

School Counselor Involvement in Postsecondary Transition Planning
for Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

School counselors are charged with addressing the career development and transition needs of all students (American School Counseling Association [ASCA], 2005), yet research has revealed that not all school counselors are involved in postsecondary transition planning for students with disabilities. This exploratory study examined high school counselor involvement in postsecondary transition planning activities for students with disabilities. Recommendations regarding the collaborative provision of postsecondary transition planning services for students with disabilities are presented.

School Counselor Involvement in Postsecondary Transition Planning for Students with Disabilities

School counselors always have prioritized helping students prepare for life after school; the profession's roots lie in vocational development. Although current trends in educational reform (e.g., *No Child Left Behind*) encourage school counselors to emphasize students' academic development, career counseling continues to be an important component of the school counselor's job. In fact, the American School Counselor Association ([ASCA], 2005) delineates individual planning (i.e., meeting with students to explore career interests, choose courses, etc.) as an important school counselor role, especially at the high school level. Additionally, the National Career Development Association ([NCDA], 2003) outlines the importance of school counselors assisting *all* students with career development and future planning. More specifically, the NCDA (2003) indicated that career development at the high school level "should center around helping youth make quality decisions regarding their educational/career plans at the postsecondary level" (p. 4).

Developmentally appropriate postsecondary transition planning interventions that can be implemented by high school counselors via individual planning sessions, classroom guidance, or small groups might focus on areas including self awareness or career and college exploration (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2005). Hence, addressing topics such as interests and abilities, the college admissions process, job requirements, and how to prepare for a job interview could help students better understand themselves and their readiness for future careers or postsecondary education.

Additionally, Super, Savickas, and Super (1996) indicated that engaging in career exploratory activities is important to an individual's vocational success and satisfaction.

Researchers (e.g., Kerka, 2002; Ohler & Levinson, 1995) have identified individuals with disabilities as a population particularly in need of career development and postsecondary transition planning interventions. More specifically, individuals with disabilities tend to be less successful in transitioning to careers (Murray, 2003), more often unemployed (Levine & Nourse, 1998), and less likely to pursue postsecondary education (Murray, Goldstein, Nourse, & Edgar, 2000), than individuals without disabilities. These less-than-positive outcomes signify a need to examine both the types and effectiveness of postsecondary transition planning services currently being provided to students with disabilities.

The federal government first formally recognized the importance of postsecondary transition planning for students with disabilities in 1990 through the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and its mandated postsecondary transition planning component. According to IDEA, postsecondary transition planning for students with disabilities should be a collaborative process involving a variety of professionals. Agran, Cain, and Cavin (2002) stated that "only when all relevant school personnel and services agency representatives are fully involved can effective services and supports be identified and implemented" (p. 141). It could be argued that someone with specialized knowledge of career and college planning would be a beneficial postsecondary transition planning team member. School counselors might seem a logical choice to provide expertise in these areas, yet Milsom (2002) found that nearly one-third of high school counselors who completed her survey

indicated they were not involved with postsecondary transition planning for students with disabilities. Similarly, Hitchings et al. (2001) found only 8% of their participating college students with learning disabilities indicated having met with a school counselor during high school to discuss coursework and requirements for applying to college. Agran et al. (2002) highlighted the potential contributions of vocational rehabilitation (VR) counselors in relation to postsecondary transition planning, but found that those individuals also rarely were involved. Reasons for their limited involvement included large caseloads and sporadic invitations from school personnel and parents.

Purpose of the Study

High school counselors are responsible for addressing the career and transition needs of all students, yet many report not being involved in postsecondary transition planning for students with disabilities. Additionally, little is known about the ways in which some high school counselors are involved in postsecondary transition planning for students with disabilities. This research was designed to fill that void in the literature.

The following three research questions were explored:

1. What types of postsecondary planning activities do high school counselors engage in with students with mild disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities, attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder) and students with moderate to severe disabilities (e.g., cerebral palsy, autism)?
2. With what frequency do high school counselors engage in postsecondary transition planning activities for students with disabilities?
3. What reasons do school counselors give for not engaging in various postsecondary transition planning activities for students with disabilities?

Method

Participants

A random sample of 500 members of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) who indicated they were employed in high schools was generated by and obtained directly from ASCA. Of the 500 surveys mailed, two were returned as undeliverable, reducing the total sample size to 498. A total of 156 were returned (31% response rate). Of those 16 (10%) indicated they were not high school counselors, another 14 (9%) indicated they were not interested in participating, and 2 (2%) only partially completed the survey.

The age of the 126 participants ranged from 25 to 70, with a mean of 47 ($SD = 11$). Twenty-five percent ($n = 31$) were male and 75% ($n = 95$) were female. The ethnic distribution of the participants included African American (3%, $n = 4$), Asian/Pacific Islander (2%, $n = 2$), Hispanic/Latino(a) (2%, $n = 3$), Native American (1%, $n = 1$), and White (92%, $n = 116$). Ninety-one percent of the participants indicated they had obtained a master's degree ($n = 115$), and four percent had obtained a doctorate ($n = 5$). Six participants (5%) did not indicate their highest degree earned. The participants' school counseling experience ranged from 1 to 34 years, with a mean of 12 ($SD = 9$). Of the 92 participants who indicated having teaching experience, their years of teaching experience ranged from 1 to 33, with a mean of 10 years ($SD = 8$). Six of those 92 participants indicated they had experience as special education teachers.

Participants' schools were diverse in many ways. Thirty-nine participants (31%) worked in rural school districts, 57 (45%) were in suburban districts, and 30 (23%) were in urban schools. Graduating classes ranged from 17 to 900 students, with a mean of

294 ($SD = 189$). The number of school counselors employed in participants' schools ranged from 1 to 11, with a mean of 4 ($SD = 2$). The percentage of students on free or reduced lunch ranged from 0 to 100, with a mean of 31 ($SD = 25$). The percentage of students who pursued four-year college degrees ranged from 0 to 100, with a mean of 52 ($SD = 25$) while the percentage of students who pursued any formal postsecondary education ranged from 30 to 100, with a mean of 74 ($SD = 19$). Participants indicated that between 1 and 30% ($M = 13$, $SD = 7$) of their students had IEPs. School counselor caseloads ranged from 15 to 700 with a mean of 328 ($SD = 126$).

Procedure and Instrument

A package consisting of a letter introducing and describing the study, a questionnaire, the personal and school demographic information form, and a return envelope was mailed to each member of the sample. A reminder post card was mailed two weeks later. Participants indicated their informed consent by returning the questionnaire.

The Postsecondary Transition Questionnaire is an instrument created by the author to assess the postsecondary planning activities that school counselors engage in for students with disabilities. The questionnaire was piloted with ten school counselors and reviewed by a school counselor educator and five graduate students in school counseling. Revisions based on feedback addressed relevance and clarity of items.

On the questionnaire participants indicated the frequency with which they engaged in various postsecondary transition planning activities for students with disabilities. Items (see Table 1 for complete list of items) were generated based on a review of literature identifying relevant high school career development interventions

(e.g., Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey) and postsecondary transition planning activities related to students with disabilities (Wehman, 2001). In an effort to encourage greater likelihood of participation, the number of items was limited to 15. The instrument did not include a comprehensive list of interventions but rather a list of what were perceived by the researcher and the participants who completed the pilot study to be more commonly recommended interventions. In order to not restrict participants to these 15 items, an “Other” category was provided in which they could list interventions they used but which were not included in the list.

Using five descriptive categories (always, usually, sometimes, rarely, and never), participants indicated how often they engaged in each of the 15 activities for students with mild disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities, ADHD), and students with moderate to severe disabilities (e.g., mental retardation, autism). For each *never* response, participants were asked to indicate *why* they did not engage in the activity using the following codes: ‘A’ to indicate that someone else implements the intervention, ‘B’ if they did not feel competent to implement the intervention, ‘C’ to indicate that they did not have time to implement the intervention, ‘D’ if they did not believe the intervention is necessary/helpful, or ‘E’ for any other reasons.

Results

The percentages and numbers of participants who engaged in each postsecondary transition planning activity are presented in Table 1. The activities that the participants most often indicated they *always* engaged in for students with mild disabilities included the following: plan and schedule courses (73%), explore colleges (52%), and explore careers (50%). Conversely, the activities for which they most

frequently indicated they *never* were involved in for students with mild disabilities included assessing abilities (40%), arranging job shadowing (35%), and discussing disability legislation (32%). Regarding their work with students who have moderate or severe disabilities, the participants most frequently indicated that they *always* planned and scheduled courses (38%), participated in IEP team meetings (30%), and provided input for the transition planning team (25%). Well over half of the participants indicated they *never* engaged in 7 out of the 15 activities for students with moderate or severe disabilities, including the following: teach resume or interviewing skills (67%), arrange college visits (67%), assess abilities (66%), arrange job shadowing (64%), arrange college testing (63%), teach job search skills (59%) or discuss disability legislation (57%) for students with moderate and severe disabilities (See Table 1).

Table 1

Frequency With Which School Counselors Engage in Various Postsecondary Transition Planning Activities, by Type of Student.

<i>Activity and Type of Disability</i>	<i>Always % (n)</i>	<i>Usually % (n)</i>	<i>Sometimes % (n)</i>	<i>Rarely % (n)</i>	<i>Never % (n)</i>
<i>Attend IEP meetings</i>					
Mild Disability	36 (43)	34 (40)	14 (17)	9 (11)	6 (7)
Moderate/Severe Disability	30 (29)	28 (27)	12 (11)	7 (7)	23 (22)
<i>Provide input for transition plan</i>					
Mild Disability	28 (32)	32 (37)	23 (26)	10 (12)	7 (8)
Moderate/Severe Disability	25 (24)	19 (18)	17 (16)	12 (11)	27 (26)
<i>Plan and schedule courses</i>					
Mild Disability	73 (87)	15 (18)	7 (8)	1 (1)	4 (5)
Moderate/Severe Disability	38 (36)	16 (15)	18 (17)	4 (4)	25 (24)

<i>Activity and Type of Disability</i>	<i>Always % (n)</i>	<i>Usually % (n)</i>	<i>Sometimes % (n)</i>	<i>Rarely % (n)</i>	<i>Never % (n)</i>
<i>Assess interests</i>					
Mild Disability	34 (39)	16 (19)	23 (27)	12 (14)	15 (17)
Moderate/Severe Disability	8 (7)	3 (3)	19 (18)	23 (21)	47 (44)
<i>Assess abilities</i>					
Mild Disability	20 (23)	10 (12)	17 (19)	13 (15)	40 (46)
Moderate/Severe Disability	8 (7)	3 (3)	11 (10)	12 (11)	66 (61)
<i>Explore careers</i>					
Mild Disability	50 (58)	26 (30)	18 (21)	4 (5)	3 (3)
Moderate/Severe Disability	15 (14)	12 (11)	22 (21)	16 (15)	36 (34)
<i>Arrange job shadowing</i>					
Mild Disability	14 (16)	3 (3)	22 (26)	27 (31)	35 (41)
Moderate/Severe Disability	4 (4)	2 (2)	10 (9)	20 (19)	64 (61)
<i>Teach job search skills</i>					
Mild Disability	10 (11)	10 (11)	36 (41)	19 (22)	25 (29)
Moderate/Severe Disability	2 (2)	2 (2)	12 (11)	26 (24)	59 (55)
<i>Teach resume/interviewing skills</i>					
Mild Disability	10 (12)	7 (8)	29 (33)	24 (27)	30 (35)
Moderate/Severe Disability	3 (3)	1 (1)	12 (11)	17 (16)	67 (64)
<i>Explore colleges</i>					
Mild Disability	52 (62)	21 (25)	13 (15)	9 (10)	5 (6)
Moderate/Severe Disability	10 (9)	9 (8)	17 (16)	24 (22)	41 (38)
<i>Arrange college visits</i>					
Mild Disability	26 (30)	7 (8)	21 (24)	16 (18)	30 (35)
Moderate/Severe Disability	4 (4)	2 (2)	8 (7)	19 (18)	67 (62)
<i>Arrange college testing (e.g., SAT)</i>					
Mild Disability	34 (40)	48 (16)	18 (21)	9 (11)	25 (29)
Moderate/Severe Disability	6 (6)	3 (3)	12 (11)	16 (15)	63 (59)

<i>Activity and Type of Disability</i>	<i>Always % (n)</i>	<i>Usually % (n)</i>	<i>Sometimes % (n)</i>	<i>Rarely % (n)</i>	<i>Never % (n)</i>
<i>Discuss college disability services</i>					
Mild Disability	19 (22)	26 (30)	38 (44)	10 (11)	8 (9)
Moderate/Severe Disability	10 (9)	18 (16)	19 (17)	11 (10)	43 (39)
<i>Teach self-advocacy skills</i>					
Mild Disability	27 (31)	23 (26)	28 (32)	13 (15)	10 (11)
Moderate/Severe Disability	20 (18)	11 (10)	14 (13)	11 (10)	45 (41)
<i>Discuss disability legislation</i>					
Mild Disability	6 (7)	10 (12)	24 (28)	27 (31)	32 (37)
Moderate/Severe Disability	3 (3)	4 (4)	18 (16)	18 (16)	57 (52)

Note. Students with Mild Disabilities *N* = 116,
 Students with Moderate/Severe Disabilities *N* = 96.
 Percentages do not always total 100 due to missing data.

Results presented in Table 1 demonstrate that participants most frequently responded *never* in relation to their involvement in postsecondary transition planning activities for students who have moderate to severe disabilities. Each time participants indicated they *never* engaged in one of the 15 activities, they were asked to provide a reason; these data are presented in Table 2. For all of the activities, the overwhelming majority of participants indicated that the reason they never engaged in those activities was because they believed someone else did. Very few participants indicated they never engaged in an activity because they lacked competence, and those who did most frequently did so in relation to discussing disability legislation (12%). Interestingly, some school counselors indicated that they lacked time to engage in a few activities, such as exploring careers (8%) and assessing abilities (7%). Finally, many participants indicated that they never engaged in some activities because they believed that their involvement was not relevant. Specifically, 21% did not believe that discussing college disability

services was relevant and 17% did not believe attending IEP meetings was relevant. See Table 2 for all results related to reasons the participants indicated for never engaging in postsecondary transition planning activities for students with disabilities.

Table 2

Reasons School Counselors Indicated for Never Engaging in Transition Planning

Activities

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Reason</i>			
	<i>Other % (n)</i>	<i>Competence % (n)</i>	<i>Time % (n)</i>	<i>Relevance % (n)</i>
<i>Attend IEP meetings (N = 35)</i>	57 (26)	0	2 (1)	17 (8)
<i>Provide input for transition plan (N = 34)</i>	60 (27)	0	2 (1)	13 (6)
<i>Plan and schedule courses (N = 26)</i>	79 (23)	3 (1)	3 (1)	3 (1)
<i>Assess interests (N = 47)</i>	88 (45)	0	4 (2)	0
<i>Assess abilities (N = 65)</i>	83 (57)	1 (1)	7 (5)	3 (2)
<i>Explore careers (N = 35)</i>	79 (30)	5 (2)	8 (3)	0
<i>Arrange job shadowing (N = 63)</i>	80 (57)	1 (1)	6 (4)	1 (1)
<i>Teach job search skills (N = 59)</i>	86 (54)	2 (1)	6 (3)	0
<i>Teach resume/interviewing skills (N = 66)</i>	86 (61)	0	6 (4)	1 (1)
<i>Explore colleges (N = 37)</i>	81 (34)	0	0	7 (3)
<i>Arrange college visits (N = 55)</i>	69 (46)	0	6 (4)	8 (5)
<i>Arrange special college testing (N = 56)</i>	71 (47)	0	2 (1)	12 (8)
<i>Discuss college disability services (N = 45)</i>	58 (30)	4 (2)	4 (2)	21 (11)
<i>Teach self-advocacy skills (N = 42)</i>	83 (38)	2 (1)	4 (2)	2 (1)
<i>Discuss disability legislation (N = 53)</i>	58 (35)	12 (7)	5 (3)	13 (8)

Note. N reflects number of individuals who responded.
Other = someone else performs the activity.
Competence = did not feel competent to perform the activity.
Time = did not have time to perform the activity.
Relevance = did not feel activity was relevant or necessary.

Discussion

Results revealed that the participants engaged in a variety of activities in their efforts to help students with disabilities prepare for postsecondary transitions. Yet, their involvement in those activities varied greatly by type of student (i.e., students with mild disabilities or students with moderate to severe disabilities) as well as by type of activity. In general the participants reported more frequently engaging in activities that would be considered *direct* services (e.g., exploring careers, assessing interests) for students who have mild disabilities and more frequently in activities that would fall under the category of *indirect* services (e.g., attending IEP meetings and providing input regarding transition plans) for students with more severe disabilities. Although it is unclear why high school counselors would not more frequently work directly with students who have moderate or severe disabilities, it seems plausible that those students, who are less likely to be mainstreamed, could easily be overlooked. That is, unless they intentionally seek them out, school counselors might have little contact day-to-day with special education teachers and students who spend most of their time in self-contained classrooms. Furthermore, students with moderate or severe disabilities might receive lower priority from school counselors who perceive that some other professional is involved in providing services to them. For example, even though Agran et al. (2002) found that VR counselors infrequently become involved in postsecondary transition planning, students who have more severe disabilities typically receive first priority for VR services. Thus, there would be little need for school counselors to provide services that already are in place through VR counselors.

Regarding school counselors' responsibilities to address the career needs of all students, the infrequent nature of the participants' involvement in a number of career-related activities for students with disabilities is discouraging. More specifically, fewer than 50% of the participants indicated that they helped students with disabilities assess their abilities more than *rarely* and a fairly large percentage reported that they rarely or never helped those students explore their interests. Although a large percentage of participants did report that they helped students with mild disabilities explore careers, it is unclear how those students would be able to make informed decisions regarding their postsecondary plans without also possessing self-awareness. Again, many of the participants indicated that they believed someone else assisted students in exploring interests and abilities, so it is possible that some students do participate in both career and self-exploration activities. Given the negative postsecondary outcomes for individuals with disabilities presented in the introduction, it seems important to assess the effectiveness of interventions used to target fundamental career exploratory areas including self and career awareness. Assessing the competence of individuals providing services in those areas also could help researchers to identify what is and is not working.

Data in Table 2 suggest that the participants frequently rely on other professionals to ensure that the postsecondary transition planning needs of students with disabilities are met. Realistically, it may not be necessary or relevant for school counselors to directly assist all students with disabilities. That is, other professionals might be better situated to carry out carry out postsecondary transition planning activities. For example, some schools might have career or transition specialists who

have been hired specifically to assume these roles, and other schools might have special educators or school psychologists with training in career and postsecondary transition planning. IDEA (1990) supports a team approach to postsecondary transition planning, however, and all of those professionals might benefit from collaboration with school counselors. The fact that less than two-thirds of the participants indicated that they *usually* or *always* provided input to transition planning teams suggests that an important and knowledgeable resource (i.e., the school counselor) may not be utilized. Although larger school districts often are fortunate enough to have funding to hire career specialists, counselors who work specifically with students in special education, or other professionals who have some understanding of postsecondary transition planning, many small school districts struggle to hire one school counselor. As such, given that school counselors are often the only school-based professional who has completed any formal training related to career development, their involvement with students with disabilities, whether direct or indirect, could be considered critical.

One final discussion point centers on the reasons the participants provided for not engaging in postsecondary transition planning activities. Compared to the activities for which the participants believed some other professional was involved, relatively few of the participants reported other reasons for not engaging in activities. Regarding competence, the area in which the most frequent number of participants reported not feeling competent was discussing disability legislation. This finding is consistent with Milsom (2002), who reported that school counselors in her study received little training related to disability legislation. This result suggests that continued emphasis on school counselor training in this area is warranted. Regarding participants who reported not

having time to engage in activities, it is concerning that the most frequently marked activities in this category were career exploration and assessing students' abilities. It is unclear why the participants would not have time to engage in these types of activities, given their importance in relation to career development and their endorsement by ASCA (2005). An examination of factors that affect how school counselors prioritize their time (e.g., *No Child Left Behind*) could help to clarify how their time is spent. Finally, the participants' reported beliefs regarding lack of relevance for participating in IEP meetings and providing input into transition plans is unclear. Whether the participants do not understand the potential contributions they could make to the IEP and transition planning process or whether their involvement has been discouraged or simply not welcomed is unclear. Since school counselors possess unique knowledge and skills related to postsecondary transition planning, further exploration of their beliefs regarding the relevance of their collaboration in this process seems important.

Recommendations

Given their responsibility to address the career and transition needs of all students, school counselors should be concerned with how those needs are being addressed for students with disabilities in their schools. It is not suggested that school counselors have to directly provide services in those areas to all students. Rather, their responsibility would lie in ensuring where, how, and by whom services are being provided to those students.

As student advocates, school counselors are encouraged to approach postsecondary transition planning teams in order to examine how students' needs are being met, and to offer their expertise. First, school counselors could encourage those

teams to identify which individuals in the school are involved in providing postsecondary transition planning interventions. Then they could identify critical transition planning components needed by all students. In an effort to ensure comprehensiveness of services as well as prevent overlap of services, school counselors can then work collaboratively with postsecondary transition planning teams to develop plans to utilize each professional more intentionally, matching their expertise with various components. For example, school counselors might be capable of engaging all students in career exploratory activities. Then, based on their knowledge of students' disabilities and related strengths and weaknesses, special educators might more effectively work separately with students with disabilities to help them identify strengths and abilities related to different careers while the school counselor provides similar services to the remaining student population.

Furthermore, school counselors can advocate for the inclusion of students with disabilities in career and transition planning activities offered to all students. For example, if school counselors already provide postsecondary school exploratory activities for students without disabilities, perhaps in large groups or classes, students with disabilities might easily be included in those activities. Rather than provide completely separate services, school personnel might simply supplement the services all students receive with others that would address issues unique to students with disabilities (e.g., discussion of disability legislation). Also, school counselors likely utilize career resources that easily could be modified by other professionals for use with students who have disabilities. Collaboration in the form of sharing resources might

result in greater consistency in the basic career and postsecondary information being provided to all students.

Conclusion

As with any research project, limitations existed in this study. First, the small sample size and low response rate limit the generalization of results. Individuals who chose to respond may differ significantly in unknown ways from those who chose not to respond. The participants were diverse, but it cannot be assumed that they are representative of high school counselors throughout the United States. Additionally, the use of a self-report instrument precludes the researcher from knowing if participants responded accurately and truthfully. It is possible that participants responded in what they perceived to be socially desirable ways. Finally, the questionnaire to which participants responded was designed by the researcher. Although the items were grounded in research literature and revised based on a pilot study, the data gathered via the questionnaire allowed only a limited examination of the topic. Nevertheless, the study was designed to be exploratory and the results serve as an impetus to more thoroughly explore how school counselors as well as other school and non-school personnel are involved in postsecondary transition planning for students with disabilities.

Future research might focus on clarifying which professionals are involved in providing postsecondary transition planning services to students with disabilities as well as the types of services provided by each professional. Additionally, research could help to identify best practice models for collaborative approaches to postsecondary transition planning. Finally, outcome studies are needed in order to assess the effectiveness of

postsecondary transition planning interventions in relation to student outcomes such as college attendance and completion rates, job search success, or long-term career satisfaction.

Students with disabilities deserve equitable access to career and postsecondary transition planning interventions in order to afford them the best possible chance of achieving success later in life. School counselors can assist students with disabilities directly or indirectly, and their potential contributions are numerous. Acknowledging their responsibility to assist all students, school counselors are encouraged to assess the types of services currently being provided to students with disabilities and to initiate collaborative relationships with postsecondary transition planning team members in an effort to identify how they might best assist students with disabilities in their schools.

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