

## Chapter Seven

# Transition Success



# **Effective Practices to Ensure Successful High School Transition for DeafBlind Students: Biographical Outcomes of Struggle, Self-Determination and Achievement**

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Formal research has not yet been conducted to determine which factors lead to definite successful post-school outcomes for deafblind students. However, this collection of personal lessons learned by deafblind students and their parents before, during, and following the transition process is meant to serve as a guide for others preparing for post-secondary transition. One unique aspect of this collection of biographical essays regarding high school transition stories that are *shared by* deafblind students who have already made a successful transition from secondary education to adult life or are in the process of doing so. Each student addresses the numerous issues of accommodation, preparation, and support services often faced by many deafblind students. It is hoped that by each student sharing their individual transition realities, light will be shed on effective practices for high school transition that have been successfully utilized by educators, family members, adult service professionals, and deafblind youths from K-12 and residential settings. Through the use of biographical essays, key factors which led to individual student success will be revealed.

The global nature of our society has made a college education or some training beyond the secondary level virtually indispensable for anyone seeking competitive employment. Most especially, this is true for students with disabilities. Because college affords students access to the skills necessary for employment at a competitive level, it is imperative that each student have access to the support needed for success in post-secondary education programs. Training in time management, study and interpersonal skills, orientation and mobility, or understanding of individual learning styles are only a few of the key areas in which deafblind students will need top-notch skills in order to compete with their peers at the college level. Making certain that the deafblind student has the intellectual capacity and academic guidance to select courses or employment that match their individual talents and interests will help to lessen the likely disappointments and feelings of uncertainty encountered by recent high school graduates.

Like any potential high school graduate, deafblind students have a number of critical decisions to make which will impact the remainder of their lives. These decisions should not

be made hastily, but should be closely considered and weighed after a thorough examination of all available options. In addition to exploring college or training programs, the deafblind student should also consider independent living and transportation support needs, banking and budgeting skills, as well as social and recreational interests. With so much to consider and so many choices, students have frequently shared that time management was one of the major obstacles that impeded their post-high school success.

DeafBlind students who are new to the vocational rehabilitation system may not realize how important it is to have frequent contact with their vocational rehabilitation counselor. Taking on the primary case management role for themselves is a very formidable undertaking for many students, and not many are capable of handling such responsibility right away. However, it is the student's responsibility to alert all members of their support team of any challenges or need for additional assistance in coordinating needed support services. If a student has never been given the task of managing his/her own team of support services, this new role can be overwhelming and intimidating.

Like the high-wire performer who prepares for his balancing act within the safety of gymnasium by practicing his routine walking along a straight line etched on the floor, no true consequence is realized when his footing is unsure and balance is not maintained. The floor is nearby and remounting the line takes little or no support from others. As the performer upgrades his practice to a balance beam that is several inches off the floor, again minimal consequence is realized when a misstep occurs. However, for the final performance it is crucial that the performer possess the top skills for such a high-wire feat or any misstep can prove life altering – to say the least. With no safety net below the performer is forced to be prepared for the unexpected and to have in place "a backup plan" which can be implemented independently. DeafBlind students who are expected to perform immediately upon exiting high school should follow the "groundwork" of the high-wire performer and begin their transition process early on during high school when support is greatest and life altering consequences minimal.

### **Begin Early**

Even if college is not a definite reality for the deafblind student, early transition planning is vital. There is a tremendous amount of forethought must go into the transition planning process. This is especially true for students who require extensive support services such as orientation and mobility, one-to-one interpreting services, modified support for testing; independent living skills training, alternative communication methods for a progressive disorder, or support from a personal care attendant. Any specialized

accommodation that is present during the last two to three years of high school should be viewed as a necessity once the student begins a college. This is also true when a student begins an adult service training program, or moves to an independent apartment in the community.

With so much planning required for post-school life it is easy to see why the transition process for deafblind students should begin as early as possible. Unfortunately, many deafblind students who are considering college may have to begin even earlier to properly prepare for the rigors and expectations of college life. DeafBlind students who are not familiar with their accommodation needs may find themselves in a very precarious position once they arrive on the college campus. Prior to exiting the secondary program, the deafblind student should be guided through the process of developing an individualized portfolio that contains, in addition to information regarding their etiology, severity of disabilities, and personal and emergency contact information; a list of all their equipment, preferred layout of the classroom environment, transportation, and communication support needs (Enos and Jordan, 1996). Many deafblind students are not aware of their specific equipment and support needs while in high school. Thus, it is of the utmost importance that this information and/or resources for obtaining or purchasing necessary adaptive equipment be made available prior to the student exiting the school system.

To avoid having the student's first experience as his own case manager occur when he has already begun college or is living as an independent adult, it is best to use the transition years prior to graduation for practice. Securing accessible class-related resources, materials, and equipment, or other support services such as a mobility instructor, sign language interpreter, or tutor may be new areas for which the deafblind student will need training.

As noted, the average deafblind student is not properly prepared for life after high school. So, better and more effective strategies are required much earlier at the secondary education level to ensure post-school outcomes that are reflective of the student's actual aptitude and aspirations. Many deafblind students have access to some type of resource support while in high school. These support services can and often do include: orientation and mobility instruction, print-to-braille transcription services, notetaking services, interpreter support services, adaptive technology evaluations, specialized training on adaptive equipment, resources for equipment acquisition, and assessments to determine academic and employment potential. Though essential to a successful education placement for deafblind students, many students are unaware of how these services are typically coordinated. Often students exit the school system without ever having any prior knowledge

of the vast array of assorted support services, or the frequency, practicality, or rationale for having access to certain types of support services to make their educational experience both possible and positive. Upon arriving on the college campus or upon entering the adult service system, many students are lost and often lose valuable time trying to figure out all the rules associated with their new environment.

## **Timeline**

Ideally, the transition process should begin as soon as the student enters the secondary program or turns 14 years of age. In some rare cases, beginning even earlier than age 14 is necessary. Often success stories for students who exit the school system begin long before actual transition plans are devised. Family members, early educators, and students themselves put in many long hours and lots of hard work to make certain that every opportunity available for support and growth is seized and fully utilized. The following group of students has all experienced post-school success; however, this success was not achieved without strong individual determination, resiliency and team support. Many of the students attended school following the passage of P.L. 94-142 and thus were able to benefit from a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment. A few of the students exited the school system before the passage of P.L. 101-476 which mandated that transition plans be drafted for each student with a disability by the age of sixteen. However, before their educational programs were completed, this subgroup of students did have the benefit of resourceful and forward-thinking professionals who, in essence, embarked on a transition process similar to that set forth in P.L. 101-476. Only one student attended school prior to the passage of any significant education legislation for students with disabilities. All individuals are now thriving by living independently, working in competitive settings, and/or making full use of their community resources.

Depending on the severity of the student's combined vision and hearing loss, etiology leading to these losses, and their previous educational experience, he may be capable of getting by without any specialized services. Other students may require constant one-to-one support to receive information, travel in the community, and live independently (Kinney, 1972; Smithdas, 1977; Ingraham, Carey, Vernon, & Berry, 1994; Ingraham, 2001). To begin the process of planning for successful post-school life, the transition team should contact all adult service providers from whom the student could presently benefit (Ingraham & Anderson, 2001). These providers can include: state vocational rehabilitation agencies (VR), Centers for Independent Living (CIL), agencies that focus on specific disability groups, and even the Social Security Administration (SSA). By far, linking with the

Social Security Administration and the state VR agency provides access to two of the most critical adult service partners for the deafblind student. Any adaptive technology that the deafblind student requires to ensure success in the classroom and in the community should be provided before he exits the school system. This will enable the student to experiment with the equipment while entitlement support services are available to help with any adjustments or additional training concerns (Ingraham et al, 1994; Ingraham, Belanich, & Lascek, 1998; Ingraham & Anderson, 2001).

When the student reaches his 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, the state vocational rehabilitation agency and any other adult service providers should be active participants in helping to develop the student's transition plan. The level of participation can include actual attendance at IEP meetings or via telephone conference; and in some cases, input and feedback can be provided electronically prior to or following the team meeting. It is advantageous to make use of the knowledge of these professionals while the student is still enrolled within an entitlement program, rather than to wait until the student has completed education and has entered the adult service arena where services are based on eligibility (Ingraham, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 2003). In many states VR counselors have helped to fund an array of support services, assessments, and even training before the student exits the school system (Ingraham, et al, 1994; Ingraham & Anderson, 2001). These creative and astute VR counselors were able to see the benefit of early partnership with the transition team as the foundation for a consumer case that was more likely to reach successful closure status.

### **Ensuring Post-School Success**

As will be seen from the following biographical essays written by parents and students, planning early in the educational process with some type of definite outcome in mind is most helpful for keeping the student on course. Each student had a support system that enabled them to access an assortment of early education support services in the environment which was least-restrictive based on their individual needs, and not their disability label. Occasionally, it was necessary to change educational settings, level of support services, and even adaptive equipment. However, each student exhibited resiliency and flexibility when change was needed. This ability to "go with the flow" helped to ensure that not only would these students be prepared to make any necessary adjustments later in life, but it also enabled them to acquire substantive coping skills.

Career exploration, peer interaction, and self-awareness were a key part of each student's education experience. Not only did all students participate in their IEP and

education planning, each was given the opportunity to develop self-determination skills by speaking up and advocating for themselves (degree of participation varied). Whether career exploration takes place through an on-line search or in the community, it is very important to expose deafblind students to a variety of post-school employment possibilities (Folska, 2001). Often students who are deafblind are so adept with adaptive technology that they are guided into that field. However, it is important to remember that an individual who possesses great knowledge in a particular area may not always be the best instructor on that subject. As with any other student group, the opportunity to interact with and discuss career objectives with peers and professionals in their field of interest was extremely helpful to these deafblind students. Often times career choices were clarified after meeting another deafblind adult with similar interests or skills.

Finally, as many of these students will confirm, it is important to ask deafblind students early and often what they really know about themselves both intellectually and functionally. Also, students should be asked if they truly believe that they possess the self-care skills needed to live independently. The short checklists below are a great place to begin when attempting to assess whether a student is indeed ready for life after high school, or if a successful outcome is on the horizon.

#### Checklist for Success: (Questions for Instructors)

1. Does student know how to use an interpreter?
2. Is student comfortable with his disability?
3. Does student know what accommodations are needed and how to use them (TTY, amplified phone, relay, etc.)?
4. Can the student explain his own accommodation needs?
5. Does student have orientation and mobility skills?
6. Does student understand and value the responsibilities of employment?
7. Does the student have to deal with disincentives of any kind (SSI, over accommodating parents, etc.)?
8. Does the student have family support and transportation?

#### Developing a Post-School Profile (Questions for Students)

1. What type of job would you like to have in the future?
2. In what type of environment do you most prefer for work?
3. Does your employment goal require a college education?
4. What type of people do you prefer to be around?

5. What are your communication, equipment and transportation support needs?
6. Where can you go to get this support or to learn about available services?
7. If you have worked in the past, what jobs have been your favorites?
8. At which jobs were you most successful?
9. Why do you feel you were successful at these positions?
10. What are your dreams for the future?
11. What are the different things you feel are essential for you to have a successful life after high school?

Developing a Resource Book (Compiled by and with student)

1. Personal information (address, DOB, SSN, telephone number, medications, specialized equipment for travel and communication, etc.)
2. Emergency contact information (parents, counselor, case manager, etc.)
3. Special accommodation needs (i.e., equipment, lighting, personal attendant, SSP, etc.)
4. Local and national resources
5. Sample applications, extra resumes, samples of art working or writing sample of published or non-published work