NASET's Practical Teacher

Supporting Students with Disabilities in Transitional Services: Advocating for Post-Secondary Success

By

By Melissa Beck Wells, EdD, BCASE, BCISE

Director of Teaching, Learning and Faculty Development, State of New York, Empire State University

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This issue of **NASET's Practical Teacher** was written by by Melissa Beck Wells, EdD, BCASE, BCISE. The transition from high school to college presents unique challenges for students with disabilities due to the differences in support services between PK-12 and post-secondary education. This article explores how educators can support these students by incorporating self-advocacy skills into transition planning. By understanding and addressing the shift in responsibilities, students can be better prepared to navigate higher education successfully. This paper outlines strategies for empowering students to advocate for themselves, ensuring they receive the accommodations necessary for academic success.

Abstract

The transition from high school to college presents unique challenges for students with disabilities due to the differences in support services between PK-12 and post-secondary education. This article explores how educators can support these students by incorporating self-advocacy skills into transition planning. By understanding and addressing the shift in responsibilities, students can be better prepared to navigate higher education successfully. This paper outlines strategies for empowering students to advocate for themselves, ensuring they receive the accommodations necessary for academic success.

Introduction

The transition from high school to college is a significant milestone for any student, but for students with disabilities, this period can be particularly challenging. The differences between the support services provided in PK-12 education and those available in post-secondary settings are vast, often leaving students unprepared for the new expectations placed upon them. This article focuses on how educators, families, and transition specialists can support students with disabilities in advocating for themselves as they navigate these challenges. By understanding the key differences between special education services in PK-12 and higher education, and by incorporating essential self-advocacy skills into transition planning, we can help ensure that students with disabilities are equipped to succeed in their post-secondary education.

Understanding the Differences Between PK-12 and Higher Education Services

Special education services in PK-12 settings are governed by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which mandates that schools provide a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to students with disabilities. This includes individualized education plans (IEPs), specialized instruction, and related services tailored to each student's unique needs. The focus in PK-12 is on providing direct support and ensuring students have access to the general education curriculum (Newman et al., 2009).

In contrast, post-secondary education is governed by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). These laws require colleges and universities to provide reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities but do not mandate the same level of individualized support as PK-12 settings. Students must self-identify as having a disability, provide documentation, and actively seek out accommodations (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2011). The emphasis shifts from ensuring access to providing equal opportunities, with students bearing greater responsibility for managing their educational needs (Hadley, 2011).

The Importance of Understanding These Differences

The transition from a highly structured, supportive environment in PK-12 to a more self-directed, less individualized one in higher education can be daunting for students with disabilities. Many students and their families are unaware of the differences in legal protections and the shift in responsibility that occurs after high school (Lindstrom, Doren, & Miesch, 2011). This lack of awareness can lead to challenges in accessing necessary accommodations, academic difficulties, and a decline in self-confidence.

Getzel and Thoma (2008) emphasize that self-determination and self-advocacy are critical components of success in higher education for students with disabilities. However, these skills are not always explicitly taught in PK-12 settings, leading to difficulties in the post-secondary environment. Educators, families, and transition specialists play a key role in ensuring that students are informed and prepared to navigate the post-secondary landscape.

Incorporating Self-Advocacy Skills into Transition Planning

Self-advocacy is the ability to understand and communicate one's needs and rights. For students with disabilities, developing self-advocacy skills is critical for success in post-secondary

education (Thoma & Wehmeyer, 2005). Transition plans, which are part of the IEP process starting at age 16 (or younger in some states), should include goals and activities that focus on building these skills.

1. **Education on Rights and Responsibilities:** Transition plans should include instruction on the differences between IDEA, Section 504, and ADA, emphasizing the shift in responsibility from school to student. Understanding their rights under these laws empowers students to seek the accommodations they need (Wood et al., 2005).
2. **Self-Identification and Disclosure:** Students should be taught how to self-identify as having a disability and how to disclose this information to post-secondary institutions. This includes understanding when and how to request accommodations, as well as knowing what documentation is required (Lindstrom et al., 2011).
3. **Communication Skills:** Effective communication is essential for self-advocacy. Transition plans should include activities that help students practice articulating their needs, discussing their disability and its impact on their learning, and negotiating accommodations with professors and disability services staff (Wehmeyer et al., 2010).
4. **Problem-Solving and Decision-Making:** Students need to be equipped with problem-solving and decision-making skills to navigate the challenges they may face in post-secondary education. This includes understanding how to address issues with accommodations, managing time and workload, and seeking support when needed (West et al., 2008).
5. **Use of Technology:** Many students with disabilities benefit from assistive technology (AT) in their PK-12 education. Transition plans should include training on how to use these tools independently in a college setting. Additionally, students should be introduced to the range of technology available in higher education to support their learning and advocacy efforts (Hadley, 2011).
6. **Practice in Real-World Settings:** Whenever possible, students should be given opportunities to practice self-advocacy in real-world settings. This could include role-playing scenarios, participating in dual enrollment programs, or attending summer programs designed for students with disabilities transitioning to college (Madaus & Shaw, 2006).

Conclusion

Supporting students with disabilities in their transition to post-secondary education requires a focused effort on building self-advocacy skills and understanding the significant differences in services and responsibilities between PK-12 and higher education. By incorporating these skills into transition planning, educators can empower students to take charge of their education and successfully navigate the challenges of higher education.

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