previous transition calendar and on informal feedback from those who have used it, it is anticipated that the Transition Activity Calendar for students with visual impairments will be a

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valuable tool for students, parents, special educators, transition specialists, and vocational rehabilitation personnel to help students with visual impairments prepare for college. The newly released online version incorporates suggestions from the grant research regarding developing social skills and a variety of work experiences, as well as information on topics such as e-text and online library access. The new Transition Activity Calendar, in its online format, is intended to be a dynamic, ever-changing instrument that will contain specific activity suggestions and supplemental information to assist in preparing young adults for a positive college experience. The online format contains links to supplemental information and provides opportunities for adding suggestions from the field and those who have used it.

Examples of the Information it Contains

Middle School

The following are some examples from the Transition Activity Calendar, starting with those for students in middle school:

- Start thinking about possible careers that you are interested in exploring and assess your skills and abilities.
- Discuss your interests and capabilities with your parents, special education teacher, school guidance counselor, or another trusted teacher or adult. Read books about what people do for careers, attend career fairs, and talk with people in your community about their careers and the educational training that prepared them. (Resources to consider are Kernel Books by the National Federation of the Blind:

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http://www.nfb.org/nfb/Kernel_Books.asp.)

- If you have not done so before, now is a good time to learn how to download books and to read both audiobooks (which use a narrator) and e-text (which uses synthesized speech). If you want to go to college, the vast amounts of reading it requires will necessitate such skills in order to keep up. Now is a good time to start practicing if you have not already done so.
- When you are 14 years old, ask about vocational rehabilitation services in your state. Find out who your rehabilitation counselor would be. Call and introduce yourself and learn about services that are available, and how old you have to be to apply. To find the vocational rehabilitation office near you, check for information in the MSU-NRTC online directory of state vocational rehabilitation agencies:
<http://www.blind.msstate.edu/referral/ncsab>. Vocational rehabilitation is not mandated for all people with disabilities, and you have to be found eligible based on severity of vision loss and future employability.
Vocational rehabilitation can be very beneficial in assisting you to get the training and skills you need to succeed. You will have to qualify for these services, but in some states they can assist you in finding a part-time or summer job while you are still in school.
- If you have not already learned to use the assistive technology you need before middle school, now is the time to start.

High School

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What follows are a few examples of activities to accomplish in the 11th grade.

Once the student reaches high school, the Transition Activity Calendar identifies activities by month (the following information is slated for October):

- Take standardized admission tests such as the PSAT (Preliminary Standard Aptitude Test). Taking the PSAT in 11th grade gives you a good idea of the type of test it is. It will prepare you to take the SAT (Standard Aptitude Test) in the 12th grade. Your score on the PSAT is used to qualify you for National Merit Scholarships.
- Check out the SAT requirements for students with disabilities at <http://sat.collegeboard.org/register/for-students-with-disabilities> and <http://www.collegeboard.com/ssd/student>. Note that any accommodations must be approved in advance of the test, and no one will be approved if the request is made less than two weeks before the test date.
- For students who are blind or visually impaired, there are several accommodation options: large-print exams and answer sheets, computers, audio access or readers, additional testing time, braille editions, and extra or extended breaks.
- If you are planning to take the ACT (American College Testing exam), check out information on their website at <http://www.collegeboard.com/ssd/student> and their accommodations section at <http://www.act.org/aap/disab/index.html>. Testing times and locations may be different for you, depending upon your accommodation requirements.

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- Continue to investigate possible careers by participating in job fairs, career days, and field trips. As you are exposed to more careers, you may change your potential career path. If so, be sure to adjust your course of study accordingly.
- Arrange regular times to meet with your vocational rehabilitation counselor.

Discussion

Students who are well prepared for the transition from high school to college have already learned strong self-advocacy skills during middle school and high school and have a strong sense of self-determination—all of which will enable them to successfully overcome the new challenges college brings (Trief & Feeney, 2005; Wolffe, 2000). They have learned additional skills necessary for students who are visually impaired in academic and social areas, as well as in independent living skills, including the use of appropriate assistive technology. They have also prepared early for the activities that are involved in finding the right college and in applying, getting oriented, and preparing for their classes.

The Transition Activity Calendar is free, and is available on the MSU-NRTC's website at <http://www.blind.msstate.edu/transition/TAC>.

Note: The Transition Activity Calendar was developed as part of a Disability Rehabilitation Research Project (DRRP) grant entitled *Transition Services that Lead to Competitive Employment Outcomes for Transition-Age Individuals with Blindness or Other Visual Impairments of Students with Visual Impairments*, from

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the U.S. Department of Education (NIDRR #H133A070001). The contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education.

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