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# Introduction

**E**nrollment in a formal education program after individuals leave high school is a major part of and a next step in their adult lives. Postsecondary education and training can be provided in a number of settings, including 4-year colleges and universities; community and junior colleges; private vocational schools that offer certificates in a particular job area, such as cosmetology or truck driving; apprenticeship programs; on-the-job training programs; adult education programs; and the military.

*Informal assessment* can help students and their families when they are making the decision to go to a postsecondary education or training program and can also help them prepare for and succeed in their choice of experience. Formal or standardized assessment is not addressed directly; informal assessment, however, is a direct response to the need for ways of asking appropriate questions for the planning process as an alternative to using only testing and other formal or standardized assessment procedures.

## Assessment Information Needed at the Secondary Level

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004) requires schools to conduct a transition planning process and defines transition services as a set of coordinated activities

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 post-school activities, including postsecondary education, vocational education, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation. (§300.43(a)(1))

These activities must be “based on the individual child’s needs, taking into account the child’s strengths, preferences, and interests” (§300.43(a)(2)).

IDEA 2004 also makes it clear that assessment for transition planning is essential. The law requires that, for individuals 16 years of age and older, the Individualized Education Program (IEP) must include the following:

- Appropriate measurable postsecondary goals based upon age-appropriate transition assessments related to training, education, employment, and where appropriate, independent living skills; and
- The transition services (including courses of study) needed to assist the child in reaching those goals. (§300.320(b))

The new language for the schools’ mandate to provide age-appropriate assessment information for the IEP and transition planning gives new focus to what has been a basic component of the IEP since it was instituted—the information needed to determine how a student is currently performing, now referred to as Present Level of

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Academic Achievement and Functional Performance. Now that appropriate assessment for both academic achievement and functional performance is required, we need new ways of providing such information.

### **Practical Implications of Transition Assessment**

Students pursuing postsecondary education will encounter a host of challenges, and they and their families need opportunities to engage in the wide range of topics associated with postsecondary education and to plan, as best as possible, for the student's smooth transition to this setting. A key component of doing this successfully involves assessment. The transition assessment process can and should begin in middle school to get students thinking about what they might do when they complete high school. Middle and junior high school teachers especially can begin informal assessments to initiate students' thinking about high school expectations and demands, motivate students' thinking about occupational choices and their implications for schooling, and provide high school teachers with baseline information for high school planning and instruction. When a student approaches age 16, schools should conduct a thorough assessment, using either formal or informal methods, with the goal of identifying the student's interests, preferences, strengths, and needs as they relate to what will happen when school is completed.

### **Methods for Gathering Information**

There are a number of methods that may be used to gather information on the strengths, needs, preferences, and interests of the student. There are also a number of methods to gather information on the demands of postsecondary education programs and environments, and the supports available within these environments (Clark, 2007; Sitlington & Clark, 2007; Sitlington, Neubert, Begun, Lombard, & Leconte, 2007; Whitfield, Feller, & Wood, 2007). Methods for gathering information on the student include background information; interviews; rating scales (formal and informal); paper-and-pencil tests (formal and informal); performance samples; behavioral observation; and situational assessments (observing students in actual postsecondary environments). These sources also provide information on the demands of postsecondary education and training programs. The instruments included in this book could be used as part of a number of these approaches.

### **Summarizing the Information Available at the Secondary Level**

Two specific summary statements help in organizing the information available at the secondary level so it meets the needs of postsecondary education and training programs.

First, IDEA 2004 mandated that a Summary of Performance (SOP) be provided for each student as he/she exits the school system, which must provide a summary of

- the student's academic achievement and functional performance, and
- recommendations on how to assist the student to meet his/her postsecondary goals.

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The SOP provides a way for school systems to compile assessment data and provide students and their families valuable information that students can share with postsecondary education and training programs.

Many states and districts have developed a standard format for the SOP. The National Transition Assessment Summit (Dukes, Shaw, & Madaus, 2007) developed a format that focuses on summarizing data from formal assessments but also includes informal assessment information. One state example, the Iowa Department of Education's (2007) "Summary for Postsecondary Living, Learning, and Working," focuses on summarizing information primarily from informal assessments but also uses existing formal assessment data.

Many states are also developing formats to assist students in requesting accommodations at the postsecondary level. The Appendix presents an example (a blank form and a completed form) of a *Support for Accommodation Request*, developed by a statewide group of secondary and postsecondary practitioners and other adult providers (Iowa Department of Education, 2005). The purpose of this document is to support the student's request for accommodations at the postsecondary level, using information from the student's performance at the secondary level and the accommodations and supports found effective at that level.

### Challenges to Providing Information

Three specific innovations in special education have created challenges in the transition of students with disabilities from secondary to postsecondary education (Kincaid, 1997; Sitlington, 2003; Sitlington & Clark, 2006). First, under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 (IDEA 1997), a district is no longer obligated to conduct a 3-year reevaluation if the IEP team determines that it is unnecessary to do so for eligibility purposes. The regulations also indicate that an exit evaluation is not required for students whose eligibility for special education will terminate due to either graduation or exceeding age eligibility. These regulations will likely lead to students leaving high school with increasingly older formal documentation of their disability (Madaus & Shaw, 2007). This may mean that for many adolescents in their last year of high school, the last formal evaluation data collected on the student may be years old when the student graduates. As Sitlington and Payne (2004) pointed out, however, this does not mean that ongoing data have not been collected, although these data may be of a more informal nature.

Second, special educators in many states are moving away from emphasizing standardized assessments and toward the use of curriculum-based assessments. Such assessments are important in middle and high school because they are criterion referenced and align with school instructional standards. These curriculum-based assessments also may provide a great deal of information to postsecondary institutions in terms of the student's level of mastery in specific content areas and in comparing the student's performance to students with and without disabilities in the district.

Finally, many states are moving away from specific disability labels and toward the concept of "student in need of special education," or a noncategorical label. Although a specific label such as "learning disability" may not be applied to the student, documentation should be provided that shows that the student's disability substantially

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limits his or her learning. Thus, although these more recent changes and trends pose challenges to the smooth transition of adolescents with disabilities into postsecondary education, they also promise data that may be more recent and more relevant (Sitlington & Payne, 2004). The challenge is to identify how to convert the data currently being gathered at the secondary level into information that is needed by postsecondary institutions.

### **Changes Holding Promise**

The IDEA Amendments of 1997 require that all students with disabilities be included in state or district assessments that are required of other students. In addition, the IEP must include a statement that addresses the issue of participation in state or district-wide assessments (Bryant, Patton, & Vaughn, 2000). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 requires that all states assess students in reading and mathematics in Grades 3 to 8, and at least once between Grades 10 and 12. States must also assess students in science at least once in elementary, middle, and high school. This should provide information on how students with disabilities compare to those without disabilities in their district and their state. States and local districts are also increasing their graduation requirements to include more rigorous coursework and tests to demonstrate knowledge and skills needed after high school (Kochhar-Bryant & Bassett, 2002).

In addition, the Association for Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD; 2004), the Educational Testing Service (ETS; 2005), and the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (2007) have all issued statements that are closer to acknowledging the role of informal assessments in documenting a student's disability and determining the accommodations and supports needed.

### **Assessment Information Needed at the Postsecondary Level**

According to Sitlington et al. (2007), transition assessment means

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 (Individualized Education Program) and transition planning process and to develop the Summary of Performance document detailing the student's academic and functional performance and postsecondary goals. (pp. 2–3)

Postsecondary institutions use assessment information in two principal ways. First, to determine if the individual has a disability, as defined by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (to document a disability, students must first provide evidence that their disability substantially limits a major life activity; e.g., their learning). Second, students need to demonstrate that they are otherwise qualified, that is, are able to meet the essential requirements of the program when provided reasonable accommodations (Sitlington & Payne, 2004).

The issue of who is otherwise qualified can be complicated. Scott (1991) proposed three questions to address the issue of who is "otherwise qualified":

- What are the program or course requirements?
- What nonessential criteria can be accommodated without changing the essence of the course or program?
- What are the specific abilities and disabilities of the student within this context?

Postsecondary education and training programs also use documentation to help determine appropriate and reasonable accommodations based on the individual's specific, disability-related needs (Hatzes, Reiff, & Bramel, 2002). Accommodations may take place at the program level and often include part-time schedules, longer time to complete the program, and priority registration. Accommodations may also be directly related to instruction and course-related methods and commonly include activities such as changes to the testing or evaluation procedures, the use of assistive technology, recorded books or a reader, tape-recorded lectures, and notetaking adaptations (Mull & Sitlington, 2003; Mull, Sitlington & Alper, 2001).

Once a student has sufficiently documented that he or she has a qualifying disability, a postsecondary institution is responsible for providing reasonable accommodations that “do not result in unfair advantage, require significant alteration to the program or activity, result in the lowering of academic or technical standards, or cause the college to incur undue financial hardship” (Thomas, 2000, p. 254).

## About This Book

This book is the third of three companion books to *Informal Assessments for Transition Planning* (Clark, Patton, & Moulton, 2000). The first companion book is *Employment and Career Planning* (Synatschk, Clark, Patton, & Copeland, 2007); the second book is *Independent Living and Community Participation* (Synatschk, Clark, & Patton, 2008). Each of these books can be used separately or in combination with the others in the series.

These books extend the Comprehensive Informal Inventory of Knowledge and Skills for Transition and the 45 informal assessments found in *Informal Assessments for Transition Planning* (Clark et al., 2000); these assessments cut across the nine transition planning domains of the *Transition Planning Inventory* (Clark & Patton, 2006). Conceptually, all were designed to move from the general information of the *Transition Planning Inventory* to more specific assessment of areas that appear to be missing, unknown, or were uncertain due to discrepancies in information.

This book provides 64 informal instruments that we have found, edited, or developed, and for which reproduction permission has been granted for educational purposes. These instruments may be used to collect information on the student's strengths, needs, preferences, and interests or in collecting information on the demands of postsecondary education and training programs and supports available within these programs.

These informal assessments are organized into five topical areas (defined in the following paragraphs) that are critical to transition planning and decision making. Each assessment is designed to be completed by the student, family members, or educators at the secondary or postsecondary level.

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### **The Big Picture: Getting My Future in Focus**

Informal instruments in this section focus on big-picture goals and would be useful to the student early in the process of thinking about postsecondary education and training. Areas covered include identifying overall goals, developing a plan of action, and assessing readiness for postsecondary education and training.

### **Self-Determination: Understanding and Evaluating Myself**

Areas covered in this section include understanding the student's disability, documenting a disability, identifying the student's strengths and challenges, and determining the best instructional formats for the student.

### **Planning for Postsecondary Education/Training: Preparing for My Future**

Areas covered in this section include factors to consider when selecting a postsecondary education and training program and when applying for postsecondary education and financial aid.

### **Academic Skills and Support Needs: Addressing Learning-Related Demands**

Instruments in this area focus on identifying specific study skills, academic skills, the demands of classrooms, and supports and accommodations needed by the student. They also focus on learning strengths, needs, and styles.

### **Nonacademic Support Needs: Examining the Other Parts of My Life**

Instruments in this section focus on areas such as comparing costs of colleges, accessing campus activities outside of class, and independent living skills.

## **A Final Note**

The transition process through public school levels and the transition process from public school to postsecondary education and training are responsibilities shared among students, their family members, and educators. Asking students age-appropriate, student-focused questions about their dreams, interests, preferences, strengths, and needs is usually highly appreciated and is rarely considered an intrusion of privacy; for many students, these questions show a rare indicator of caring from the school.

We hope these instruments will assist you as teachers or counselors as you plan, with students and their families, for secondary school educational goals in the IEP, course of study choices, and postsecondary education and training planning.

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### Author Note

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