

Opening New Doors:
Transition from High School to College
For a Student with a Moderate Disability

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If we listen attentively to our children they will take us into worlds that we never knew existed. One of the first times we entered a “new world” occurred about twelve years ago when our son, Micah became a proud first grader. Because of his cognitive impairments, Micah received his education at his neighborhood school in the “Opportunity Room” with other young children with special needs. He was mainstreamed for music, gym, and art but primarily stayed with his special education class. He was thriving and learning but unbeknownst to us, he wanted something a bit different. We learned more about his hopes when he unexpectedly informed us one day, “Mom and Dad, I want to go in the SAME door as all the other kids in my school.” End of sentence. He walked out of the room confident that we would make his request a reality. We thought, “Thanks for sharing, Micah! How do we do make that happen?” His self-determined appeal took us to the world of inclusive education. Since that day when he walked in the same school door as his peers, he has entered scores of more of the same doors, same classrooms, same school clubs, sports, and same extracurricular activities as his peers. He even was voted to be on the Homecoming court this year and received his Varsity Letter in cross country for running two of the three miles.

Given our history with Micah, we, as his parents should have been prepared for his request in tenth grade. “I think I will go to the same university that my grandpa, uncles, and dad went to--the University of Michigan.” And then he added, “Go blue!” Once again we thought, “Thanks for sharing, Micah. How do we do that? Kids with cognitive impairments do not go to college.” This request seemed a lot bigger than elementary and secondary school inclusion---a whole lot bigger. Over the past two years, we have learned that it is not nearly as far fetched as we initially thought.

Micah’s self-determined request once again led us to a new world. Through months of networking and research we learned that parents, school personnel, university and college personnel, students, and other groups were creating inclusive post secondary opportunities on college campuses for youth with significant disabilities all over the country: Eastern Michigan University in partnership with Washtenaw Intermediate Schools; Buffalo State College and Buffalo Public School; Asbury College and Jessamine County, Kentucky Public Schools; Maryland has at least 17 programs; University of Massachusetts has worked with several local school districts and universities; Trinity College in Vermont; and Lewis and Clark Community College in Illinois to name a few. Other indicators of national support for inclusive post secondary education are:

- US Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) has provided funding for campus outreach grants to the University of Maryland to

- provide technical assistance to over 17 programs in Maryland and several states. (www.education.umd.edu/oco/).
- The National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational (PSE) Supports at the University of Hawaii (www.rrtc.hawaii.edu) sponsored the Second Summit on the PSE topic in Boston on December 14, 2002. They have submitted a grant requesting funds to hold three more summits in Minneapolis, Pittsburg, and Hawaii. (For a copy of the Proceedings of the 2002 Summit contact email: juana@hawaii.edu)

The goals of PSE services on college campuses may include:

- Enhancing the academic and daily living skills through a wider range of learning opportunities such as participation in college classes. (Many programs report that the students audit or “sit in” on classes).
- Enhancing social, communication, and friendship skills with others of similar ages. (Access to student organizations, sporting and social events, etc.).
- Improving self-determination skills.
- Obtaining employment and strengthen vocational skills.
- Increasing mobility in the community.
- Developing age-appropriate leisure and recreation pursuits.

A typical day in the life of a young man Danny who was integrated into a college setting in Maryland for his postsecondary option was as follows: Danny began by riding the city bus to college campus. At 8:00 AM he attended a class on campus, at 9:00 he participated in the weight training class at the University Fitness Center, at 11:00 he had a computer class with supports from a peer tutor, at noon he had lunch with other university students supported by his Best Buddy, at 1:00 he took the city bus to his job site at PetSmart

Benefits for all

Involved personnel, parents, students are quick to point out that this inclusive design of working with and on college campuses benefits all key players. Students with disabilities have enhanced learning, vocational, and social opportunities with same age peers. Universities can offer innovative ways to provide “hands on” learning opportunities for their traditional students in natural settings, in particular for students enrolled in education, human services, computer programming, engineering, etc.

Creating another option

PSE is another option on the continuum of transition services for youth with significant disabilities post high school. These services affiliated with colleges and universities are not intended to replace existing transition services. They have been initiated in part to continue the integrated setting and experience for youth who have been fully integrated at the elementary and secondary levels.

What’s happening in Michigan?

The Transition Service Project (TSP) has provided leadership and support to PSE options by collecting resources (articles, video’s), attending the Second Summit in Boston in

2002, and establishing contacts with local and national leaders and experts who are implementing programs. TSP has provided guidance to districts and parents who are investigating PSE options. John Rose at Transition Services of Washtenaw Intermediate School District in partnership with Eastern Michigan University has provided valuable technical assistance and inspiration to many interested groups in Michigan. (Email>Jrose@wash.k12.mi.us.).

TSP has also created a summary sheet entitled: *Beyond High School: Innovative Development for Youth with Significant Disabilities in Post Secondary Settings*. This summary contains a sampling of the goals of such programs, a listing of contact personnel who have created PSE opportunities, and a listing of the published articles which provide excellent and concrete examples, how to's, and "next steps."

Concluding Comments

Over the last two years, as we, as parents have networked with key personnel in our area toward creating a college experience with our son, Micah, we have witnessed his confidence and excitement about his future soar. Recently he spoke at an education class at Wayne State University, using power point to tell about his life. He informed the students that he wanted to continue his education on a college campus. He passed a sheet of paper asking for volunteers to help him. Twelve students signed on. They said that they think they could learn a lot about teaching by working with students like Micah during their pre-service education. Micah agreed! He sees himself as a teacher as well as a student.

A friend of mine once said, "We see ourselves as creators of our children and never dream how much they will create us." Her statement rang true for me, especially as we move forward in helping Micah shape his own future. The Micah's, and the Danny's of the world are re-creating our thinking as parents and professionals. Their request to "be on a college campus" is helping us re-create new ways for young people with significant disabilities to enter the same doors as other young adults who choose college to enhance their learning and vocational skills.

I encourage you to learn more about this new evolving option and to share this information with others. The resources are available to you through Transition Services Project as well as at the web sites listed in this article. I welcome your comments and ideas!

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