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Overview of Transition Assessment

Transition assessment is an ongoing and coordinated process that begins in the middle school years and continues until students with disabilities graduate or exit the school system. Transition assessment assists students with disabilities and their families to identify and plan for postsecondary goals and adult roles. Adult roles can include independent living, employment, postsecondary education, community involvement, and social/personal relationships. The purpose of this chapter is to

- Describe why transition assessment is important for students with disabilities
- Explain legislation that impacts transition assessment

Adolescents with disabilities and their families face challenges at various transition points, such as moving from middle school to high school, from high school to a postsecondary education program, or from home to living in the community. Each transition point requires a determination of appropriate experiences and services that will assist individuals in selecting and achieving their goals. Due to the diversity of these goals, various professionals, including special and general educators, career and technology educators, counselors, vocational assessment personnel, transition specialists, paraprofessionals, employers, and adult service providers, may participate in transition assessment. However, the success of this process depends on the active involvement of students with disabilities and their

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families. Transition assessment provides the vehicle for this active involvement and for ongoing transition planning.

Students with disabilities and their families need to understand what types of transition assessment data are most useful at different life junctures, who is in the best position to collect assessment data, and how the results of transition assessment will be used. Students should be actively involved in determining what assessment activities they will participate in (e.g., interest inventories, internships, exploration of support services at colleges). Some students may benefit from person-centered planning approaches in which a group of professionals and family members assist a student to identify vocational, community, and domestic experiences that will allow them to achieve goals in various environments. Most important, students with disabilities need to understand how they can use transition assessment activities to identify their needs, strengths, preferences, and interests as they prepare for adult roles. Students can then use this information to participate actively in Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings when transition services are discussed.

WHAT IS TRANSITION ASSESSMENT?

Transition assessment provides a foundation for planning students' post-school outcomes and is conceptualized broadly as an ongoing and coordinated process. Methods from career education, vocational assessment and evaluation, career and technology education, vocational rehabilitation, and curriculum-based assessment are used in the process. Transition assessment facilitates individual choice by allowing students with disabilities to

- Identify individual needs, strengths, preferences, interests, and post-school goals
- Identify a course of study in high school to achieve postschool goals
- Identify potential living, working, and educational environments to achieve postschool goals
- Identify programs, services, supports, and resources to achieve postschool goals

In addition, transition assessment data provide secondary educators with valid information to update IEPs and compile a SOP for each student as the student exits school. This facilitates compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004).

Definition and Purposes

We propose the following definition for transition assessment:

Transition assessment is an ongoing process of collecting information on the student's strengths, needs, preferences, and interests as they relate

to the demands of current and future living, learning, and working environments. This process should begin in middle school and continue until the student graduates or exits high school. Information from this process should be used to drive the IEP and transition planning process and to develop the SOP document detailing the student's academic and functional performance and postsecondary goals.

In addition, the purposes of transition assessment are to assist students to

- Determine their level of career development so they can participate in appropriate career education activities
- Identify their needs, strengths, interests, and preferences in relation to postschool goals for living, learning, and working
- Identify a focus of study to facilitate the attainment of postschool goals
- Identify self-determination skills needed to participate in general education courses and pursue postschool goals
- Identify accommodations, supports, assistive technology, and/or adult services to attain postschool goals
- Compile the SOP document upon graduation or exit from school

The definition and purposes of transition assessment build on our earlier work (Neubert, 2003; Sitlington, Neubert, Begun, Lombard, & Leconte, 1996; Sitlington & Neubert, 1998) and on a definition of transition assessment endorsed by the Division of Career Development and Transition (Sitlington, Neubert, & Leconte, 1997).

TRANSITION: A LOOK AT WHERE WE'VE BEEN

Since the early 1980s, special education has focused on the need for transition services to assist students with disabilities to plan for the future. Documentation of poor postsecondary outcomes for individuals with disabilities through follow-up studies led to development of secondary and postsecondary transition models, identification of recommended practices, and training of personnel to provide transition services in secondary and postsecondary settings. Legislation in special education and vocational rehabilitation for the past 30 years has shaped current transition assessment practices for secondary students with disabilities.

Will's (1984) early definition of transition, which focused on moving "from school to employment," was broadened to include various post-school outcomes. Halpern's (1994) definition of transition remains timely and is used for the purposes of this book:

Transition refers to a change in status from behaving primarily as a student to assuming emergent roles in the community. These roles include employment, participating in postsecondary education, maintaining a home, becoming actively involved in the community

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and experiencing satisfactory personal and social relationships. The process of enhancing transition involves the participation and coordination of school programs, adult agency services and natural supports within the community. The foundation for transition should be laid during the elementary and middle school years, guided by the broad concept of career development. Transition planning should begin no later than age 14, and students should be encouraged, to the full extent of their capabilities, to assume a maximum amount of responsibility for such planning. (p. 117)

In 1990, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) provided a similar definition of transition and mandated that transition services be included in students' IEPs by age 16. In addition, this legislation addressed assessment and self-determination by requiring that the statement of transition services be based on students' needs and interests and that students be invited to IEP meetings when transition services were discussed. These mandates remained in the IDEA Amendments of 1997; however, the age for including transition services in IEPs was changed to 14 and the requirement to identify a student's course of study (e.g., college preparation courses, career and technical courses) was added.

The School to Work Opportunities Act of 1994 (STWOA) also drew attention to the need for transition planning for all youth. Although the STWOA was discontinued in 2001, it continues to provide a foundation for school-based, work-based, and connecting activities in career and technology programs and youth employment programs that mirror the transition services we've come to know in special education.

STWOA and several other key pieces of legislation since that time (e.g., Goals 2000; No Child Left Behind Act of 2001) emphasized the need for educational reform in public school systems. Therefore, the need to align secondary transition services within the reform movement has become a prominent theme. Blending transition services with state standards for academic content areas, state assessments to determine students' adequate yearly progress in reading and math, and greater accountability for ensuring that all students reach higher standards presents challenges and opportunities for educators today. IDEA 2004 reinforces the themes of increased expectations and accountability for students with disabilities by mandating access to general education with appropriate supports, the identification of measurable postschool outcomes for students, and the determination of students' goals and interests/needs through age-appropriate transition assessment. The following section provides more detailed information on the impact of IDEA 2004 on transition assessment.

IDEA 2004

One of the purposes of IDEA 2004 is to ensure that students have a free and appropriate education that emphasizes special education and related

services in relation to individual needs and preparation for further education, employment, and independent living opportunities; the term "further education" is a new addition to the IDEA 2004 purpose statement. The term "transition assessment" is addressed directly for the first time under Section 614 (IEP requirements) and the definition of transition services has changed slightly from IDEA 1990 and the 1997 Amendments. It is unfortunate to note that the term "student" has been replaced with "child" throughout the Act. Finally, assistive technology services and devices and universal design are addressed in IDEA 2004; this is relevant in terms of assessing students' needs for assistive technology to participate in regular education, postsecondary education, and community settings. For additional information on the statute (IDEA 2004), readers are referred to <http://thomas.loc.gov> and <http://www.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/idea/idea2004.html>. Information on the Final Regulations for IDEA 2004 issued by the U.S. Department of Education on August 3, 2006, can be found at <http://www.wrightslaw.com/idea/law.htm>.

Transition Services

Transition services in IDEA 2004 are defined as a coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that

... is designed to be within a results-oriented process, that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child's movement from school to postschool activities, including postsecondary education; vocational education; integrated employment (including supported employment); continuing and adult education; adult services; independent living or community participation; [602(34)(A)] and Is based on the individual child's needs, taking into account the child's strengths, preferences and interests. [602(34)(B)]

IEP Requirements

There are a number of changes to the IEP process in IDEA 2004. IEPs are to include a statement of measurable annual goals, including academic and functional goals that will help the student be involved in and progress in the general education curriculum. The mandate for addressing transition services in students' IEPs has been changed from age 14 to no later than age 16. IDEA 2004 requires that a student's IEP be updated annually beginning at age 16 to address the following:

- Appropriate measurable postsecondary goals based upon age-appropriate transition assessments related to training, education, employment, and, where appropriate, independent living skills

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- Transition services needed to assist the student to reach these goals including the student's course of study (e.g., career and technology education, college preparation courses)
- A statement that the student has been informed of the rights (if any) that will transfer to him or her on reaching the age of majority—no later than one year before reaching the age of majority under State law

Including students with disabilities in state and district assessments remains in IDEA 2004 and now requires that states develop accommodations guidelines. This is important in terms of assisting students to understand their needs and to request appropriate accommodations in secondary classes and for state and district assessments.

SUMMARY OF PERFORMANCE (SOP) REQUIREMENTS

IDEA 2004 includes a new mandate to provide each student with an SOP before he or she exits the school system (Section 614, Part B—Evaluations Before Change in Eligibility). As a student with a disability graduates from high school with a regular diploma or exceeds the age eligibility under state law, the local school system must provide a summary of

- The student's academic achievement and functional performance
- Recommendations on how to assist the student to meet his or her postsecondary goals

Transition assessment provides a way for students and practitioners to collect the information needed for this document. The SOP provides a way for school systems to compile assessment data and to provide students and their families with valuable information as they exit the school system. The SOP is explained in more detail in Chapter 7 and an example is included in Appendix A.

Assistive Technology

Assistive technology and the use of universal design is important in terms of accommodating students in general education, postsecondary education, and the community. The need for assistive technology for students with disabilities has been addressed in the IDEA Amendments of 1997, IDEA 2004, and the Assistive Technology Acts of 1998 and 2004. Specifically, assistive technology **devices** include commercial or customized equipment, items, or product systems that increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities in students with disabilities. Assistive technology **services** include the selection, acquisition, or use of an assistive

technology device, which can include a functional assessment of assistive technology in specific environments (e.g., workplace, general education, or postsecondary education classroom). Services also include information related to purchasing or leasing assistive technology devices, coordinating the use of assistive technology with education and rehabilitation plans, and training or technical assistance for students and family members.

Universal Design is a concept for designing and delivering products and services that are usable by all people. Products and services incorporating Universal Design can be used with or without assistive technologies. In education, Universal Design can be applied to learning by providing course instruction, materials, and content that promote equal access to learning for all students (e.g., textbook for history is made available in book format, in CD format with access to a computer, or on tape with access to headphones and tape player in the classroom). Therefore, students with disabilities or varying learning styles do not have to request accommodations but can choose the format that enhances their learning. Incorporating assistive technology and Universal Design into postsecondary education, employment, and community settings can assist students with disabilities to realize their postschool goals and participate as adults in their communities.

IDEA 2004 clearly provides a mandate for including transition assessment in the IEP process. The focus on students' needs, strengths, preferences, and interests provides an avenue for student choice in determining postschool goals. IDEA 2004 emphasizes the need for accommodations, assistive technology, and Universal Design to assist students in participating in state assessments, in general education, and in postsecondary environments. Legislation in the field of rehabilitation also addresses the need for accommodations in employment and community settings and provides an avenue for using transition assessment results. In the next section, this legislation is reviewed briefly as it relates to transition assessment.

OTHER SELECTED LEGISLATION IMPACTING TRANSITION ASSESSMENT

Legislation in the field of rehabilitation provides students with disabilities additional safeguards in school and adult life. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 provide students with the means to access programs, services, and accommodations if they are informed of and understand their rights under these laws.

Section 504

Section 504 of The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (PL 93-112) is often regarded as landmark legislation impacting the civil rights of individuals

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with disabilities; programs and services receiving federal funds cannot discriminate against individuals on the basis of a disability. At the secondary level, some students with disabilities who are not eligible for special education services under IDEA 2004 may be eligible for reasonable accommodations under this law. These students may have a Section 504 Plan detailing accommodations needed in the general education classroom or to access the school building. While assessment data form the basis for determining eligibility for such reasonable accommodations, these students are not entitled to plan for transition services at age 16, as are students with an IEP.

It is important that all secondary students with disabilities (with an IEP or 504 Plan) understand that Section 504 provides the basis for requesting reasonable accommodations in postsecondary education and employment settings. In order to request accommodations, the student must self-disclose the presence of a disability and provide the rationale for asking for specific accommodations. This obviously requires students to understand their needs, strengths, preferences, and interests as discussed earlier in terms of transition assessment.

Americans with Disabilities Act

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) also provides broad civil rights protection to individuals with disabilities in education, in employment, and in the community (e.g., transportation, recreational facilities, and telecommunications). The ADA extends Section 504 to the private sector in terms of access to and reasonable accommodations in these settings. Once again, individuals must understand their needs, strengths, preferences, and interests and match their characteristics with future education, employment, and community sites. For example, in terms of employment, it is important to note that only “qualified persons with disabilities” are entitled to protection from discrimination under ADA. This means individuals must be able to complete the essential functions of the job, which can be identified through a job analysis (see Appendix D). If the individual’s needs, strengths, preferences, and interests match the requirements of the job, it is up to the student to disclose his or her disability and request reasonable accommodations under ADA if needed. If there is not a match between the individual and the essential functions of the job (e.g., student cannot lift 50 pounds for a warehouse position), then the individual would not be a “qualified person with a disability” under ADA.

Rehabilitation Amendments of 1998

The Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1998 (Title IV of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998) are important in the transition assessment process in terms of using transition assessment results and finding out information on job-training opportunities in the community. First, it is possible to use

transition assessment data collected during a student's secondary years to facilitate the eligibility and planning process in vocational rehabilitation. The Rehabilitation Amendments of 1998 specify that existing assessment data can be used for determining eligibility for services. School system personnel can compile transition assessment data and forward it to rehabilitation personnel with a student's permission (see Neubert & Moon, 2000, for an example) or share the SOP document (see Appendix A). Using existing assessment data during the eligibility process can be especially important for students with more significant disabilities; while these students may score poorly on traditional standardized tests, they may have demonstrated the ability to work in the community or attend supported postsecondary education classes. Once the individual is determined eligible for rehabilitation services, assessment data are also used to develop an individual plan for employment (IPE). The IPE outlines services and goals for the rehabilitation process and is similar to the IEP process in special education. Individual choice and self-determination are also emphasized in the rehabilitation process in that the IPE must be jointly developed between the counselor and the person with a disability.

Second, the Rehabilitation Act Amendments are part of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 that now links a state's vocational rehabilitation system to a state's work force investment system (e.g., One Stop Career Centers). Students and/or practitioners should be able to access information about various job-training environments in the community to assist students in realizing postschool goals related to employment and advanced skill training. Appendix C provides a way to collect this information through a Community Assessment format.

SUMMARY

Transition assessment is an integral part of the educational process for students with disabilities during the secondary school years and serves as the foundation for planning for adult roles. Transition assessment encompasses age-appropriate methods to assist students in identifying individual needs, strengths, preferences, and interests and in obtaining information on future living, work, and education environments.

Deciding what to assess, who will assess, and how assessment data will be collected is critical during transition assessment. While there are a variety of methods associated with transition assessment, it is important for practitioners to determine what assessment data are needed at various transition points for each student and his or her family. Most important, data collected during the transition assessment process provide a foundation for secondary IEP development and for the SOP document. The chapters in this book provide a blueprint of how school personnel can approach these important tasks in transition assessment and enhance transition planning

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for students with disabilities. The essence of transition assessment is to make the best match for the student in terms of his or her individual characteristics and the demands of specific environments; this enhances access to and success in adult living, working, and learning environments.

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