

# Adolescents with Disabilities Transitioning to Adulthood: *Implications for a Diverse and Multicultural Population*

By Audrey A. Trainor, Ph.D.

For all adolescents, the transition into adulthood is one that requires shifting attitudes, knowledge, and skills commensurate with this next developmental stage of life. Adolescents and young adults need to develop self-determination, enabling them to make decisions independently; they must understand the nuances of finding and maintaining employment; and they must be able to practice the art of managing personal finances, to name only a few of the demands of adult living. Youth with disabilities often face unique challenges as they transition into adulthood. For instance, having a learning disability (LD) may present obstacles to college entrance or degree attainment; having attention deficits or an emotional/behavioral disability (EBD) that requires medication may have implications in the eligibility for military service; and having a myriad of other developmental or cognitive disabilities may impact independent living skills such as using public transportation, the healthcare system, and recreational and leisure facilities.

Common indicators for adult success include reaching one's academic, career, and personal goals, such as graduating from high school. In this way the experiences of youth with disabilities are not so different from the experiences of youth without disabilities. Nevertheless, as people who mentor, teach, counsel, and guide youth with disabilities from adolescence into adulthood are well aware, concerted attention is necessary to overcome barriers that result from both having a disability and society's reaction to disabilities. Fortunately, the study of postsecondary transition for adolescents and young adults with disabilities, although a relatively young field in educational research, has provided teachers and others who work with youth with disabilities promising practices in guiding them through this important transition.

The purpose of this article is to consider the state of transition education and planning for youth with disabilities, paying particular attention to majority/minority issues and trends. In the sections that follow, transition education mandates, models for instruction and planning, domains of transition, and post-school outcomes are presented.

## MAJORITY/MINORITY ISSUES AND TRENDS

Before considering the knowledge base in transition research, we must acknowledge that adolescents from historically marginalized groups fare worse, in some cases much worse, than both their dominant-group European American peers from middle and high socioeconomic backgrounds with disabilities and their peers across racial/ethnic and socioeconomic groups who do not have disabilities. Existing studies of promising transition practices across dominant/historically marginalized groups of adolescents in the U.S. are few in number. Historical marginalization refers to bias, prejudice, and discrimination that groups have experienced over time because of institutional and individual racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, classism, and ableism.

For instance, African American youth, and boys in particular, have been consistently overidentified in the disability category of EBD, calling into question the accuracy of the identification

processes that lead to such a categorization or diagnoses. Simultaneously, researchers have found adolescents with EBD to be among the most likely to drop out of high school (Wagner et al., 2005) and to be among the least likely to enroll in postsecondary education opportunities (Newman et al., 2009), illustrating an increased risk for adolescents who receive special education services under this category of disability. Additionally, boys across races/ethnicities and African Americans with disabilities are less likely to enroll in four-year colleges (Newman et al., 2009). While disproportionate representation in special education is complicated, institutional racism and individual biases have been identified as contributing factors to this phenomenon (Skiba et al., 2008). In this way, African American adolescent males with EBD face increased risks to the successful transition to postsecondary education.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

Adults with disabilities, parents, teachers, and special education researchers have long realized that transitioning to adulthood requires planning, instruction, and opportunities to practice new skills. Since the late 1980s, postsecondary transition has received pointed attention in legislation, practice, and research within special education (Kohler & Field, 2003).

### *Transition Education and Legislative Mandates*

The most important legal transition-related mandate is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA), which requires schools to address the transition needs of adolescents with disabilities. While transition has been included in iterations of this law since 1997, the mandate is quite broad with little regulatory guidance. In fact the statutory language



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included in IDEA is brief and general. Additionally, other federal legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act, address the rights of individuals with disabilities as they transition from adolescence and become adults (National Council on Disability, 2008).

While there is no scorecard that documents the extent to which transition mandates contained in legislation, particularly in IDEA, have been successfully implemented, several studies provide a glimpse of their effectiveness. Unfortunately, some evidence suggests that current transition planning practices are not individualized nor are they responsive to the future goals that adolescents and their families set for themselves (Powers et al., 2005; Williams & O'Leary, 2001). This problem seems to be especially acute for adolescents from historically marginalized groups, in part because structural barriers continue to impede postsecondary opportunities for some groups of adolescents. For example, adolescents living in poverty (of any race or ethnicity) struggle to meet the financial demands of costly postsecondary education. But lack of individualization also occurs because school-based values and beliefs about disability, education, and adulthood are too narrow, and do not understand or address families' and adolescents' preferences, strengths, and needs from a cultural perspective (Trainor, 2005, 2007; Trainor et al., 2008). For example, career development with young women with disabilities continues to present limited options and fewer opportunities for exploration (Lindstrom & Benz, 2002). Additional barriers, including few opportunities to practice self-determination and a lack of collaboration among social service agencies, have been identified for Latinas with disabilities who are served in the U.S. foster care system (Gil-Kashiwabara et al., 2007). Trainor (2005, 2007) documented similar limitations in the transition planning processes for adolescents with LD who received free/reduced cost lunches, noting the lack of meaningful home-school collaboration as an additional limitation.

## Youth with disabilities often face unique challenges as they transition into adulthood.

Part of the IDEA mandate is to include students in planning and developing goals so that transition programming reflects students' individual preferences, strengths, and needs. However, Martin and colleagues (2004, 2006) found that adolescents with disabilities were rarely given the opportunity to actively participate in formal planning meetings held by teachers and other adults. These results demonstrate that professionals need to improve their efforts to prepare adolescents for adulthood by inviting them to individualized education program (IEP) meetings, welcoming them into the conversations, listening to what they have to say, and developing their transition program accordingly.

One complicating factor is that the instructional focus on core general curricular courses such as mathematics and reading may leave insufficient time for direct instruction in areas related to transition such as self-determination and interpersonal relationships (Kochhar-Bryant & Bassett, 2002). Further, opportunities for adolescents to practice self-determination in school contexts are often missing or lack cultural responsiveness, compromising the potential usefulness of these opportunities (Trainor, 2005; 2007). For example, among the young men in Trainor's (2005) study, few transition plans addressed families' and students' strong preference to continue living at home after high school, instead including independent living goals on transition plans that conceptualized "independent" as maintaining a separate residence. Additionally, Gil-Kashiwabara and colleagues (2007) noted that



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a lack of connection to participants' churches and cultural organizations within the communities limited the extent to which transition plans included or reflected established mentor support and important adult connections.

### *An Ecological Model of the Transition into Adulthood*

Postsecondary transition, of course, is more than a mandate; it's an experience with demands, challenges, and opportunities that require adolescents to interact with a range of individuals and institutions as they move into adulthood. An ecological model first introduced by Bronfenbrenner (1979) helps us understand how, during their transition to adulthood, youth are impacted both by their microsystems (individual interactions with teachers and other school personnel), as well as by macrosystems (societal interactions such as the globalization of the labor market or the economic recession). See Table 3.1 for definitions of each system, adapted to the context of special education (Garcia & Domínguez, 1997), as well as transition-related examples. Special education research has amassed evidence of effective and promising practices in transition education. For instance, following recent reviews of transition research (Test, Fowler et al., 2009; Test, Mazzotti et al., 2009), practices such as providing vocational experiences, increasing self-determination, and involving parents have been identified as promising or having a positive impact on outcomes. Unfortunately much of this research focuses on transition education at the microsystem, omitting from consideration important variables at the meso-, exo-, and macrosystems (Trainor et al., 2008).

Additionally, adolescents from historically marginalized groups have rarely been the focal point of transition research, raising questions about the appropriateness of promising practices for these groups of adolescents. For instance, researchers in multicultural education have argued that, at the microsystem, youth of color and their families may require or respond to different strategies for teaching and learning (Bennett, 2001). Similarly, researchers who study gender and transition education posit that girls and boys may learn differently, thus requiring different instructional strategies (Lindstrom & Benz, 2002). As Garcia & Domínguez (1997) point out, exosystem (e.g., interagency collaboration between a school and the vocational rehabilitation agency) and microsystem interactions (e.g., measuring the effects of discrimination in the work place or the implementation of protective legislation such as ADA) have not figured prominently in research designs, potentially limiting the application of this body of work.

If post-school outcomes between adolescents from the dominant group and their peers from historically marginalized groups were not remarkably disparate, perhaps this issue would not be as pressing. As the evidence shows, however, outcomes typically associated with adult success (e.g., high school completion, post-secondary education enrollment, employment, and engagement in civil society through voting, abiding laws, etc.), are not equal across groups of young adults with disabilities.

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**Key Domains in Transition Education**

Although transition research and practice began with a focus on employment, individuals with disabilities and their families, professionals, and researchers quickly became aware of the need to include consideration for further education, independent living, self-determination, and community engagement in order to address broader issues of personal fulfillment for young adults with disabilities (Halpern, 1985). Just like their peers without disabilities, life satisfaction for people with disabilities encompasses far more than finding and maintaining employment.

One useful framework for understanding the parameters of transition education is Clark and Patton's (2004) comprehensive

set of the domains of adulthood that include: employment, postsecondary education, daily living, health, leisure, interpersonal relationships, self-determination, and communication. When considering the preferences, strengths, and needs of adolescents with disabilities during transition, these domains help us categorize and think strategically about planning, instruction, and opportunities for practice. To illustrate, the large body of research in the domain of self-determination has established that instruction in this area can be particularly beneficial for adolescents with disabilities as they learn to meet the demands of employment, education, and adult life in the years following high school (Algozzine et al., 2001). Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1997) found that individuals with disabilities can learn self-determination through direct instruction and that this may be particularly beneficial for young women with disabilities. Constructing opportunities for practicing self-determination in school-based contexts, a necessary component of transition education, continues to present challenges for teachers (Field & Hoffman, 2002).

**POSTSECONDARY OUTCOMES**

Postsecondary outcomes of young adults with disabilities are indicators of how well our theories are working in practice. Two separate, nationally representative, longitudinal studies document the post-school outcomes of youth with disabilities. These studies, called the National Longitudinal Transition Studies (NLTS) 1 and 2, included a random sample of over 10,000 youth with disabilities across the 13 disabilities served under IDEA (Wagner et al., 2005). The first NLTS was completed in 1990; the second, is to be completed in 2010. The good news is that there has been a marked improvement in the employment and postsecondary enrollment of all youth with disabilities over the past three decades.

**Table 3.1**  
**Examples of an Ecological Framework for Youth with Disabilities Transitioning to Adulthood**

Ecological System	Definition	Transition-Related Examples
Microsystem	Interactions between the adolescent with a disability and other individuals, contact is interpersonal and directly involves the adolescent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Civic club leader/mentor speaks to adolescent about preparing for college life</li> <li>• Teacher uses a career interest inventory to promote adolescent's self-awareness</li> <li>• Vocational rehabilitation counselor attends an adolescent's senior-year IEP meeting</li> </ul>
Mesosystem	Interactions between microsystems in which an adolescent with a disability is a member, contact and interactions may be indirect or may directly involve the adolescent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A local church works with a local service organization to bring youth group members to volunteer after a storm</li> <li>• The high school guidance counselors organize a vocational and college education night for parents</li> <li>• Local disability service agencies hold a community information fair at the high school</li> </ul>
Exosystem	Interactions between systems in contexts and communities in which the adolescent with a disability is a member, contact is indirect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The state department of labor offers grants for Chambers of Commerce members to develop an internship program targeting adolescents with disabilities</li> <li>• Disability rights advocates work with a coalition of school districts to develop regional/state rules and policies for the implementation of transition requirements included in federal law</li> </ul>
Macrosystem	Interactions between all levels of the ecosystem including cultural and societal patterns of activities, mores, and institutionalized values, beliefs, and behaviors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Federal education legislation such as No Child Left Behind and IDEA that position parents as decision-makers in the educational programming of their children with disabilities</li> <li>• Historical and political events that contributed to the election of the first African American president, creating a role model for adolescents of color who consider careers in public service and civic office</li> </ul>

The bad news is that, when this data is analyzed by subgroups of adolescents based on race/ethnicity, disability, socioeconomic background, and gender, gains over time are not as positive. For example, adolescents with EBD continue to have very low rates of high school completion and postsecondary enrollment. Additionally, youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds and African American youth are far less likely to enroll in four-year colleges and universities as compared to youth who are from high income brackets and youth from other racial/ethnic backgrounds (Newman et al., 2009).

One limitation of the NLT's data reports, as well as reports from other, smaller outcome studies, is germane to this discussion. For methodological reasons and other more conceptual constraints, the analysis of data and subsequent dissemination efforts such as published reports have not addressed the intersection of race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic background. Therefore, the post-school outcomes of African Americans with disabilities cannot be disaggregated by disability category or by gender. The same is true for all racial/ethnic groups, making it impossible to examine correlations between post-school outcomes and combinations of demographic variables that represent participant characteristics. As Connor's ethnographic study of youth of color with LD and EBD who live in high-poverty, urban communities illustrates, marginalization is multifaceted and the experience of racism, sexism, ableism, and classism can deeply complicate the transition to adulthood (Connor, 2009).

Since the passage of the IDEA in its original form in 1975, outcomes for adolescents with disabilities have steadily improved. More high school students with disabilities are accessing the general curriculum and more are earning regular high school diplomas. For the purposes of this discussion on postsecondary outcomes, we will consider the IDEA foci on high school graduation, employment, and postsecondary education enrollment.

#### **High School Completion**

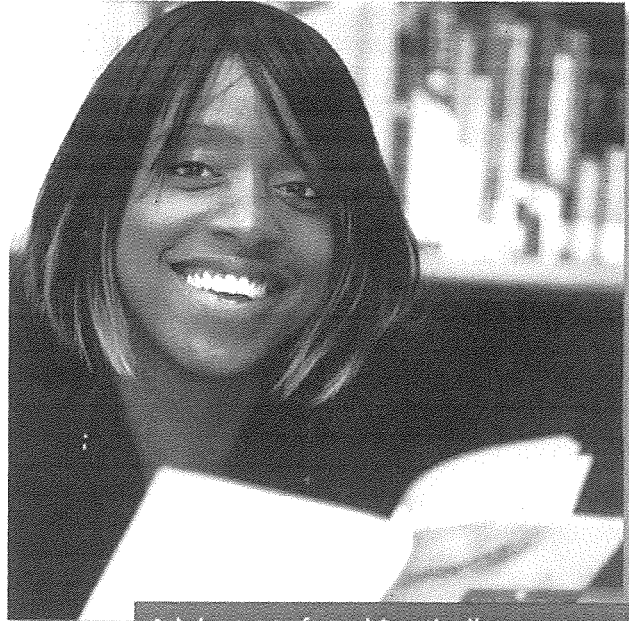
Many adolescents with disabilities graduate from high school. Approximately 55% of students across disability categories graduate with regular high school diplomas, and an additional 14% obtain a nonstandard diploma (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Both high school diploma attainment and dropout rates vary according to disability. For example, of the 13 disability categories entitled to services under the IDEA, adolescents with EBD are the most likely to drop out, while adolescents with visual impairments are among the least likely to do so. In addition, dropping out differs across racial/ethnic groups. For example, African American and Latino adolescents with disabilities, similar to their peers without disabilities, are among the most likely students receiving special education to drop out, leading to what Blackorby and Wagner (1996) originally identified as a kind of double jeopardy.

#### **Employment**

Employment is an important indicator of successful adulthood. Across disabilities, young adults with LD (77%) and other health impairments (OHI; 80%) were the most likely to be consistently employed during the first 4 years after high school (Newman et al., 2009). However, race/ethnicity is also an indicator of employment variation, with African American adolescents with disabilities 16% less likely to be employed than their European American peers. As with young adults without disabilities, some young adults with disabilities also divide their time between employment and further education immediately following high school, with approximately 21% working and going to school (Wagner et al., 2005).

#### **Postsecondary Education**

A substantial number of adolescents and young adults with disabilities enroll in higher education. Young adults with visual



Adolescents from historically marginalized groups have rarely been the focal point of transition research.

impairments (78%) and hearing impairments (72%) are among the most likely to attend either 2- or 4-year schools or colleges, as compared to 47% of young adults with LD and only 34% of their peers with EBD (Newman et al., 2009). In addition to disability, socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity and gender, are all factors in postsecondary enrollment. While approximately 15% of European Americans and Latinos with disabilities enroll in 4-year colleges and universities, fewer than 6% of African Americans do the same. The gaps across racial/ethnic groups narrows for enrollment in vocational and technical schools with African American enrollment at 28% and European Americans and Latinos at 20 and 25%, respectively.

#### **PUSHING FORWARD**

While longitudinal studies illustrate steady growth for some adolescents with disabilities, we must push forward to ensure that access to positive post-school outcomes is within the reach of individuals, regardless of socioeconomic backgrounds, race/ethnicity, gender, language, or any other factors. Dedication to this goal requires us to examine the indicators of successful transition and promote these across all educational, recreational, and community-based contexts and settings, dismantling structural barriers, and supporting the growth and development of individuals with disabilities who have a wide range of life experiences, preferences for the future, and academic/interpersonal strengths and needs.

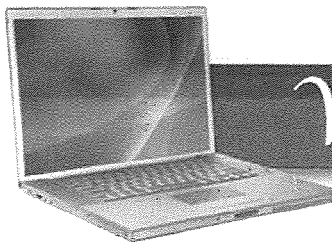
Implications for practice include paying attention to the range of experiences that constitute adolescents' domains of transition. Early work in special education has demonstrated that adolescents with disabilities, like their peers without disabilities, need a range of interpersonal and individual experiences in order to attain personal fulfillment (Halpern, 1985). As teachers focus on increasing students' self-determination, other postsecondary indicators might improve. Moreover, we must acknowledge that a pattern of marginalization creates specific barriers for some groups of young adults. Beyond acknowledgment, we must advocate for

students with disabilities who are also adolescents of color, those living in poverty, or experiencing other forms of marginalization, so that they have equitable access to education, disability services, and preparatory experiences. ❧

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## Web Resources

### Child Trends

[www.childtrends.org](http://www.childtrends.org)

Child Trends is a national research center which studies children and youth at all stages of development. There are a number of relevant research reports on this Web site, including *What Works for Older Youth During the Transition to Adulthood: Lessons from Experimental Evaluations of Programs and Interventions* (2010); *Youth Who are "Disconnected" and Those Who Then Reconnect: Assessing the Influence of Family, Programs, Peers and Communities* (2009); and *A Developmental Perspective on College & Workplace Readiness* (2008).

### Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative

[www.jimcaseyouth.org](http://www.jimcaseyouth.org)

The mission of Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative is to "bring together the people, systems, and resources necessary to assist youth leaving foster care make successful transitions to adulthood." This Web site provides access to a number of reports and publications about supporting youth as they transition out of foster care and into adulthood. Recent titles include *Building Assets for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care: Findings from the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative* (2009); *Cost Avoidance: Bolstering the Economic Case for Investing In Youth Aging Out of Foster Care* (2009); and *Supporting Youth in Transition to Adulthood: Lessons Learned from Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice* (2009).

### The Network on Transitions to Adulthood

[www.transad.pop.upenn.edu](http://www.transad.pop.upenn.edu)

The purpose of The Network on Transitions to Adulthood is to examine the changing nature of early adulthood, and the policies, programs, and institutions that support young people as they move into adulthood. Researchers associated with the Network represent a large number of disciplines which adds to the breadth of the Network's research. An extremely large number of articles, reports, working papers, and other publications are available from this Web site.

### The Urban Institute

[www.urban.org](http://www.urban.org)

The Urban Institute Web site has a number of useful reports about the transition to adulthood, including: *Transition to Adulthood: African American Youth and Youth from Low-Income Working Families* (2009); *Vulnerable Youth and the Transition to Adulthood* (2009); and *Coming of Age: Employment Outcomes for Youth Who Age Out of Foster Care Through Their Middle Twenties* (2008).



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