

## Predictors of Higher Education Participation for Students with Disabilities

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### INTRODUCTION

The benefits of higher education have been widely documented. Comparisons repeatedly show that those with a college degree (associate, bachelor, master, doctoral) fair better in life than people with a high school degree or less. They earn and save more money, they are more insured and healthier, and they experience lower rates of unemployment.

Considering the benefits, understanding how to increase one's chances of accessing higher education is a worthwhile endeavor. Fortunately, over the past decade researchers have identified practices that predict the likelihood that students with disabilities will participate in postsecondary education.

Predicting the likelihood of a future event is not the same as stating with certainty that outcomes will occur. Instead, predictors function in the realm of probability. For example, maintaining healthy diets, exercising, limiting alcohol intake, and not smoking reduce but do not eliminate the chances of a heart attack. Similarly, insurance companies have found over time that factors such as marital status predict the likelihood of car crashes. What predictors have in common is that evidence is built from events that have already occurred. To understand what *will* help students go to college, researchers examine what *has* helped students go to college.

Another truth is that predictors function within context. Some students may do everything needed to improve their chances of going to college, but policy and geography may prove powerful enough to restrict options. Therefore, when reviewing predictors of college participation for students with disabilities, one should know that some postsecondary environments are more inviting than others.

Keeping those restraints in mind, this topical paper describes predictors of post-school success and access to postsecondary education opportunities. It should be noted, however, that conditions which predict one type of post-school success often predict other successes too. This means that often the opportunities that help students go to college are the same ones that help students get jobs.

### PREDICTORS OF POSITIVE POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION OUTCOMES

Over the last decade, education researchers David Test, Val Mazzotti, Dawn Rowe and their colleagues have

listed, defined, and shown the statistical significance of college predictors. Using these efforts, we will describe some of the strongest predictors of participation in higher education: **paid employment/work experiences, inclusion in general education, parent expectations and involvement, self-care and independent living skills, and self-determination**. In some cases, we have fused multiple predictors into one common theme. The predictors are listed in no particular order and all should be considered significant.

## **Paid employment/work experience**

The impact of education on work opportunities is fairly well known, but perhaps less understood are the ways that high school work experiences can contribute to college participation for students with disabilities. Work experiences of greatest benefit to students occur in natural work environments and are not limited to experiences manufactured within classrooms settings and include job shadowing, internships, apprenticeships and paid employment.

High schools can play an important role in creating employment opportunities by providing academic credit for paid work experiences, working with students on social skills, and assisting students as they apply for vocational rehabilitation services. It should come as no surprise that good employees and good students share common traits which are often developed and refined from experience. With each job opportunity, students narrow their career interests and better understand the behaviors that will make them increasingly marketable.

## **Inclusion in general education**

In general education classes, students can practice and eventually crystallize the soft skills sought by employers. There are likely few places better than general education classes, surrounded by peers without disabilities, for allowing students to prepare for college participation. General education opportunities positively predict postsecondary opportunities.

For high schools to make inclusive opportunities a reality, exceptional and general education teachers need common planning times for collaboratively developing any modifications necessary for full participation. Schools can arrange for general education teachers to more seamlessly include all learners in their classroom environments by providing professional development on topics such as universal design for learning. To prepare students for general education classes, teachers can provide individualized instruction on self-management, organization, and study skills. The fit between students and classroom environments is best understood after consistent assessment; after all, the first step to creating solutions and interventions is accurately defining challenges.

At VCU, students with intellectual and developmental disabilities participate in college classes and coursework. Many of these students were restricted to inclusive opportunities during lunch, physical education, or family and consumer sciences in high school in spite of their potential. Initial access to the general curriculum can be a launching point for inclusion in a more diverse array of academics. With support from teachers, peers and assistive technology, access to more general education classes should be considered.

## **Parent involvement & parent expectations**

Parent advocacy, from the time students are young, is critical for students to participate inclusively in general education. Parent involvement and high expectations are also predictors of postsecondary education outcomes. In the transition process, involved parents actively participate not just by attending IEP meetings, but by continuing to advocate for opportunities that help students accomplish their postsecondary goals. When parents expect their children to participate in education and competitive employment after high school then these opportunities are more likely to occur.

Schools can help parents be more involved in the transition process by linking parents to support networks. Providing tips for reinforcing social, academic, or independent living skills at home is another way schools can help parents provide dynamic support throughout the transition process. To make sure all parents and families are supported, schools can help staff access training to learn how to best serve families from a wide variety of cultural and economic backgrounds.

## **Self-care/independent living skills**

When families and schools help students develop self-care and independent living skills, students are more likely to access higher education. Training in a wide swath of skills including hygiene, wellness, financial literacy, and social interactions is useful for students. Teachers can support students by frequently assessing independent living skills and the degree to which students generalize behaviors across settings. A focus on independent travel and navigation is recommended for participation on college campuses because classes and administrative offices are often spread over acres of campus. At home, students can be encouraged to do their own laundry, participate in household chores, and even cook family meals.

For the first time in their lives, many college students experience unparalleled independence and the need for self-reliance. Hygiene, time management, and meal planning are required but occur without reminders and instructions from family. Students with disabilities who have had access to years of training will find increased independence as a source of pride and a similarity that they will share with college peers.

## **Self-determination (autonomy & decision making; goal setting)**

Increased independence requires increased self-determination. In college, and for the rest of their lives, students will be expected to make choices and accept the consequences of those choices. Accessing college disability support services requires personal initiative. Students must seek accommodations that will not be otherwise provided. Self-determination, specifically goal setting, autonomy, and decision making, is predictive of college participation.

Individualizing education for students with disabilities requires that school personnel recognize student strengths, but also that students are given opportunities to recognize and monitor their personal development and to make choices. For example, students can rearrange activity schedules, choose peer supports, or decide on club participation. Leadership and mentorship opportunities bolster self-determination. IEP meetings are one consistent place where student leadership can be exhibited by training students to facilitate their own meetings.

Self-determined students recognize college as a place for individuals to gain necessary skills to succeed in careers and communities, and as a vehicle for accomplishing future goals. Although college enrollment is worthy of celebration, it is best viewed as a conduit for enabling students to reach the goals that will inevitably impact their adult lives.

## CONCLUSION

Transition planning cannot start too early. There are as many paths to college as there are students, but attention to the predictors of positive postsecondary education outcomes is one way to increase the likelihood that those paths will lead to college.

## REFERENCES

- Mazzotti, V. L., Rowe, D. A., Sinclair, J., Poppen, M., Woods, W. E., & Shearer, M. L. (2016). Predictors of post-school success: A systematical review of NLTS2 secondary analyses. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals, 39*, 196-215.
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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

National Technical Assistance Center on Transition: [transitionta.org](http://transitionta.org)