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College Experiences Can Foster Both Student Self-Determination and VR Support

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Successful completion of college requires more than attending to coursework, it also requires the development of foundational skills and personal competencies such as working with others in a collaborative manner, effective communication, problem solving, and self-direction skills, (Hart, Boyle, & Jones, 2018; Karp & Bork, 2012; NCWD, 2016;). These same skills are also needed to support future career success (Hart et al., 2108; NCWD, 2016). A team of researchers from the Institute for Community Inclusion conducted a study on state vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies and institutions of higher education (IHEs) that enroll students with intellectual disabilities and autism (ID/A) to identify characteristics of effective partnerships. The team conducted interviews with students with ID/A and their parents, as well as higher education program and VR staff, at four IHEs across the country.

Two themes that emerged from these interviews were that college provided students with a variety of growth opportunities in social skills and self-determination and maturity, and that this growth led to some VR personnel to become more supportive of higher education programs for students with ID/A.

Gaining Social Skills and Self-Determination

Some of the experiences associated with going to college, such as living with roommates, interacting with other students, learning time management, and making more of their own decisions contributed to students' social skills and self-determination (Grigal, Weir, Hart & Opsal, 2013). One parent described both of these changes in her daughter:

[Since going to college] she's a different person in a good way. She's definitely more engaging with people, where before she wanted to be alone and just not be around the family or extended family or friends. Where now she's more open to having social relationships, and she's gained some independence. That's been a big thing.

The impact of postsecondary education on the self-determination skills of students with disabilities has been previously documented (Garrison-Wade 2012; Getzel & Thoma, 2008). In a recent study of first-year college students with ID/A, Shogren et al., (2018) found that the number of social activities students participated in predicted their scores in several self-determination domains including autonomy, self-realization, and overall self-determination. The college environment seems to offer students, who may have previously been given fewer opportunities to engage with new social networks or deal with decision making in their high school, the chance to navigate and manage adult learning, social, and work situations in higher education.

The Campus Experience Cultivated Maturity

Developing skills that strengthen a student's independence and maturity is crucial for them to thrive in a diverse and dynamic culture that exemplifies most college campuses (Karp & Bork, 2012). Our interviewees described how attending college propelled students to build these skills, developing into more mature young adults (Big Future, College Board, 2019). Students were generally described as having a bumpy start when they began college. Many were anxious about being in an unfamiliar environment, and some were reported to be shy and lacking confidence. As students became more active in campus life, they gained independence and confidence demonstrating maturity and greater self-esteem. One staff member at a college noted:

There is a distinct difference between first-year and third-year [students]. By third year, their confidence is sky-high. They're more verbal; they're more social. It's just really cool to see that.

Students and their parents also indicated being on a college campus helped the young adults increase their maturity. One student reported:

I feel much more confident now. I'm more social. Because I also discovered some new things in college.

These changes were also evident to the VR counselors who worked with these students. One VR staff related:

I see them coming here, not making eye contact, not talking to anybody, not getting outside of their dorm room. And a year later ... one [student] spoke at graduation, and that graduation was easily 100 people in a stacked auditorium. I probably couldn't do that.

By observing these outcomes first-hand, VR counselors are able to better understand and support student access to higher education.

Garnering VR Support for Access to Higher Education

VR's primary focus is on student employment outcomes; they are not as engaged in other elements of the higher education experiences. This sometimes creates challenges in understanding why students with ID/A are going to college and if VR should be involved in those experiences. A college program staff shared:

I really think that's what VR didn't understand at first was that there is a career piece [to the higher education program].

Our findings indicated when VR personnel witnessed students' personal growth, they were more likely to understand how the social skills and maturity in young adults developed in higher education could positively influence potential employability. One VR counselor put it this way:

[In] my speech to the current VR counselors who are naysayers ... I've seen the light ... [I would say to counselors who have doubts], Hey, you might be a little skeptical right now, but give it a year and you will see these kids really change and grow and become neat, neat people, adults, working adults.

The VR personnel we interviewed had become convinced of the value higher education offered to students with ID/A. As one VR counselor said:

The executive skills that they learn being an equal member on a college campus—you just can't replace that with anything else. And the growth is absolutely amazing. I don't think without that program that most of them would be where they are at.

These VR counselors became champions of the whole college experience for increasing students' independence, interpersonal skills, and other foundational skills that ultimately increased employability.

Conclusion

College leads to growth in many parts of a student's life and our findings demonstrate that students and parents, IHE program staff and VR counselors saw increases in student self-determination and social maturity as a critical outcome of the IHE programs in which they were involved. These positive findings can be used to support future conversations between IHEs and VR about the nature of higher education and its short- and long-term impact on student social identity and future employability.

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