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Article 8

Preparing Students With Disabilities for Their Future Careers

Paper based on a program presented at the 2011 American Counseling Association Conference, March 25-27, 2011, New Orleans, LA.

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With the passing of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA), the U.S. government reinforced the need for specific services provided to students with special needs. Students identified with special needs are given an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) that must include services designed to help them succeed at school. Included in the IEP are required transition services, or coordinated activities for students with disabilities, that include actions which help students plan for and be successful in postsecondary education or vocation. The IDEIA states that transition services should include “instruction, related services, community experiences, the development of employment and other post-secondary adult living objectives, and, if appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation.” [34 CFR 300.43 (a)]. These activities must be derived from student needs and should be based on student’s interests, strengths, and preferred activities (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

School counselors are in the unique position to assist in the career development and planning for students with disabilities. They are trained in career counseling and have career development as one of their three domains of focus for working with students (ASCA, 2005). Milsom, Goodnough, and Akos (2007) noted that school counselors are the only school staff to have specific career development knowledge and training to administer career assessments. In addition, CACREP (2009) requires that school counselors be trained in special education issues, including developmental problems, ability issues, and assessment of learning difficulties, so they are somewhat familiar with how to work with students with disabilities. Unfortunately, many school counselors lack the tools needed to truly help students in special education plan for their future.

Research demonstrates that many school counselors do not actively participate in transition planning. Milsom (2002) surveyed recent school counseling graduates and found that, of all services they offered to students with disabilities, they felt least prepared to assist in transitioning to college or career. In addition, only two-thirds of the high school counselors and less than half of K-12 counselors in the survey reported assisting in transition planning. Relatedly, Hitchings (2001) surveyed college students with learning disabilities and learned that only 8% reported meeting yearly with their high school counselors to discuss course selection and college preparation. Another study (Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007) surveyed students with disabilities regarding their knowledge about transition services and found students were unfamiliar with transition planning. For example, the majority of students were unable to recall the date of their last transition planning meeting, lacked knowledge about the purpose of a transition plan, and were unable to name an adult service provider who assisted with their transition services.

Ultimately, transition services may be left to the special education teacher, who is not trained in career development and counseling. A recent study (Washburn-Moses, 2006) revealed the majority of special education teachers surveyed found the quality of transition services at their sites to be only satisfactory or needing improvement, and believed they were ill-prepared to offer these services to students. A second survey of special education teachers yielded similar results, with most teachers reporting that their school was not providing full transition planning. Areas lacking adequate services included employability skills, service learning and internship opportunities, and job coaching (Zhang, Ivester, & Katsiyannis, 2005). Clearly, special education teachers cannot provide the full range of transition services needed for students with special needs.

Transition Activities for School Counselors

School counselors can become involved in providing a multitude of services related to transition planning. Many of these activities would benefit not only students in special education, but all students in middle and high school. We grouped the activities by focal area, and encourage school counselors to add these to their school counseling programs. In most cases, school counselors already provide versions of these services to most students; including students in special education is a logical next step that would add only minimally to their workload. In addition to the specific ideas described below, a list of helpful websites is also included in Appendix A.

Career Exploration

At the middle and high school level, students are involved in career exploration and tentative decision-making (Sharf, 2010). Small and large group activities can address many career exploration needs of students with disabilities. Lindstrom et al. (2007) interviewed students and other school stakeholders to determine what creates successful transition services. They recommended utilizing community learning experiences and providing information regarding the variety of training programs available to students. Learning experiences might include internships, service learning opportunities, or job shadowing, while information on training programs could be provided through parent meetings that include panel members from local community support groups.

School counselors also can provide resources for the special education teacher (and really all teachers) that will provide realistic career information. Two resources that can be easily utilized with students are the O*NET website and Occupational Outlook Handbook. These resources offer accurate information for students regarding salary, training and education, and work related tasks. These websites can be used during transition planning to create specific goals and student outcomes.

Other activities for small group guidance include providing information on salary and benefits, offering modified interest inventories, recognizing work-related skills, completing values card sorts, and creating panels of previous students with disabilities who can share their job experiences. School counselors are well equipped to offer these guidance programs, and they can tailor them to meet the needs of all students.

Individually, school counselors can meet with students in special education to help plan for postsecondary schooling. School counselors might discuss the link between school and career or review course choices to ensure that students take college-prep programming when they are able. At minimum, counselors should meet yearly with students in special education, just as they do with all of their students. Overall, school counselors possess the best training to provide career preparation activities.

Parent Involvement

Another area school counselors should be involved in is helping parents of students with disabilities. Although special education teachers keep in touch with parents about transition planning and the IEP process, school counselors can provide information to parents on financial planning for college, how to talk with their students about career planning, and who to talk with in postsecondary institutions about disability services. Counselors might teach parents how to learn about their student's strengths, needs, values, and interests. Counselors could hold a parent workshop, not just for parents of students with disabilities, but all parents, on how to talk with their student about their skills and interests. Parent involvement directly influences career development (Whiston & Keller, 2004), so encouraging these conversations is vital. Counselors can use the *Guidance and Career Counselors' Toolkit* (<http://www.heath.gwu.edu/images/stories/Toolkit.pdf>) to find answers to many questions typically asked by parents, including information about assistive technology, vocational rehabilitation, and college disability services.

School counselors can also work with special education teachers to help strengthen ties between them and parents. For example, they might help teachers learn to be intentionally inviting with parents. Suggestions such as focusing on student strengths when talking with parents, inviting parents to share their knowledge about career, and communicating regularly with parents about transition programming can strengthen the bonds between teachers and parents, ultimately benefitting the students. Turner, Steward, and Lapan (2004) suggested the following activities for developing student career interests: help teach parents to model career-related behaviors, remind parents that student anxiety about courses and career planning is normal, and offer parents tips on goal-setting with their students. Once these skills are taught to special education teachers, school counselors can act as consultants to ensure the new skills are implemented.

Skills Training

According to a survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor (1991), the personal qualities wanted most by employers are responsibility, self-esteem, self-management, sociability, and integrity. Each of these can be considered soft skills, or transferable occupational skills. These soft skills should be part of a student's transition plan and can easily be taught by the school counselor as part of a classroom guidance program. Zhang et al. (2005) found that special education teachers were not providing training on occupational social skills as part of the transition programming. Students with disabilities will benefit from gaining efficacy in these skill areas.

Elksnin and Elksnin (2001) described a model to help teach occupational social skills. First, instructors must define or describe the skill, then provide a rationale for needing to learn the skill, then offer situations when the skill might be used, then use role play to teach the skill, and finally help students understand the nuances of using that skill. For example, if the skill being taught is how to greet someone for the first time, the instructor would first define what greeting means. Next, students and the instructor would discuss reasons for needing the skill and situations in which the skill might be used, such as a job interview or meeting new coworkers. A rationale might include that making a good first impression increases the possibility of a job offer. Next, the class would discuss the steps involved in the skill. In this case, it might include a firm handshake and introducing oneself by name. During the role plays, students would work through each step, including practicing how closely to stand next to the person, how loudly to talk, what exactly to say, and appropriate eye contact. Finally, students would learn generally acceptable behavior related to greeting someone, such as waiting until the person is ready. This type of training can be used to teach any occupational social skills.

Assessment

Career assessment remains an important part of the career planning process. Assessment is one area where school counselors should take the lead. The ASCA Ethical Standards (2010) clearly mandates "equitable academic, career, post-secondary access and personal/social opportunities for all students through the use of data. . ." (p. 2). Counselors are trained in the use and interpretation of career assessments, and must use this knowledge to "consider the developmental age, language skills, and level of competence of the student taking the assessments before assessments are given" (ASCA Ethical Standards, p. 3). School counselors are better trained than special education teachers in the use of career assessment, but this process can be difficult and time-consuming for students with disabilities. Depending on the type of disability, school counselors may need to offer different types of career tests than they do for other students. One option is to check with the special education teacher to learn if more appropriate tests are already being offered. If this is not the case, counselors may investigate the following tests for possible use.

Various assessments exist for use with students with disabilities. One assessment option is the Reading Free Vocational Interest Inventory (R-FVII:2; 2007). As indicated, no reading is required for this assessment; instead students select pictures of preferred job-related tasks. This assessment can be administered in a group setting, in about 45-minutes. This assessment has also established norms based on disability status. Other options include the O*Net Ability Explorer which is available free of charge on the

O*Net website; the Wide Range Interest-Opinion Test (WRIOT), another pictorial interest inventory; or the Ashland Interest Assessment (AIA), a interest inventory designed specifically for people facing potential barriers to employment (Whitfield, Feller, & Wood, 2009).

Importantly, school counselors can help with career assessment even if they are not involved in directly giving the test. For example, many schools already give career inventories as part of the transition process. These tests are put into the student's portfolio, but often are not discussed directly with the student. School counselors can work with special education teachers to provide test interpretation on a yearly basis, so students receive personalized information about their results. Each year, the counselor can build upon previous assessment results to provide a holistic picture of career development. This service would be invaluable to all students in special education.

School counselors can use their skills and training to assist students with disabilities in transition planning. Career exploration, soft skills development, career assessment, and parent involvement are four specific areas where school counselors' expertise is needed. School counselors need to offer these services to all students in order to meet the mandates set forth by ASCA and the school counseling profession.

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Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS_Home.htm

Appendix A. Helpful Websites When Working With Students With Disabilities.

- <http://www.heath.gwu.edu/images/stories/Toolkit.pdf>
This is a link to a manual for school counselors on advising students with disabilities.
- <http://www.dol.gov/odep/>
The Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) provides information on schooling and employment for students with disabilities.
- http://www.heath.gwu.edu/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1001&Itemid=4
The Heath Resource Center is an online clearinghouse of information related to postsecondary education for students with disabilities.
- <http://online.onetcenter.org/>
O*Net offers information about careers and includes various career assessments that can be used with students with disabilities.
- <http://www.bls.gov/oco/home.htm>
The Occupational Outlook Handbook provides information for hundreds of jobs, including required training, salary, daily tasks, and projected demand.
- <http://askjan.org/>
The Job Accommodation Network offers information about workplace accommodations for people with disabilities.
- <http://www.disability.gov/>
This website offers a variety of information about disability services, including entire sections on education and employment.
- <http://www.ncwd-youth.info/>
The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability offers free professional development on working with students with disabilities. The site also includes links to multiple helpful resources.
- <http://www.cosdonline.org/>
Career Opportunities for Students with Disabilities connects college students and recent graduates with disabilities to major employers seeking them.