

“Self-determination is what it’s all about”: What Post-secondary Students with Disabilities Tell us are Important Considerations for Success

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Abstract: This article describes results of a series of focus group interviews conducted with post-secondary students with disabilities about the importance of self-determination in their success in those settings. Participants attended community college and/or state universities in Virginia and were between the ages of 18 and 48. They indicated that self-determination skills were important to their success in taking courses, finding the supports they needed, and advocating for their rights. Implications for supports for students with disabilities in post-secondary settings, as well as those K-12 students who are planning to transition to post-secondary educational settings are discussed.

Self-determination has been identified by numerous researchers as a critical component of effective transition planning for students with disabilities (Eisenman, 2001; Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998; Wehmeyer, 2002; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). In fact, research has shown that the core component skills of self-determination are correlated with an improved quality of life for adults with disabilities, particularly those outcomes as employment, community living, and post-secondary education (Martin, Mithaug, Husch, Frazier, & Huber Marshall, 2003; Raskind, Goldberg, Higgins, & Herman, 1999 2002; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998; Wehmeyer & Schalock, 2001).

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The importance of self-determination is reinforced by the Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education (SPeNSE), a study funded by the U.S. Department of Education. This large-scale, national study identified teaching self-determination as one of the key practices in facilitating transition (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Approximately 62% of teachers reported teaching self-determination “often” and approximately 29% of teachers reported teaching self-determination “sometimes” (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Empirical studies report, however, that many secondary teachers do not include activities for students with disabilities that will foster self-determination as part of their transition planning (Agron, Snow, & Swaner, 1999; Eisenman & Chamberlin, 2001; Grigal, Neubert, Moon, & Graham, 2003; Thoma, Baker, & Saddler, 2002; Thoma, Nathanson, Baker, & Tamura, 2002; Thoma, Rogan, & Baker, 2001; Wehmeyer, Agron, & Hughes, 2000). SPeNSE data, for example, indicates that special educators who conduct transition planning devote 6 hours per month, on average, to this activity (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

The correlation between post-secondary success and self-determination skills is an important one, especially given the fact that other researchers have linked postsecondary education with improved employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities (Stod-

den & Dowrick, 2001). Given the importance of learning self-determination skills in general, the number of core component skills that are part of self-determined behavior, and the lack of time that special educators are devoting to teaching these skills, we thought it would be important to understand which of those core component skills students themselves found to be most important to their success in post-secondary settings. This research investigation focused on students in those settings who were identified by their support providers as having a high degree of self-determination skills in general, in an attempt to guide special educators and transition planning stakeholders in their work to develop transition plans that result in successful outcomes for students with disabilities.

Wehmeyer (1992) defined self-determination as “acting as the primary causal agent in one’s life free to make choices and decisions about one’s quality of life, free from undue influence or interference” (p. 302). Field and Hoffman (1994) conceptualized self-determination as “one’s ability to define and achieve goals based on a foundation of knowing and valuing oneself” (p. 136).

Wehmeyer, Agran, and Hughes (1998) described 12 component skills that are important to the emergence of self-determined behavior. Those elements are: “choice-making; decision-making; problem-solving; goal setting and attainment; independence, risk-taking and safety skills; self-observation, evaluation, and reinforcement skills; self-instruction; self-advocacy and leadership skills; internal locus of control; positive attributes of efficacy and outcome expectancy; self-awareness; and self-knowledge” (Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes 1998, p. 11).

It is clear that the goal of transition planning is to prepare students with disabilities for their lives after high school by teaching skills they will need in the new settings. But what skills are most important, and how does one identify them? We believe that the best way to identify those essential skills is to ask those who are currently in those settings. So, for success in post-secondary settings, we believe it is important to ask students with disabilities who are in colleges and universities. The specific purposes of the study are as follows:

Identify which skills post-secondary students with disabilities described as being important to their success in post-secondary educational settings.

Identify how post-secondary students with disabilities learned those skills.

Identify how post-secondary students with disabilities believe we can best prepare high school students for the transition to post-secondary education.

Method

Participants

We used a purposive sampling procedure to select focus group participants (Morgan, 1998; Patton, 1990). In this procedure, we sought to include post-secondary level students with disabilities who were receiving supports and services related to their disability and who were identified as having self-determination skills. They were individuals who self-disclosed that they had a disability at some point within their post-secondary educational experience. Participants were paid for their time to increase the likelihood that they would attend the focus group interview session.

This method of choosing participants was used because it offered an opportunity to learn from those students who had disabilities, who sought out supports and services for their disabilities and who therefore exercised at least some degree of self-determination skills. At the university level, there is no attempt to identify students with disabilities. Instead, students with disabilities need to self-disclose; that is, they need to identify themselves as having a disability and request the services and supports they need from the office for students with disabilities at the college or university setting. Choosing participants who had self-disclosed assured that all participants had some basic self-determination skills and therefore had experiences to use to answer these questions.

Participants ranged in age from eighteen through forty-eight. Fifty-three percent of the participants were female and forty-seven percent were male. Participants came from a variety of cultural backgrounds and had a variety of disabilities. Tables 1-3 highlight demo-

TABLE 1
Characteristics of Participants: Ethnicity

<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Caucasian</i>	<i>African-American</i>	<i>Asian</i>
Number	21	12	1
Percent	61.8%	35.3%	2.9%

graphic characteristics of participants. The ethnic backgrounds of the participants can be found in Table 1. Table 2 lists the types of disabilities that participants had, while Table 3 lists the grade classification of participants.

Focus Group Interview Process

This research study used a semi-structured interview process within a focus group format. Kreuger (1998) describes a number of reasons for the use of focus groups. He reports that focus groups are an effective way to obtain results from a small group of individuals, and they also provide an atmosphere for collecting information that is more relaxed and natural. Focus groups are more socially oriented with a structure that allows the facilitator the flexibility to explore unanticipated issues that emerge during the discussion.

Six locations for the focus groups were chosen: three community college sites across the state of Virginia, and three college/university sites in different geographic areas of the state (rural/Southwest, urban/Central, and suburban/Tidewater). We asked staff in the office for students with disabilities in these institutions to identify 6-8 students who receive services from their office. Students who were willing to participate gave permission for research staff to contact them directly. Telephone calls were made inviting participation in the focus group, and the researcher gave the individuals information about the purpose of the group and the date, time, and location of the meeting. Staff also identified whether accommodations would be needed by the participants in order to participate fully in the groups. Follow-up letters and phone calls were made to ensure their participation. Individuals who agreed to participate signed a consent form for the study and received a stipend of \$25.

The typical size of a focus group is 6 to 10

participants and researchers generally find that three to five groups allow the emergence of recurring themes (Morgan, 1998). Group size in this study ranged from four to ten participants and we found common responses across the six groups held. The final sample included thirty-four participants.

There were three primary discussion questions with related probes for gathering information. Questions and follow up probes centered on the primary research purposes as outlined above, including: a) what do you think a good advocate does to get the services and supports they need; b) what advocacy/self-determination skills are absolutely essential for staying in college and getting the supports you need; and c) what suggestions do you have for our training format (training for high school students who are planning for their transition to post-secondary education)?

To ensure consistency across the six groups, we developed question, probe, and data guidelines for focus group facilitators and scribes. Two staff members facilitated each group with one member serving as the group moderator and the second individual serving as scribe, taking notes on the focus group session by summarizing the key points verifying with participants that the points were representative of the discussion and offering another opportunity to add to the dialogue.

TABLE 2
Characteristics of Participants: Disability

<i>Disability</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Blind	2	6%
Cerebral Palsy	6	17.6%
Narcolepsy	2	6%
Multiple Health Issues	1	2.9%
Deaf	1	2.9%
ADD/ADHD	5	14.8%
Learning Disability	7	20.6%
Bipolar	1	2.9%
Anxiety	1	2.9%
Muscular Dystrophy	1	2.9%
Spinal Cord Injuries	2	6%
Tourettes Syndrome	1	2.9%
Multiple Sclerosis	1	2.9%
Diabetes	1	2.9%
Seizure Disorder	1	2.9%
Visual-perceptual disorder	1	2.9%

TABLE 3

Characteristics of Participants: Year in School

<i>Year</i>	<i>Freshman</i>	<i>Sophomore</i>	<i>Junior</i>	<i>Senior</i>	<i>Graduate</i>
Number	5	8	14	6	1
Percentage	14.8%	23.6%	41.1%	17.6%	2.9%

Following each focus group, the moderator and scribe debriefed the session capturing the first impressions and the main themes that seem to have emerged. After the second focus group met, the moderator and scribe again looked for repetition of themes that had emerged. The results were further analyzed by the scribe's notes.

Data Analysis

Data analyses were conducted using information from the scribe notes (Benz, Johnson, Mikkelsen, & Lindstrom, 1995; Krueger, 1998). We developed transcripts for each focus group including demographic information, location and settings for each of the groups, responses to questions posed by the facilitator, and information obtained through follow-up questions to obtain additional information from the participants during the focus group sessions (Benz et al.). After each of the summaries was developed, we analyzed the information and systematically coded them for the emergent themes. We then compared and integrated these themes across the major themes that emerged from the data analysis across all groups.

Results

Research Question 1. Identify which skills post-secondary students with disabilities described as being important to their success in post-secondary educational settings

Participants in these focus group sessions clearly identified self-determination as important to their success in college and/or university settings. Many shared experiences of not self-disclosing (not advocating for the services they needed), failing, and then choosing to disclose their disability and request the sup-

ports they needed. But each of them identified many of the key component skills of self-determination as outlined by Wehmeyer as being essential for their success, including problem-solving skills, learning about oneself (and one's disability), goal setting, and self-management.

Problem-solving. Problem-solving skills were identified as necessary. For instance, one individual talked about the fact that "barriers find students, so students have to find out a lot of things on your own." Another student said that it was important to find out "what works for you, how do you get around problems. It's important that you know your limitations, set priorities, and focus on those. Every person is different." Yet another student discussed the need to "learn to be the squeaky wheel [because] 75-80% of the problems [students face] are with others."

Understanding one's disability. Learning about oneself, and particularly about one's disability are directly related to the self-determination core component skills of self-knowledge and self-understanding. No one said that learning about oneself was unimportant to their success at college. In fact, they reported that others did not understand the disability and/or their abilities. For instance, one student reported that "no one understood my disability and I was told that I could not attend college." When asked how she then made the decision to go to college, she said that "I gathered information everywhere I could: the Internet, doctors, and support groups. Then I had to explain it to others and ask for accommodations."

Many other students reported that they used the Internet to learn about their disabilities or to understand how others with the same disability succeeded in life. "My comfort was information: the Internet and doctors." "The Internet and a psychology class were

important sources of information for me, especially [about] how the brain functions and better understanding of my disability.” Other students felt that they just had to do it, saying things like “I had no other choice but to accept my disability” or “[I just had to] deal with it, fight through it” or “[I was] faced with the decision to continue living or become a hermit.”

Yet another theme that emerged was that of using trial and error as a strategy for determining what worked as an accommodation for one’s disability. One student said that a trial and error strategy worked for him. “I have a short attention span. I had to learn to pay attention through my grades. I’m not good in math and had to take it a second time. Doing it twice made me realize what my strengths and weaknesses are. I tried a different instructor and he was very different with a different teaching style. The second instructor explained it better. Before taking the class, find out how that person teaches.” Another student explained that she used “trial and error [to figure out what worked as an accommodation] for studying. Note cards are helpful but anatomy note cards are not good. I learned my strengths and weaknesses through experiences with different study techniques. I need to study with another person. I need to see it, hear it and write it. I’m more of a kinesthetic learner. I wasn’t prepared enough in high school.”

Goal setting. Every participant in the focus groups mentioned the importance of goal setting. One participant said, “goals have meaning to the individual [and may not have meaning to others], but it’s important to set career goals that reflect what you want to do and enjoy in life.” Another student reported, “I think goals need to be precise with steps and breaking it down. Take it one step at a time, once you accomplish the goals, you move on to the next one.” Yet another reported that he “learned that you have to be realistic about educational goals and jobs.”

High expectations when setting goals was a theme that emerged from the participants. As one student reported “my parents helped me to set high goals and to perform well even with a disability. I don’t know how people can deal with a disability without supportive parents.” Yet another student reported “seeing more

people on TV and in movies who have the same disability made him more aware of his disability and what goals he could accomplish.” Another explained that high expectations might not be supported by others, but that “being told she couldn’t do it, being determined to excel [helped her set and meet goals].” Lastly, a student summarized his feelings and those of the group when he said, “self-determination is what it’s all about. I want to do these things.”

Self-management. Self-management was also listed as an important skill by the participants in these focus groups. Participants reported, “I learned to organize my time. I don’t have back-to-back classes so I can take a nap and wake up.” Another participant reported, “I use a day planner and try to write everything down. I use the day planner to plan ahead for situations that require extra time.” Yet another participant said that it is important to “allot time to study, actually plan time, look at time and figure out how to use it; clean and clear the environment and have one notebook for each course and have sections in the notebook to keep up with different aspects of class: homework, classnotes, assignments, etc.”

Research Question 2. How did post-secondary students with disabilities learn these skills?

Trial and error. The most frequently reported method for learning self-determination skills was trial and error. That is, participants reported that they tried something, failed, and then tried again. Some even went as far as to say that “[I] don’t think that could be taught” or “In some ways it can be taught at school and some can’t.” Another student explained how he learned self-determination skills by saying, “figure out what the problem is and then figure out different ways to solve it.” Lastly, one participant offered this advice, “Make sure you know what your rights are and work with the people to get what you want, not forcefully, but assertively, until you get what you are entitled to. I learned these rights by finding out on my own.”

Finding support from peers/mentors. “Get people with disabilities together to learn from others with disabilities,” a strategy that one student suggested would work to learn “what your rights are.” This idea of learning from

others who have the same disabilities, and from a more traditional mentor relationship emerged as a theme. One participant said that he learned from “role models. They can tell you what it’s really like” while another participant reported “I had friends to look out for me and help me with notes. You know, friends who have the same disability. . . .we all work together.”

Being taught by parents. Yet others reported that their parents played a role in helping them learn these skills. “You need to be taught at home or learn on your own.” Another student reported that he learned from “my dad. He deals with a lot of my stuff.” And lastly, another student reported, “my mom is a great help. But it’s important that parents don’t baby them. . . .let them do things on their own. That’s the way to learn.”

Research Question 3. What suggestions do you have for training high school students with disabilities?

Participants in these focus groups had many suggestions for a training format for high school students with disabilities who are preparing to transition to post-secondary educational settings. These suggestions could be grouped into the following areas/themes: age to begin; format; and roles of parents in the process.

Age to begin. Participants were unanimous in their belief that learning self-determination skills should begin as early as possible. Most reported that “ninth or tenth grade [would be best]. Don’t wait until your senior year.” Another student said that it should begin “as soon as you realize you have a disability.” And yet another student said that “maybe self-determination should begin when you’re a little kid, whether you have a disability or not.”

Format for training. Participants varied greatly in their recommendations for the format for teaching self-determination skills to high school students planning to transition to post-secondary settings. It could be summarized through the comment of one student who said, “[you have to use] all formats for all learning styles.” And those multiple formats include such things as “have college students come in to talk with them;” “learning about successful people who have the same issues

(Einstein, Tom Cruise, Halle Berry, etc.);” “interactive workshops;” “written information [like] fact sheets on disabilities, accommodations, resources, required testings, etc;” and “career and college exploration activities.” In summary, they reported that it was important to “make the process more practical and with more [real] life activities.”

Role of parents. Many of the participants reported that “parents need to be more involved.” They also recommended that parents realize that “[they] shouldn’t force students to do what [parents] want them to do,” but should “educate themselves and ask their kids what they thought was best.” In summary, parents are asked to “support, encourage and understand.”

Discussion

Results of the focus groups provide insights into the postsecondary education experiences of 34 college students with disabilities concerning their self-determination skills, how they acquired these skills, and what information and training are needed for secondary education students who are considering post-secondary education as a transition goal. The findings are a beginning step towards better understanding how college students define the skills or behaviors that exhibit self-determination. However, some limitations should be noted. Research is needed to further validate the information provided by these students. The selection of the participants was not based on measuring their self-determination skills prior to joining a group. The selection was based on two assumptions. First, we used self-disclosure to the DSS office as one criterion as exhibiting self-determination. Second, we asked the DSS coordinators to select students who they believed were self-determined individuals; therefore we depended on the judgment of other individuals. Another limitation is the number of students with disabilities who participated in the focus groups. The results presented in this article were based on the opinions of thirty-four college students with disabilities. A greater number of students need the opportunity to voice their experiences and ideas to achieve a greater cross-section of students with disabilities attending higher education programs.

In spite of these limitations, results present important strategies and approaches. Some of the self-determination skills or behaviors identified by the focus group participants have been reported in the literature. These skills include: 1) an awareness of their strengths and weaknesses, (2) an ability to discuss their accommodation needs with faculty and staff, (3) an awareness of services and supports available to them, and (4) an ability to access information, services, or supports when needed (Aune, 1991; Bursuck & Rose, 1992; Durlak, 1992). Comparable results were found concerning the need to understand one's disability, seek out the services and supports needed to be successful, and communicate services needs with faculty and support services staff.

Results indicate the importance of technology, in particular, the Internet in helping students find information about their disability, which better equipped them to request accommodations and services, they needed. Another theme that emerged was the importance of family and peer support in encouraging and assisting these students in reaching their goals. They specifically discussed the importance of having peer support of other individuals with disabilities to serve as role models or as resource persons to increase their understanding about effective learning strategies or approaches.

Participants across all of the focus groups expressed the importance of setting goals, learning how to manage their time, and using problem solving strategies as essential skills when transitioning to higher education. Ongoing research and evaluation is needed to assess the impact of these skills on the progress and retention of students with disabilities in college.

Future Directions

The information obtained from these focus groups will be used to assist VCU-RRTC staff members to develop information and materials to use with secondary education students with disabilities considering college as a transition goal. Participants emphasized the need for a variety of formats for all learning styles and that activities should be practical and include more real life activities. Students ex-

pressed the need for secondary students to have college students with disabilities come to speak to them about their experiences. They also suggested that interactive workshops be created allowing students the opportunity to practice skills or strategies to decide what works best for them. The decision to gather information from college students with disabilities to use as one of the primary strategies for developing materials is based on the premise that the opinions of these individuals can help to fully understand what is needed to enhance the self-determination skills of students who are entering college (Lehmann, Davies, & Laurin, 2000; Fullan, 1993). Using their input will enable us to develop information that is practical and based on "real life" experiences.

There is little comprehensive research on what self-determination activities or strategies are working in the transition of students from high school to postsecondary education, and what strategies are helping students to remain in college (Harris & Robertson, 2001). Results of this study are an initial step to gaining a better understanding of the experiences of college students and the self-determination skills they believe are essential for transitioning to and staying in college. Obtaining information from students with disabilities who are experiencing the day-to-day issues, challenges, and successes in seeking advanced degrees needs to be a driving force behind the development of relevant activities and resources. Their "voices" are critical to enhancing and expanding the knowledge and information on effective self-determination methods and strategies to prepare students with disabilities to meet the demands in the college environment.

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