

Setting the Standard: Implementing Self-Advocacy Goals in Transition Plans for Students in Special Education – A Literature Review

Shana Stober, Kara Parker, Emily Becks
University of Findlay, USA

Abstract

Do students with disabilities have full understanding of their learning difficulties and the capacity to act as full participants in their postsecondary education? According to the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition [1], students with disabilities should have “access to and full participation in postsecondary education.” Secondary schools must prepare students with disabilities on how to obtain and maintain eligibility criteria in the postsecondary environment [2], [3] stated this is a major factor into why students need to have a background of their disability and what accommodations are needed to be successful. Furthermore, students need to learn how to advocate for themselves, their disability, and their accommodations that are needed if they choose to progress to postsecondary education. Adding a self-advocacy goal to transition plans may be a measurable method for school teams to document how prepared students are in transitioning to life outside of high school. Limited research exists on adding a self-advocacy goal to transition plans for students on Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and Section 504 plans.

1. Introduction

Research has documented that student with disabilities often endure inferior postschool results [4]. Upon the reauthorization of IDEA in 1990, postsecondary transition planning was required for students that were 16 years of age; furthermore, when IDEA was amended in 1997, it required transition planning for students starting at 14 years of age, along with a student’s course of study and links to other agencies at 16 years of age. IDEA was amended again in 2004 and required that transition start at age 16 but mandated that each state develop a plan to improve outcomes for students with disabilities [4].

Within the framework of special education services and IDEA, a disability could be identified by a team of professionals, including the school psychologist, to determine eligibility within one of the thirteen categories listed. A disability could also be defined within the structure of Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA 1990): “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or

more of a person’s major life functions” [5]. An accommodation for a student is implemented so the student is still able to access the general education curriculum without changing the material that is learned within the setting. Accommodations can be helpful in reducing the impact of a student’s disability. No learning expectations are changed with accommodations; however, with modifications, changes are made in the student’s education, or the learning instruction is reduced.

2. Background of Transition and Postsecondary Education

Postsecondary transition planning involves planning for the student’s education for the first few years after graduating high school. The IEP reviews the student’s transition plan every year; however, it can be amended or changed as necessary depending on the student’s needs. In Ohio, all sections of a student’s transition plan must be completed by the time the student is fourteen years of age; however, if it needs to be completed earlier, the IEP team would have to agree (State Support Team Region 6, n.d.).

In terms of the transition planning in of itself, a goal must be written in the area of education or training. The goals have to be measurable in order to prove or disprove if the goal occurred within the IEP (State Support Team Region 6, n.d.). In addition, the goal of education or training is written in the future after the student leaves the high school setting. Another goal within the transition planning for students must be written in the area of employment, and if applicable, independent living (State Support Team Region 6, n.d.). According to Ohio’s Operating Standards for the Education of Children with Disabilities, the competitive integrated employment should be considered first among IEP team members (State Support Team Region 6, n.d.).

Despite improvement in legislation for postsecondary transition over the years, research has indicated that approximately two-thirds of all students with disabilities who are eligible for transition services into postsecondary education (PSE) do not take advantage of the academic opportunities provided for them [6], [7]. The National Center for Education Statistics [8] reported that 19.4% of undergraduates reported having a

disability; however, after graduation, 11.9% of students reported a disability. Erickson et al. [9] found that in comparison to students without disabilities obtaining their bachelor's degree or higher at a completion rate of 30.9%, students with disabilities completed their degrees at 12.2%. Furthermore, The National Council on Disability [10] reported that within people 25 years or older, those with disabilities complete college at half the rate as their nondisabled peers.

To review these statistics further, it is important to understand why students do not pursue more accommodations into their PSE, and as a result, are unable to reach graduation. From the student and parent perspective, transitioning from high school and beyond can sometimes be overwhelming and 'daunting' [11], [12]. Researchers noted that hardships students face while transitioning to PSE may be due to the absence of appropriate supports in place, awareness of their disability, and ability to advocate for themselves [13], [14], [15] states that youth must be provided with the appropriate services to "prepare them for further education,"; thus, the focus for students and their families should make the transition between secondary education and PSE as seamless as possible.

2.1. What is PSE?

Shaw et al. [16] stated that postsecondary education (PSE) could include a variety of placements, such as vocational training, technical schools, community colleges, coursework for certification, licensure, associate degree, or even a four-year university.

2.2. Responsibility of Members within the Transition

Most parents have a strong presence at their child's IEP or Section 504 meeting to give authority and consent for services to take place. However, once the child reaches the age of majority, the child and the parent must sign on or before the student's seventeenth birthday, indicating that when the student turns eighteen years old, rights will be turned over indefinitely to the student only. Shaw [2] states that school districts need to work more with families to transfer this activism and responsibility onto their children. The student needs to have an active involvement in his or her transition to PSE. Once the transition occurs, it will be the student's responsibility to identify their disability, provide documentation to prove the disability, and describe accommodations that help within the classroom setting [2]. In addition, the transition coordinator is responsible for letting the student and their family know about outside resources and agencies to help within the student's educational program [2]. The

transition coordinator could be primarily responsible for writing the postsecondary goals and keeping track of progress within the student's individualized program.

The school administrator could act at the district representative, a required member, at the student's IEP meeting. The administrator's presence at the meeting emphasizes the importance of transition and life after high school [2]. According to Shaw [2], special education teachers and general education teachers both play roles in the IEP process by providing goals, objectives, and accommodations for the student. While the special education teachers are primarily responsible for creating students' IEP plans, the general education teachers have more experience in the transition to postsecondary life. School counselors, school psychologists, and other related school personnel are also all helpful in assisting with the implementation and completion of students' transition plans [2].

2.3. Accessibility of Services

According to the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition [1], students with disabilities should have "access to and full participation in postsecondary education." Secondary schools must also prepare students that, despite their disability, meet qualifying criteria and certain standards to keep eligibility [2]. Shaw et al. [2] stated this is a major factor into why students need to have a background of their disability and what accommodations they need to be successful. Students with disabilities and their families may not be made aware of how drastic the changes in special education services and accommodations are after graduating from high school. This could be due, in part, to the absence of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in PSE [12]. Changes in legal rights, responsibilities of the student and parents, and structure are a contrast of what they may be accustomed to [11], [17], [18] differentiate that within the secondary level of education, the school district is responsible for the identification, evaluation, payment of evaluation, IEP or service plan, programming of courses, transition planning, progress monitoring, determining accommodations, and monitoring progress based on requirements of IDEA; however, within the postsecondary level, the student is responsible for most of those areas. Within PSE, the student and institution share joint responsibility with progress monitoring, accommodations, and monitoring the efficiency of goals [18].

Kelepouris [12] explained that with the lack of IDEA into PSE, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Section 504) and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) are then incorporated legislation to protect students with disabilities. Furthermore, with

PSE, the focus is on not discriminating based on a disability in comparison to providing a free appropriate public education through IDEA [12]. Through previous research, the purpose of this article is for secondary institutions, students, and families to understand the differences in service between secondary and PSE, equip schools for this transition to PSE, and give the students the knowledge they need to be successful.

3. What is The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)?

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act provides information into the 13 disability categories in which students must be identified to qualify for special education services. It requires free appropriate public education for all students ages 3-21. In terms of transition services in Ohio, IDEA requires discussions about postsecondary transition, employment, and independent living by the time a student is fourteen years old [16]. Within this legislation, vocational programs such as Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities (OOD) are mandated for students with disabilities to help them plan their future post high school graduation [19]. When students decide to attend PSE, IDEA is no longer utilized to their education [20].

3.1. What is Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973?

Section 504 is a law that essentially prohibits any discrimination to those with disabilities in programs that receive federal funding. Within Part D of Section 504 as a civil rights law, secondary schools provide services for students with disabilities [2]. It also excludes discrimination and safeguards equal opportunity [11]. Within Part E of Section 504 as a civil rights law, postsecondary institutions may follow accommodation plans for students with disabilities [2]. It also excludes discrimination and safeguards equal opportunity [11].

3.2. What is the Americans with Disabilities Act?

Signed into law in 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination and allows access for students with disabilities that attend educational institutions. These educational institutions must receive federal funding to follow ADA. This legislation notes that a disability must have a substantial limitation to a major life function. Title II of the ADA covers community colleges and state academic institutions, while Title III of the ADA covers private academic institutions and most universities [21].

3.3. What is Section 5 of an IEP?

Within a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP), Section 5 is reserved for postsecondary training and goals. Section 5 of an IEP requires the discussion of the student's years in high school and the first few year's post-graduation. Revisions and amendments can be made to this document as deemed necessary. IDEA requires that the postsecondary transition section be a "results-oriented process," which means that the goals must be specific and measurable in nature. As part of the IEP in Section 5, students also are required to have a competitive integrated employment goal and an independent living goal, if needed. Through the use of an Age-Appropriate Transition Assessment (AATA), the school district needs to provide evidence that each postsecondary goal is measurable by documenting the student's preferences, interests, needs, and strengths (PINS).

The AATA are used for the following: "as evidence that the student is developing the skills to achieve postsecondary goals, to determine the transition services or supports needed to progress within postsecondary goals, as basis for identifying annual IEP goals to support post-school plans, and to inform the appropriate linkages to adult services" (State Support Team Region 6, n.d.). The AATA is documented under each postsecondary goal for the student, and this is also where the PINS information is summarized with each goal (State Support Team Region 6, n.d.). The student's preferences, strengths, personal goals are assessed by personal interviews or surveys with the special education teacher or transition coordinator [2]. This document is used partly as evidence that the student has or is developing skills needed to complete postsecondary goals.

Students' courses of study align with each postsecondary goal within the IEP, and the purpose of this section is to identify which classes the student will have to take to prepare for or meet all of the postsecondary goals (State Support Team Region 6, n.d.). On the student's IEP, the transition service/activity, projected beginning date, anticipated duration, and person or agency responsible is also required to be filled in to record the special education and related services provided to the student by the public school district (State Support Team Region 6, n.d.).

4. Student Strategies in Advocating

Lynch and Gussel [21] noted that students with disabilities have to learn the proper components of disclosing their disability to others within their PSE at the appropriate time and setting. Furthermore, Lynch and Gussel [21] stated the importance of the student to realize that they are first a qualified person

instead of focusing simply on the disability. Baker and Blanding [22] reported that is helpful for the student to disclose his or her disability as soon as possible.

Lynch and Gussel [21] stated that self-exploration was needed before a student was able to advocate for themselves, so the student is cognizant of behaviors before supporting for accommodations in the PSE environment. Counselors within the secondary school setting should also practice disclosing with the students so they become more comfortable before trying it in the postsecondary setting [21]. Lynch and Gussel [21] believed that the following skills should enhance students' skill development: timing, plan development, assertive verbal and nonverbal communication, and self-advocacy skills. In regard to timing and planning, students need to establish a deadline and strategy in which they disclose their disability and accommodation needs to their instructors within their new setting [21]. Lynch and Gussel [21] further explain the importance that counselors discern the differences with various communication styles.

In assertive communication, counselors need to express the significance in "I" statements when students discuss their disability; additionally, role-playing activities are impactful with teaching verbal and nonverbal assertiveness communication styles [21]. Lynch and Gussel [21] stated that in terms of self-advocacy, students need to be knowledgeable about their disability and be able to speak about what accommodations are helpful in their learning. Students are also encouraged to practice within a group setting with other peers to disclose their disability to help inspire them once they need to complete this independently within the postsecondary school setting [21]. Summers et al. [14] stated that students' steps to gaining accommodations successfully in the PSE setting involved a combination of knowledge about disability laws, awareness of strengths and or challenges, understanding of accommodations, and self-assessment to choose appropriate accommodations, along with role-playing scenarios to practice.

5. Why are Self-Advocacy Skills in Students Needed?

Due to the fact that families of students with disabilities take on less responsibility of educational needs in PSE while students' obligations in their education increases, secondary school staff need to help build self-advocacy skills [2].

Self-advocacy "means that the student understands his or her disability, is as aware of the strengths as of the weaknesses resulting from the functional limitation imposed by the disability and is

able to articulate reasonable need for academic or physical accommodations" [23].

According to Eckes and Ochoa [24], many students do not leave their high school experience with the activism skills that are needed. Herbert et al. [25] echoed that adequate preparation in support services envisages success in the PSE environment for students. Although transition goals are required for every student on an IEP in Ohio at the age of 14 and after, goals in this area are not often specific enough. Furthermore, students on Section 504 plans do not have access to transition goals. It is important that secondary institutions adequately prepare our future generations with the tools they need to succeed as they embark upon new educational territory. According to Newman et al. [26], students with disabilities that need transition planning should be normalized for those that expect to participate and attend college. Madaus et al. [27] explained the need for a three-tiered model in response the difficulties students with disabilities experienced in transitioning to college; in Tier 1, all students receive information about transitioning to college life. Tier 2 involves speaking more with students with disabilities and how to obtain services in the PSE, while Tier 3 is giving more direct instruction to students with disabilities in preparation for the next step [27].

6. PSE's set their own reasonable standards for disability

According to Heyward [28], it is not required for academic institutions to provide accommodations to students until the student chooses to disclose this information to the office of disabilities and provides appropriate documentation of the disability. Additionally, instead of basing the disability need off a certain category, the determination from the academic institution is based off limitations [16]. While applying to PSE, the academic institution must consider the student "otherwise qualified," which means that despite the disability, the student was able to be admitted into the academic program with the same process as anyone else [11]. Postsecondary institutions are obliged to offer at least disability services but can do more through a disability program; it varies from college to college [11]. Irrespective of the way in which the postsecondary institution allows services for those with disabilities, it does not include modifying any standards or content within academic programs [11]. Madaus [11] noted that depending on the academic institution, a student will remain eligible for accommodations under Section 504 if a certain grade point average is maintained.

A transition plan for a student with a disability from one secondary school to another, accommodations are likely to remain similar. Unlike secondary educations, PSE are not the same in their

approaches or what accommodations are allowable. Since students do not have a necessary right to a PSE like they do a secondary education, academic institutions have the overall right to deny services to anyone that encounters the application process [12]. When students with disabilities request accommodations, the academic institution chooses those that 'level the playing field,' are not unreasonable, and show marginal liability to the school [12]. The academic institutions are not required to preserve all accommodations the students may have received in secondary education [11].

McGuire and Shaw [29] developed a range of support services that describes the admission differences among colleges in Connecticut. Within this framework, four categories were defined: Decentralized Services, Loosely Coordinated Services, Centrally Coordinated Services, and Data-Based or Comprehensive Support Programs [29]. Services with decentralized support have an established person of contact, limited support services, few guidelines in place, and students are reliant upon caring faculty; while, loosely coordinated programs have an established person of contact, generic accommodations and peer tutors are available, and students are referred to agencies on campus [29]. Centrally coordinated and comprehensive programs allow full-time coordinators or directors, accommodations or a range of accommodations provided, reputable measures in place, focus on self-advocacy, adaptive technology, and trained disability specialists may or may not be accessible; comprehensive programs specifically have individualized support and plans available to students [29].

6.1. Misunderstandings with Faculty Members with disability services in PSE

Students need to have more of an awareness of their disability and advocate for themselves. Research has shown faculty staff within PSE has limited knowledge on disabilities and services and have limited training [30], [31].

6.2. University Variability in Accommodation Services

To give validity to the variances amongst colleges, the Office of Accessibly/Students with Disabilities Offices of five colleges within Northwestern Ohio were analyzed by the authors of this literature review study through means of online website information about each institution (University A-E). University A gave explicit accommodation choices (advising accommodation, adaptive testing, advocate for students, amplification equipment, assistive technology, books on tape,

equipment to borrow, group/individual tutoring sessions, housing modifications, introduction to faculty members, notetakers, priority registration, sign language interpreters, study skills, and test-taking accommodations. A 'Tips for College Success' was also provided from this institution. University A noted documentation of disability, previous accommodations, and modifications were needed, and eligibility was only determined from an interview from the director of disability services and the student. The date of the documentation of the disability was not noted for this institution.

University B preferred a copy of IEP or 504 from the student's senior year or a psychoeducational evaluation of no more than 3 years old. This university noted that an accommodation request needs to be filled out entirely by the student. The student needs to explain their primary disability, how it affects them as a student, disability-related medications, what accommodations are being requested, which accommodations or modifications were made in the past. Specific accommodations were not listed for this university; however, it was noted that drop-in tutoring was available for free and peer tutoring was a small expense. Examples of unreasonable accommodations were provided from this university. University B noted that even though the student may have a documented diagnosis, the postsecondary institution looks more at the severity of the impact of the disability. Furthermore, students are required to self-identify as a student with a disability as it is deemed discriminatory for the university to do so. University B also provided a document that described differences between secondary and postsecondary education services.

University C asked students to fill out an application, note when their disability was identified and severity of the impairment/diagnosis, and how it impacts their ability to complete exams. In addition, the institution gathers if accommodations were used during the ACT and if so, which accommodations. If accommodations were not requested for past tests, the university requests the reasons why. It is also the student's responsibility to contact professionals for a recent copy of the 504 or IEP and to answer questions about the severity of the disability. University C has a form that students must sign to share accommodations with university staff members.

University D provided a detailed 27-page manual for students with disabilities requesting accommodations. In addition, the manual outlines examples of reasonable accommodations that may be granted, identification of student disability, and how to upload documents to prove the disability. A unique feature provided by University D was a reasonable accommodation survey must be completed each semester and 60 days before the semester starts to guarantee services. During the

survey, students were asked to describe their condition and how it substantially limits a daily life activity, previous accommodations, a letter of documentation from a medical professional and what he/she thinks accommodations should be, a copy of the 504 or IEP, and a list of reasonable accommodations the institution provides.

Finally, University E had a limited description of what students with disabilities should do to transition to their institution. They note that the students should register with the counselor early in the semester to allow time for arrangements to be made, if necessary. Documentation of the disability must also be provided. Together the student and counselor will determine appropriate accommodations for classes.

7. Conclusion

The Universities A through E share some similarities but also some differences in admissions criteria. One similarity amongst all was that the student is the individual that contacts the institution's admissions office to describe the nature and severity of their disability. It is essential that students research exactly what is necessary to apply to institutions. Students also need practice advocating for themselves and verbalizing their disability, how it impacts them, and what accommodations they need to be successful.

8. Future Implications

Suggestions for future research include IEP and Section 504 secondary team members providing students and their families the information listed in Table 1 from Madaus and Shaw [18] that outlines the differences in responsibility between secondary schools versus PSE. These should be given as often as their procedural rights or annually. Students need to be informed about the inevitable changes with accommodations and disability when evolving to PSE.

As previously mentioned, postsecondary goals are written with a purpose in mind but may not be specific enough to be measured according to the standards set forth by IDEA [15], [2]. A study by Lightner et al. [32] found that students who received more transition planning services in secondary school were more likely to be successful in the collegiate setting, earning higher grade point averages and credit accumulation. Furthermore, adding a self-advocacy goal to every transition section on a student's IEP is justifiable for our future students. It would be beneficial for students on Section 504 plans to also have access to this practice, rehearsal, and monitoring of skills. The more that

students practice advocacy for themselves and acknowledge their disability, the easier it will be in obtaining access to accommodations in a postsecondary institution. Heyward [33] noted the following process for requesting accommodations in the PSE environment: self-disclose disability to the disability office by the student, request accommodations through the institutions process, and provide documentation of disability and previous accommodations. School staff and families need to educate the student about their disability in the beginning stages; this, in turn, will promote the students to speak about their disability and advocate for themselves [11].

According to Prince et al. [4], schools should consider adding social skills curriculums for students within their individualized programming. Within obtaining these skills, students have the capability to enhance and practice their skills with employment, postsecondary education practice, and advocating for their own educational needs. Prince et al. [4] noted that schools can practice these skills more thoroughly through vocational education, assessments to help determine potential careers, and internship opportunities. Petcu et al. [34] stated that educators need to emphasize autonomy and independence within their students.

In Ohio, students are encouraged to attend all their IEP and Section 504 meetings, especially after their 14th birthday when transition planning and goals begin. Secondary schools need to set a standard of student attendance at these meetings as mandatory, not optional. Absent participation from these meetings does not set the student up for success after graduation. Furthermore, if a student knows he/she wants to pursue PSE, secondary schools may want to consider completing new evaluations during the student's senior year to set them up for success and preventing the family from having to cover the cost of an evaluation in the future. Schools could also prepare a Section 504 alongside a student's summary of performance at the end of their senior year [12]. Students also need to be aware of the transition of vocabulary when describing their disability. It is also crucial for students to be prepared to describe how their disability substantially limits a major life activity or how they may be otherwise qualified. Information, such as this, could all be presented in objectives in a self-advocacy goal with the help of parents, intervention specialists, transition coordinators, and school psychologists. In closing, the advantage of a self-advocacy goal for all transition-aged students on IEP's or Section 504 plans will most likely set up students for success in postsecondary endeavors.

Table 1. Outlines of responsibility between secondary schools versus PSE

Area	Responsibilities under IDEA / Section 504 Subpart D (Secondary Level)	Responsibilities under Section 504 Subpart E and the ADA (Postsecondary Level)
Identification	School District	Student
Evaluation	School District	Student
Payment for Evaluation	School District	Student
IEP or service plan	School District	Not Required
Course Selection and Programming	School District	Student
Transition Planning	School District	Student
Progress Monitoring	School District	Student/Institution
Determining reasonable accommodations	School District	Student with Institution (upon student eligibility)
Monitoring effectiveness	School District	Student/Institution

Source: Adapted from Responsibilities under Subparts D and E of Section 504, by J. W. Madaus and S. F. Shaw

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10. Further Reading

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