

# Fostering Self-Determination in Higher Education: Identifying Evidence-Based Practices

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## **Abstract**

Research on the transition of students with disabilities and their post-school outcomes continues to move the field of special education in the direction of evidence-based practices. As special education professionals work to better recognize the impact of instructional and environmental characteristics to prepare youth for their transition, so must postsecondary education professionals. There is a need for a unified research agenda in the field of higher education and disability to conduct rigorous studies on evidence-based practices in the college environment that support self-determination and to identify evidence-based predictors that correlate with improved outcomes in retention, graduation, and further education or employment.

*Keywords: Self-determination, students with disabilities, postsecondary education*

Self-determination became a significant part of transition planning services in federal legislation when it was first included in the Rehabilitation Acts of 1992 and 1998 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Acts (IDEA) of 1990 and 1997 (Cobb, Lehmann, Newman-Gonchar, & Atwell, 2009; Wood, Karvonen, Test, Browder, & Algozzine, 2004). Defining self-determination within the context of preparing youth with disabilities for their futures has been a focus of research and demonstration activities for several years. Test and colleagues (2009) conducted rigorous correlational research, identifying 17 evidence-based predictors of improved post-school outcomes in three categories: employment, education, and independent living. They found that higher levels of self-advocacy/self-determination were significantly associated with an increased likelihood of postsecondary education (Test, Fowler, & Kohler, 2013). This finding is critical in light of the well-documented relationship between postsecondary education and improved employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities (Stodden & Dowick, 2001).

Research on the transition of students with disabilities and their post-school outcomes continues to move the field of special education in the direction of evidence-based practices. Evidence-based practices are defined as those that are grounded on “rigorous research designs, have a demonstrated record of success for improving student outcomes, and have undergone a systematic review process using quality indicators to evaluate the level of evidence” (Mazzotti, Rowe, Cameto, Test, & Morningstar, 2013, p. 141). As we learn more about the impact of self-determination on secondary post-school outcomes in education and employment, it is equally critical to research evidence-based practices in postsecondary education settings, since the relationship between the self-determination skills of students in college and their success in these settings continues to remain, for the most part, unexamined (Finn, Getzel, & McManus, 2008; Jameson, 2007). There is a great need to identify, refine, and implement evidence-based practices within the postsecondary environment that can foster the continued development of self-determination skills.

### Components of Self-Determination

Self-determination is defined both on the individual skill level and at the level of organizational practices (Morningstar et al., 2010; Wehmeyer, 2004). A conceptual framework of self-determination is described by Field and Hoffman (1994) as “the ability to define and achieve goals based on a foundation of knowing and valuing oneself” (p. 136). Wehmeyer, Agran, and Hughes (1998) present 12 component skills that are essential to the emergence of self-determined behavior in an individual. Some of the skills identified include choice-making, problem-solving, self-advocacy, internal locus of control, self-awareness, and self-knowledge. College students with disabilities identify these behaviors as critical to success in postsecondary education (Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Thoma & Getzel, 2005).

Research conducted in the field of psychology on the theory of self-determination supports the idea that attributes of self-determination are more than just biological, but are also a function of “a wide range of reactions to social environments” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68). It is the combination of the individual and specific environments that encompass the development and expression of self-determination. For example, in studies examining individuals’ inherent motivation, the overall feel of the specific environment, such as the home or the classroom, can inhibit or enhance a person’s sense of choice and initiative (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

In a study that examines both personal and environmental characteristics, Shogren, Wehmeyer, Palmer, and Paek (2013) conclude that further research is needed to understand the school environments that are supportive of self-determination. The researchers also recommend that studies should be conducted outside of a school setting to obtain a more complete understanding of the factors that can impact self-determination.

As special education professionals work to better recognize the impact of instructional and environmental characteristics to prepare youth for their transition, so must postsecondary education professionals. There is a need for a unified research agenda in the field of higher education and disability to conduct rigorous studies on evidence-based practices in the college environment that support self-determination and to expand this research to identify evidence-based predictors that correlate with improved outcomes of retention, graduation, and further education or employment.

### Research on Self-Determination of Transition Age Youth

Clearly, the field of special education must address the preparation needs of students with disabilities in their transition to postsecondary education through mandates in IDEA 2004. As part of the IDEA, states are required to report the post-school outcomes of students with disabilities who are competitively employed, enrolled in higher education, enrolled in some other postsecondary education/training program, or engaged in some other employment arrangement one year out of high school. These data are used on the national, state, and local levels to determine what programs, activities, or supports are needed to increase the participation rates of students in higher education, postsecondary training or employment. States are also engaged in developing college and career-ready standards and assessments to ensure that *all* students are able to exit high school prepared to successfully obtain further education or employment in today’s global economy. Morningstar and colleagues (2010) report that national organizations recognize the need for increased participation in postsecondary education through better transition services, including instruction and self-determination skill development.

Yet, obstacles remain in the transition to college for students with disabilities. While more students with disabilities are transitioning to college, they are still less likely (46% vs. 63%) to ever have been enrolled in postsecondary education than youth in the general population (Newman, Wagner, Cameto, Knokey, & Shaver, 2010). This is not surprising when looking at students’ expectations for future postsecondary school completion. When asked about graduating from a 4-year college, 25% of youth with disabilities indicated they definitely would, compared to 89% of youth in the general population (Newman et al., 2010).

What is equally concerning is the fact that once they are enrolled in college, students with disabilities are not seeking needed services and supports through the process of self-disclosure to receive accommodations. Half of the students exiting special education enter postsecondary education indicating that they do not believe they have a disability. An additional 14% of students consider themselves to have a disability, but choose not to disclose. Thus, just 35% of students with disabilities choose to disclose their disability in college (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005; Newman & Madaus, 2014). Newman and colleagues (2010) also report that only 41% of students with disabilities have completed some type of postsecondary credential, compared to 51% of youth in the

general population. More research and demonstration is needed to study personal characteristics and environmental factors that impact students with disabilities while in high school and during their transition to and participation in college.

### **Self-Determination and Higher Education**

The literature on the need for self-determination skills to remain and persist in higher education continues to grow as we look at new populations entering college and the components of a successful transition to this setting (Briel & Getzel, 2014; Grigal & Hart, 2010; Morningstar et al., 2010). Through the exploration of differences between secondary education and college, we know that the adjustment to a college environment presents challenges for all students; however, the responsibility of managing accommodations along with coursework presents an additional set of challenges that are unique to students with disabilities. The issues facing students with disabilities are well documented in the literature (Banks, 2014; Briel & Getzel, 2014; Getzel, 2008; Hitchings et al., 2001; Thoma & Getzel, 2005). Students with disabilities report barriers resulting from a lack of acceptance, difficulties accessing the necessary services and supports, and concerns in the area of self-advocacy (Lehmann, Davies & Laurin, 2000). If we are to better understand how to assist students with disabilities to transition into, remain in, and graduate from postsecondary education programs, it is incumbent on both secondary and postsecondary education to jointly engage in research, especially evidence-based practices that can assist with the transition from one environment (secondary education) to another (postsecondary education).

### **Fostering Self-Determination in Higher Education**

In an atmosphere of “high expectations, reduction of resources and questions about higher education’s commitment to educational value” (McCormick, Kinzie, & Korkmaz, 2011, p. 25), colleges and universities are focusing on student engagement. Institutes of higher education are a growing part of the First Year Experience Movement (McCormick et al., 2011). The focus of this movement is to address concerns for student retention focusing on active and shared learning and student-faculty interactions in the first year of postsecondary education. Examples of support provided to first year students include an emphasis on methods to help students in their academic planning and completion of program requirements, learning communities and seminars, and peer-to-peer instructional support (McCormick et al., 2011). Within this environment of increasing student engagement, rigorous research on

evidence-based practices that continue to foster self-determination skills would contribute to the knowledge of factors that could have a positive impact on retention and graduation rates. Ultimately, the research on effective practices in self-determination could generalize to all college students, as seen in the examination of universal design strategies in the instruction of diverse learners (Roberts, Park, Brown, & Cook, 2011). As Wehmeyer and Abery (2013) contend,

There remains a need to develop better measures of global self-determination that can be used with children, youth and adults with and without disability so as to be able to better integrate practice in the area in typical school, family and community activities (p. 406).

There are a number of university-based programs and practices that encourage the self-determination of students with disabilities, which could be a starting point for discussion on research to identify evidence-based practices. Program models or practices need to be examined to determine traits and characteristics of students with disabilities, including self-determination, self-advocacy, and motivation (O’Neill, Markward, & French, 2012). Below are a few examples of organizational practices that could foster self-determined behaviors within a college environment, based on research and evaluation articles in the literature.

### **Use of Peer or Faculty Mentoring Programs**

Providing peer-to-peer mentoring or faculty mentoring programs is not new in the college setting. Universities and colleges are establishing these types of programs to help students who are struggling with their coursework in order to increase their likelihood of staying in school (Getzel, 2008). As Brown, Takahashi, and Roberts (2010) conclude after a review of the literature on mentoring in postsecondary education settings, evidence-based research is sparse. While generally viewed as a beneficial practice in the field, research is needed to determine the efficacy of this model (Brown et al., 2010).

### **Use of Coaching/Education Coaches**

Various models of coaching are being used in higher education to benefit students with disabilities (Finn, Getzel, & McManus, 2008; Parker, Hoffman, Sawilowsky, & Rolands, 2011). For example, in two studies conducted by Parker et al. (2011) and Finn et al. (2008), students with disabilities found that learning and practicing goal setting helped them to meet the demands of their academic schedule. In the Finn et al. (2008) study, college students with disabilities indicated that the use of goal setting became a part of

their daily routine to help them make a plan and stick to it. Continuing to identify studies that focus on the strategies used in coaching models will help to assess the strength of such interventions as evidence-based practices for students with disabilities.

### Receiving Accommodations

In response to the ADA Amendment Act of 2008, the Association on Higher Education And Disability (AHEAD) developed a conceptual framework to support the provision of receiving accommodations. As stated in the AHEAD guidance document (April, 2012), “Although the amendments and regulatory requirements occurred through separate federal processes... together they reflect a more mature understanding of disability that is essential for fostering a positive campus perspective on disability” (p. 1). This philosophical shift toward looking more at the process of accommodation rather than strict guidelines around documentation is an area that needs extensive study (Klotz, 2012). Among other things, such research could explore the impact the new guidance on documentation practices may have on the further growth of self-determination in college students with disabilities.

### Collaboration Across Campus

As previously mentioned, studying instructional and environmental characteristics are an important component of supporting self-determination skills. It is critical for students with disabilities transitioning to postsecondary education to have the requisite self-determination skills; however, postsecondary education professionals need to continue to foster these skills within this environment. Since these characteristics impact self-determination, rigorous research is needed on which college characteristics provide an environment that supports these skills. What components of collaboration are essential to foster an environment that supports self-determination in higher education? What are the evidence-based practices that create an environment of support, professional development, and increased communication among faculty members and staff that could support self-determination (Dowrick, Anderson, Heyer, & Acosta, 2005; Humphrey, Wood, & Huglin, 2011; Korb, Lucia, Wenzel, & Anderson, 2011)?

### Recommendations

It is hoped that over the next ten to fifteen years, the field of higher education and disability will better understand which evidence-based practices of self-determination are predictors of improved outcomes of retention, graduation, and further education or employment. Below are some recommendations for the field to consider:

1. Focus on the changes occurring in the process for receiving accommodations, along with increased research on mentoring programs, professional development, coaching, and other practices and potential predictors of retention and graduation of college students with disabilities.
2. Explore ways that researchers from different professional organizations can collaborate on research efforts and better understand the research needs within the secondary and postsecondary system, to better direct future funding or initiatives. One approach for establishing this collaboration is for the AHEAD organization to support a Research Special Interest Group (SIG) that could work in partnership with other research committees, in particular the Council of Exceptional Children’s Division on Career Development and Transition (DCDT).
3. Move the field of higher education and disability to examine more universal or global measures of self-determination. By identifying evidence-based practices within postsecondary settings, these practices can assist all college students with or without disabilities to pursue a course of study and graduate. As we learn more about the impact of these practices and their potential use as predictors, such research can be applied more universally as colleges and universities find ways to increase student engagement in higher education settings.

### Conclusion

Increasing numbers of individuals with disabilities are entering postsecondary education to obtain the knowledge and skills they need to compete in a global economy. Correlational research in the field of special education has identified self-advocacy/self-determination as an evidence-based predictor in secondary transition, having an impact on improved post-school outcomes in education and employment (Test et al., 2013). Students with disabilities are still facing issues in both their transi-

tion to college and their retention to complete a degree or certificate. Special education researchers continue to examine the skills that can advance our understanding of how best to meet the self-determination needs of students as they transition to college. However, there is a need for increased research in higher education to identify evidence-based practices that can serve as predictors of improved outcomes for college students with disabilities. The identification of instructional and environmental factors in higher education that are supportive of self-determination is critical to further inform the field, both in special education and higher education.

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