

RESEARCH

Transitioning from High School Special Education to College: Aligning Programs with Policies and Expectations

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Abstract

Curriculum from a rural central-Midwestern high school special education transition program was analyzed and compared to the college policies and expectations of a private college in the rural central Midwest. Data from student files of college students with disabilities were compared to high school special education transitional curriculum and college policies and expectations. The study identified a misalignment between the identified areas of concern of students with disabilities in higher education, as evidenced by their student files and the skills taught to high school special education students in preparation for college. Additionally, this study identified gaps between high school special education transition program outcomes and college expectations.

Keywords: Special education, records review, transitional curriculum, college readiness

Students with disabilities receiving special education in high school are required by law under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) to engage in transition planning as part of their individualized education programs (IEPs) by age sixteen. High school transition services are commonly delivered through college readiness programs, vocational training, and community-integrated experiences. Through transition assessment, special educators employ holistic, person-centered approaches to identify student strengths and needs, informing individualized planning aimed at postsecondary education, employment, and independent living outcomes. As a result, high school special education transition programs serve as critical pathways intended to prepare students with disabilities for adult life, including participation in postsecondary education.

However, the expectations and requirements of college admission and enrollment continue to evolve, raising questions regarding the extent to which high school transition programs align with the realities of higher education. College readiness extends beyond academic proficiency and requires student to

demonstrate competencies related to social functioning, independence, and self-advocacy (Capriola-Hall et al., 2021). Unlike the structured supports available in high school, college environments require students to navigate academic, social, and logistical demands with significantly greater autonomy. Consequently, effective transition services must address a broad range of competencies and involve collaboration among special educators, families, employers, and community agencies (Lindstrom & Beno, 2020).

Despite increased awareness of the skills required for postsecondary success, substantial variation exists in the quality and scope of high school transition curricula. Differences in transition programming, particularly for students with intellectual disabilities and autism, have been associated with inequitable educational and vocational outcomes (Papay et al., 2022). This variability complicates efforts to identify consistent practices that effectively prepare students with disabilities for college and contributes to ongoing misalignment between secondary transition services and postsecondary expectations.

This study is a policy–curriculum alignment analysis examining the degree to which a rural high school special education transition curriculum addresses college policies and expectations, using descriptive frequency-based records review across college handbook policies, student files, and transition program survey data. Specifically, this study addresses the following research question: *How do the academic, social, and transitional readiness curricula of high school special education students in transition programs compare with the policies and expectations of colleges?* By examining the alignment between secondary transition curricula and postsecondary institutional expectations, this study seeks to inform transition program improvement efforts, enhance college access, and support successful postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities.

Literature Review

A study in 2018 found that first-year students with disabilities are assimilating into the mainstream non-disabled culture in higher education to successfully navigate college, and that obstacles that exist for students with disabilities in traditional college settings include unaccommodating faculty, inadequate special education transition processes, and perceived disability stigma (Whitaker). Moreover, college faculty voiced the perception of academic under-preparation for nontraditional students, including students with disabilities, and the acknowledgment of institutional barriers for many students in another 2018 study (Zerquera et al.). A more recent study echoed the findings of these 2018 studies, reporting that nearly half of the students in this study opted out of disclosing their disability in college out of fear of judgment from staff and other students and experiences of faculty not believing their disability existed because it was not physically visible (Kline & Davidson, 2022). Despite numerous recommendations for a call for change on systemic and cultural levels of higher education institutions, particularly through faculty professional development, shaping the campus environment toward disability, and reworking policies related to disability issues, the misalignment of the skills students with disabilities are exiting high school with and college expectations remain ignored (Fleming et al., 2017; Kline & Davis, 2022; Turkpour & Mehdinezhad, 2016; Caldwell et al., 2021).

According to a recent study, the misalignment of what students with disabilities are being taught in transition programs to college admission criteria and expectations is due to variations of quality in transition services, which ultimately perpetuates inadequacy and inequality in those students' educational and vocational outcomes (Papay et al., 2022). A 2021 study concluded that colleges should be aware of the great variations in transition programming that incoming freshmen might have been exposed to and seek to collaborate with

students during their transition process (Scruggs et al.). One cause of such variations in transition programming is demographics. One study explored the impact of geographical location by examining the lack of adequate college and career preparation for students in rural schools. The study found a need for rural schools to expand course offerings because there is a lack of a wide variety of courses that prepare students for college-level courses or vocational programs (Roberts & Grant, 2021). Another study explored gender among students with learning disabilities and the difference in transition services. This study found that male students with learning disabilities and female students with learning disabilities self-identified different goals and aspirations, thus recommending that staff include students in goal setting to individualize services to best support the student (James et al., 2022).

Individualization is a common theme throughout the literature in this review. Lindstrom & Beno concluded through a policy analysis that transition services should be multifaceted and highly individualized (2020). Individualization means tailoring the transition planning process to meet the unique needs, goals, strengths, and preferences of each student with a disability. Connections with various stakeholders fall under this umbrella. Collaboration among schools, government, and higher education institutions is recommended to formulate effective and ideal college transition programs (Lintangsari et al., 2021). Lindstrom & Beno shed light on the misconception that transition planning is solely the responsibility of special educators and described that effective transition practices involve collaboration among special educators, families, employers, and community agencies (2020). The results of a 2021 study showed there is a need for transition professionals to work with stakeholders to facilitate environments where students feel comfortable requesting and utilizing accommodations when needed (Scruggs et al.). According to IDEA, transition services include instruction, related services, community experiences, development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives, and, if appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and

connections with government agencies (Fine, 2022). Moreover, according to the U.S. Department of Education, IDEA and the Rehabilitation Act make clear that "transition services require a coordinated set of activities within an outcome-oriented process that relies upon active student involvement, family engagement, and cooperative implementation of transition activities, as well as coordination and collaboration between the vocational rehabilitation (VR) agency, the State educational agency (SEA), and the local educational agencies (LEAs)" (USDE, 2020).

Collaboration with stakeholders includes early access to colleges. A 2015 study examined an on-campus activity-based program that introduces high school students with disabilities to supports and accommodations on a college campus and found that exposure and access to college prior to transition increased interest and desire for high school students with disabilities to attend college (Novakovic & Ross). Another study found that students with access through early college high schools, schools that offer dual paths and the opportunity to earn credits towards college degrees, are more likely to graduate and attend college, with a smoother transition, than high schools that do not have this option (College & Career Readiness & Success Center, 2017). Specific college preparation programs that provided early access to colleges also revealed a statistically significant positive impact on the transition readiness of high school special education students in the studies, especially nonacademically: socially and emotionally (Zoblotsky & Gallagher, 2020; Capriola-Hall et al., 2021; Le et al., 2016).

Studies that examined postsecondary transitional curriculum revealed a strong need for nonacademic skills to be embedded such as goal setting, self-advocacy, self-efficacy, self-monitoring, independent living skills, and social-emotional skills (Turkpour & Mehdienezhad, 2016; Morningstar et al., 2017). Moreover, research revealed that students with disabilities remain in an environment in which they continue to receive less grade-level content and where there is a clear difference in instructional content and

expectations compared to their nondisabled peers (Edgerton et al., 2020). A 2016 study reviewed diploma options for students with disabilities and the lack of access to career and college readiness courses, revealing that an estimated 85-90% of students with disabilities could meet the same graduation standards as their nondisabled peers if they were provided necessary supports, instruction, and accommodations, students with disabilities can complete completely different courses of study than their non-disabled peers and graduate with the same regular diploma, and that state graduation assessment requirements hold the same expectation for students with and without disabilities to graduate, but hold different expectations for coursework requirements (Achieve, 2016). Another study examining high school special education students revealed that only 33% of students felt supported and equipped with skills to be successful in postsecondary settings, and that even IEP staff members perceived a low level of preparation for postsecondary settings for their students (Ruiz, 2019). Furthermore, studies revealed the importance of teaching the same skills to both students with and without disabilities. One study's results indicated that critical thinking skills are not often taught to students with disabilities but instead to students in higher-level academic courses (Morningstar et al., 2017). A study that reviewed the concept of global learning and its considerations for higher education created a model to address the gaps in which institutions exist. A foundational piece of their model included critical thinking and the recognition of the interconnected and interdependent lives of students (Kahn & Agnew, 2017). College students, with disabilities especially, are interconnected and interdependent through shared experiences, peer support networks, access to resources, advocacy efforts, collaborative learning, interdisciplinary collaboration, and intersectional identities. By recognizing and embracing these connections, colleges and universities can foster a more inclusive and supportive environment, while high schools can equip students with disabilities with the skillsets to be successful in postsecondary settings.

Purpose of the Study. This study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of high school special education transition programs or college readiness programs in preparing students with disabilities for college. By examining what students are exiting high school with within terms of skills, knowledge, and readiness, this study sought to identify any gaps between program outcomes and the expectations of colleges. The findings of this study can also inform the development and refinement of transition programs to better align with the needs and requirements of colleges. This includes identifying areas of improvement and enhancing program components to better support students' college readiness. Lastly, by addressing the transition needs of students with disabilities, this study contributes to advancing inclusive education practices and promoting equal opportunities for all students to pursue higher education and achieve their academic goals.

Method. This study utilized a quantitative approach, relying on records review with data analysis to determine if the implemented curriculum of a rural central-Midwestern high school special education transition program aligned with the college policies and expectations of a private, rural central-Midwestern college (in the same town as the high school). Quantitative data was collected on the curriculum components of the transition program and various indicators of college policies and expectations (e.g., standardized test scores, GPA, extracurricular activities, incident reports, disciplinary write-ups, etc.) from student records to assess the degree of alignment or discrepancy between the skills taught in the transition program and the skills sought by the college.

Data were converted to frequency counts. The frequency counts were structured like a checklist. To assess student records, a checklist of areas of concern for these students was created after reviewing data within the files (grades, disciplinary write-ups, incident reports, IEP transition goals, etc.). To assess the curriculum taught in the high school transition program, a checklist of skillsets taught and addressed as college preparation was created. This was converted into questions in the

survey for the transition coordinator at the high school in this study. To assess college policies and expectations, a checklist of student expectations and policy, as indicated in the college's student handbook, was created. More specifically, these checklists allowed for the identification of how many incidents are encountered or what general areas of concern there are, and if these areas of concern are taught at the high school level. These checklists were then converted into tables.

Participants. The target population of this study (individuals studied) was postsecondary students with disabilities attending a rural Midwestern college. All seven of these students were part of a postsecondary comprehensive transition program at the college. In the study, there were three females, three males, and one nonbinary student: five Caucasian, one African American, and one mixed-race (Asian/ Caucasian). The age range of this population was 18 to 27. Three of these students were freshmen, one was a sophomore, two were juniors, and one was a senior. English was the primary language for this population except for one who utilized ASL (American Sign Language).

A rural Midwestern high school transition coordinator of over twenty years completed the survey in this study. Undisclosed data included any data that was identifiable to the subjects (i.e. name, name of educational institution). Excluded participants were only a result of not providing consent to records. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants involved in the study.

Data Collection. Consent forms were provided to the target population prior to the end of the school year in May 2024. A letter of cooperation was obtained from the college. A recruitment letter for the survey was sent to the high school special education transition coordinator prior to the end of the school year in May 2024. Data collection through student files, college expectations and policy, and high school transitional curriculum took place after the 2023-2024 school year.

Possible issues with FERPA and/or HIPAA were remediated through the collection of data from student records without corresponding names or identifying data

or information that could identify specific individuals.

Internal and External Validity. Access to student records, curriculum, and college policy and expectations were obtained for this study. No interviews were conducted. No research for this study was influenced by other factors or variables. The students in the study were representative of postsecondary students with documented disabilities with accompanying proof of cognitive impact in a private college setting in the rural Midwest.

Results

A rural Midwestern high school transition coordinator of over twenty years completed the survey that broke down transitional curriculum into subcategories: academic (16 questions), social (11 questions), transitional (23 questions related to independent living and vocational skills), and other (two questions). These same questions were converted into checklists when completing archival data collection of the rural Midwestern College and student files ($n=7$). Questions not identified as an explicit policy, expectation, or admission criterion applicable to all students in the College's handbook were omitted during this study's analysis, reducing the number of questions analyzed from 52 to 33 (nine academic, eight social, 14 transitional, and two other).

Tables 1 through 4 present the alignment analysis across three data sources: (a) the college handbook policies, (b) the high school transition curriculum survey, and (c) the college student file indicators ($n=7$). Table 1 lists the topics included in the analysis by domain. Table 2 maps each topic to a corresponding handbook policy and shows whether the topic was taught in the high school curriculum and whether it appeared in student files. Table 1 details each subcategory and topic from the questions in the survey that aligned with the College's handbook. Each topic is numbered to correspond with Table 2, respectively, regarding the handbook policy to which each topic was aligned.

Table 1

List of Aligned Topics

Subcategory	Topic		
Academic	1. Emailing professors	Transitional	24. Keeping dorm room clean and tidy
Academic	2. Utilizing shared calendars	Transitional	25. Interviewing for a job
Academic	3. Reading syllabi	Transitional	26. Professional relationships/ socializing
Academic	4. Requesting accommodations	Transitional	27. Reading work schedule
Academic	5. Time management	Transitional	28. Completing job applications
Academic	6. FERPA and parent access	Transitional	29. Punctuality
Academic	7. Importance of GPA	Transitional	30. Navigating write-ups
Academic	8. Citing sources	Transitional	31. Appropriate time off requests
Academic	9. Understanding office hours	Other	32. Self-advocacy
	10. Setting/ respecting boundaries	Other	33. ADA and disability rights
Social	11. Social media etiquette	Table 2 details the type of policy the questions from the survey aligned to, if the topic is or is not taught in high school (HS) special education transitional curriculum as indicated in the survey, and the number of students from the sample ($n=7$) who had incidents, concerns, or related documentation regarding these topics appear in their student files. Each policy is numbered to correspond with the topics from Table 1. All policies in Table 2 were pulled from the college's student handbook. An "X" represented that the topic had been taught at least once in the high school special education transitional curriculum. Blank spaces represented topics that were not taught in the high school special education transitional curriculum.	
Social	12. Physical touch with others		
Social	13. Alcohol and drugs underage		
Social	14. Safe consumption of alcohol and drugs		
Social	15. Regulating emotions		
Social	16. Starting or joining clubs		
Social	17. Consent and safe sex		
Transitional	18. Navigating communal bathrooms		
Transitional	19. Navigating dorms		
Transitional	20. Cooking with microwave or toaster		
Transitional	21. Cooking with oven or stove		
Transitional	22. Knowledge about resident assistants		
Transitional	23. How to do laundry		

Table 2*Policy Embedded in Curriculum*

Policy type	College handbook policy	Taught in HS curriculum	Appears in student files
Academic policy	1. College faculty and staff communicate via email with students	X	4
Academic policy	2. Scheduling meetings with academic advisors, instructors, or Committee of Academic Standing	X	7
Academic policy	3. Student Portal- access all course-related docs		7

Disability accommodations policy	4. Students must request accommodations through Student Success Center	X	4
Work policy	5. Work schedule- if students hold a campus job, it cannot conflict with class schedule	X	3
FERPA	6. Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act section of handbook	X	0
Academic policy	7. Admission criteria- 2.5 GPA or above; Academic probation for GPA under 2.5	X	1
Academic policy	8. Plagiarism and Academic Integrity sections of handbook	X	2
Academic policy	9. Scheduling meetings with academic advisors, instructors, other faculty/ staff		4
Student conduct policy	10. Title IX policy		4
Student conduct policy	11. Violation of policy on social media sites may be subject to investigation/ sanctions		3
Student conduct policy	12. Title IX policy		3
Student conduct policy	13. Consumption/ possession of alcohol under the age of 21 is prohibited		2
Student conduct policy	14. Alcohol regulations policy		1
Student conduct policy	15. Any action that violates reasonable standards of expected human behavior or that threatens the safety or academic environment of the campus is prohibited	X	5
Student conduct policy	16. Campus guidelines; all clubs must be registered through Student Senate and Office of Student Engagement	X	1
Student conduct policy	17. Title IX policy		4
Campus residence policy	18. Student housing		2
Campus residence policy	19. Student housing		1
Campus residence policy	20. Student housing	X	0
Campus residence policy	21. Student housing	X	0
Campus residence policy	22. Student housing		7
Campus residence policy	23. Student housing	X	0
Campus residence policy	24. Student housing		2
Work policy	25. Viable candidates will be interviewed for student job positions	X	6
Work policy	26. Consensual relationship policy	X	2

Work policy	27. Workers are not to be scheduled during classes or during college convocations for which classes have been dismissed	X	0
Work policy	28. Students must complete job applications to apply for student worker positions	X	1
Work policy	29. Time and absence policy	X	3
Work policy	30. Work disciplinary system; write-ups are a permanent part of students' files	X	2
Work policy	31. Time and absence policy	X	2
Disability accommodations policy	32. Students must self-disclose a disability and request accommodations	X	0
Disability accommodations policy	33. ADA section of handbook		6

. Tables 3 and 4 then disaggregate topics by whether they were taught or not taught, alongside the frequency of instruction and presence in student files.

Table 3

Topics Taught in Curriculum

Topic Taught	Frequency	Appears in Student Files
1. Emailing professors	Monthly	4
2. Utilizing shared calendars	Weekly	7
4. Requesting accommodations	Semesterly	4
5. Time management	Monthly	3
6. FERPA and parent access	Yearly	0
7. Importance of GPA	Yearly	1
8. Citing sources	Quarterly	2
15. Regulating emotions	Quarterly	5
16. Starting or joining clubs	Yearly	1
20. Cooking with microwave or toaster	Monthly	0
21. Cooking with oven or stove	Monthly	0
23. How to do laundry	Monthly	0
25. Interviewing for a job	Yearly	6

26. Professional relationships/ socializing	Quarterly	2
27. Reading work schedule	Semesterly	0
28. Completing job applications	Quarterly	1
29. Punctuality	Semesterly	3
30. Navigating write-ups	Semesterly	2
31. Appropriate time off requests	Quarterly	0
33. Self-advocacy	Monthly	0

The topics in Table 4 correspond to the list of numbered topics in Table 1. Each untaught topic appeared in at least one of the sample students' files ($n=7$). Topics such as how to read syllabi and knowledge about resident assistants were concerns for each student, whereas other topics, although never taught in the high school special education transitional curriculum, appeared as a concern in very few of the sample students' records.

Table 4

Topics Not Taught in Curriculum

Topics Not Taught	Appears in Student Files
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3. Reading syllabi	7
9. Understanding office hours	4
10. Setting/ respecting boundaries	4
11. Social media etiquette	3
12. Physical touch with others	3
13. Alcohol and drugs underage	2
14. Safe consumption of alcohol and drugs	1
17. Consent and safe sex	4
18. Navigating communal bathrooms	2
19. Navigating dorms	1
22. Knowledge about resident assistants	7
24. Keeping dorm room clean and tidy	2
33. ADA and disability rights	6

Research Anomalies. Questions from the survey that were not directly tied to the college's policies, expectations, or admission criteria were omitted from the data analysis. It is important to note that the sample population ($n=7$) of college students in this study was comprised of three students who had previous college/ postsecondary experience and were transfers to the college used in this study. It is also important to note that of the sample population ($n=7$), only one attended the same district as the transition coordinator/ high school transitional curriculum assessed in this study.

Data Outliers. Throughout this study, there were skills appearing in only one or two of the sample ($n=7$) students' records. These were not the same one or two students each time. Moreover, when skills appeared in three or four of the sample students' records, it was not the same group of students each time. Thus, there were no data outliers in this study. It is important to note, however, that three out of the seven students transferred into the college in this study and had previous postsecondary educational experience. These three students had lower instances of concerns appearing in their files than the others, but did still have concerns across each subcategory/ topic.

Assumptions and Limitations. It was

assumed that the transition program coordinator was willing to provide honest and comprehensive insight and answers to the survey. It was also assumed that access to student records would be granted and that the high school transition program had data regarding college enrollment of students from their programs.

Limitations to consider included the number of respondents to the survey, as it was voluntary, and access to student records. A variety of identified disabilities, differing graduation rates, differing placements, access to curriculum, and variety of curricula within transition programs also serve as limitations. Other variables/ factors or potential limitations included the demographic and location of the transition program researched (sampling was from a county in the rural Midwest), the size of the school district, different requirements of different colleges (this study only looks at requirements from a college in a rural-Midwestern county), the type of postsecondary programs students enroll in (two-year and four-year institutions, postsecondary comprehensive transition programs or traditional college admissions, certificate or degree-earning programs), and what is defined as success (college acceptance, college involvement and engagement, college graduation).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of high school special education transition programs or college readiness programs in preparing students with disabilities for college. Overall, many skills appear as areas of concern for college students with disabilities that are not being taught or implemented in high school special education transitional curriculum. This study revealed 13 different topics/skills that are directly tied to college policy that are not included in high

school transitional curriculum for students with disabilities. These included six social skills, four transitional skills, two academic skills, and one other skill. Moreover, this study also revealed that out of 20 topics taught in high school special education transitional curriculum, 13 of these topics still appear as an area of concern in at least one of the sample students' records. Of the 13 skills, six are academic, two are social, and five are transitional.

When looking at *all* skills, taught or not taught, the topic/ category that appeared the most in the sample students' records was social. There were eight total social skills included in this study, all of which appeared as a concern in at least one of the sample students' records. Next was academic, with eight out of the total nine skills appearing as a concern. 10 out of 14 transitional goals appeared as a concern, and one out of two other skills appeared as a concern. To disaggregate even further, social and academic skills remained the most prominent concerns when looking at data that appeared in at least three of the sample students' records (three students out of seven were considered half of the sample due to the odd number). Five out of eight social skills appeared as a concern in at least three of the sample students' records. Six out of nine academic skills appeared as a concern, four out of 14 transitional skills appeared as a concern, and the same one out of two other skills (ADA and disability rights) appeared as a concern. These findings indicate that, despite the IDEA 2004 mandate to include preparation for postsecondary education in transition planning of IEPs, high school special education curricula emphasize transitional skills (such as workforce readiness and independent living) more than college-preparatory skills (both academic and social). Moreover, the results found in this study suggest that there is a misalignment

between academic, social, and transitional high school special education curricula and college admission criteria, expectations, and policy.

Evaluation of the Study. Overall, the study proceeded as expected. The researcher anticipated that all college students with disabilities in the postsecondary comprehensive transition program at the college used in this study would provide consent to access their student files. However, the initial sample size was already small, and this made the population even smaller. There was the expectation this study would find that the areas of concern from student files are not taught in-depth or at all at the high school level. This was identified through the data analysis.

Impact of the Study. The results of this study provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of high school special education transition programs and college readiness programs in preparing students with disabilities for college. By evaluating the skills, knowledge, and readiness with which students exit high school, this study identified gaps between program outcomes and college expectations. These findings can inform the development and refinement of transition programs to better align with the needs and requirements of colleges, pinpointing areas for improvement and enhancing program components to support students' with disabilities college readiness more effectively. Ultimately, addressing the transition needs of students with disabilities contributes to advancing inclusive education practices and promoting equal opportunities for all students to pursue higher education and achieve their academic goals.

Implications for Future Research

Future research in this field should broaden its focus beyond the rural Midwest when comparing high school special education transitional curricula

with college admission criteria, expectations, and policies. Additionally, it is advisable to examine various types of post-secondary institutions and their policies, considering that this study only included a small, private, four-year college. Public universities and two-year schools should also be included in future studies. Comparing multiple transitional

curricula and identifying common postsecondary policies nationwide would provide valuable insights for aligning transitional programs more effectively. A larger research population would yield more robust data, benefiting a broader range of students, transition coordinators, and policymakers.

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