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Abstract

This practice brief provides an overview of a project designed to support students with disabilities considering postsecondary education. Postsecondary Rewarding Education is Possible (PREP) Academy was developed by individuals from a state vocational rehabilitation agency and a public research university. PREP Academy is a campus-based, weeklong experience in which students participate in activities designed to mirror the “college experience.” In an evaluation of the project’s second year, a total of 23 students and six parents/guardians completed a pre- and post-survey to examine how attending the project affected students’ perceptions related to students attending college. Interview data from three student and parent/guardian pairs were collected to further explore students’ perceptions and to learn what components of the project were most beneficial. Results provided evidence both students and parents/guardians believe students are better prepared to attend college after participating. An emerging theme related to increasing the project’s emphasis on mirroring aspects of college was identified.

Keywords: secondary transition, postsecondary education, workplace readiness, job exploration, self-advocacy, students with disabilities

The 1990 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) included an emphasis on postsecondary education for students with disabilities (SWDs), including language regarding transition services (IDEA, 2014). In addition, the Americans with Disabilities Act of the same year sought to increase access for SWDs in higher education as well. Since this time many improvements relevant to SWDs and their pursuit of postsecondary education have been observed. For example, students with intellectual and developmental disabilities have seen a significant increase in their opportunity to obtain access to postsecondary education (Think College, 2016). Thus, as of 2016, SWDs make up 11% of students enrolled in higher education (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2016). Despite such encouraging progress, like their peers without disabilities, SWDs typically confront issues surrounding roommates, deadlines, study habits, and navigating campus during the transition from high school to postsecondary education (Hewitt, 2011). However, SWDs are at high-

er risk for experiencing academic, behavioral, and emotional demands that can impede postsecondary education success compared to their peers without disabilities (Hendrickson, Woods-Groves, Rodgers, & Datchuk, 2017).

Further, post-school outcomes for SWDs are typically less than ideal (Newman et al., 2011). Indeed, SWDs often struggle socially and academically in college, and graduation rates for such students are about half the rate of students without disabilities (Gregg, 2009). Moreover, while 85% of individuals with a disability reported to be productively engaged in their community six years after high school in the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 ([NLTS-2]; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005), 95% of their peers without disabilities reported the same. In addition, 36% of individuals with disabilities also reported to be living independently six years after high school, while 44% of their peers without disabilities reported as such.

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However, there is evidence many college graduates with learning disabilities – the largest category of disability noted for students attending a two- or four-year college or university (Snyder et al., 2016) – have similar levels of full-time employment and salary earnings compared to peers without disabilities (Madaus, 2006). In addition, appropriate supports in the postsecondary setting have been shown to be beneficial for SWDs who may have been underprepared to handle the transition to postsecondary education (Smith, Dillahunt-Aspillaga, & Kenney 2017). As such, it is vital to provide appropriate transition services.

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act ([WIOA], 2014) is legislation designed to improve outcomes for individuals with disabilities by focusing specifically on activities related to the transition to postsecondary education and employment. The WIOA amended the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, requiring vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies to allocate 15% of their federal funds to provide pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS) to individuals with disabilities eligible, or potentially eligible, for obtaining VR services. Required Pre-ETS include: Workplace readiness, job exploration counseling, instruction in self-advocacy, work-based learning experiences, and counseling on opportunities for enrollment in comprehensive transition or postsecondary educational programs. This evaluation focuses on the first three of these services, with workplace readiness including an emphasis on college readiness, given the nature of the project.

Depiction of the Problem

To address less than desired postsecondary outcomes for SWDs, the WIOA (2014) called for collaboration across agencies. Such an approach is supported by research suggesting interagency collaboration has the potential to improve educational and employment outcomes for SWDs (Test et al., 2009). The project described below is the result of collaboration between a Northwest state's Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) and a public research university. This collaboration resulted in the development of a weeklong, university-based transition project called Postsecondary Rewarding Education is Possible (PREP) Academy.

Students with disabilities too often come to campus unprepared to meet the expectations of being a college student – in particular for meeting such expectations given their unique learning needs. Although much of the above review of the literature could be seen as a depiction of a problem (i.e., less than desired postsecondary outcomes for SWDs), it

important to define a problem in context of expectations. That is, while many of the statistics noted above are troublesome for those interested in the lives of those with disabilities, it can be argued that such statistics are not the problem but, rather, simply evidence of a certain phenomenon at this moment in time. Instead of defining a problem as a troublesome, or an undesired, outcome another approach is often used in education. This approach defines a problem as a discrepancy between an expectation and a current observed outcome (Deno, 2016).

Thus, the problem PREP Academy seeks to address is the difference between how prepared one needs to be to be successful in college compared to the level of preparation of many SWDs when they arrive on campus their first semester. Considering this, and keeping in mind the idea that “experience is the best teacher,” PREP Academy was developed to mirror college life in order to give SWDs an example of attending college.

Participant Demographics

Two cohorts of students attended PREP Academy in the summer of 2017; each cohort attended for one week. Cohort A consisted of 17 students (female = 10) with an average age of 17.7 years ($SD = .78$). Cohort B consisted of 14 students (female = 7) with an average age of 17.6 years ($SD = 1.17$). Of these 31 students, 23 consented to participate in our evaluation (Cohort A = 15, female = 6; Cohort B = 8, female = 3). While some students or parents/guardians chose to provide information related to students' disability status when applying to PREP Academy, and some students disclosed such information during the week, this specific information was not available to PREP Academy staff due to privacy restrictions. Examples of self-reported disabilities included: Autism, learning disabilities, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, and mental health disorders (e.g., anxiety, depression). All PREP Academy parents/guardians were also invited to participate in the evaluation as well.

Description of Practice

Individuals are able to participate in PREP Academy at no cost, but they must be nominated by their DVR case worker as a person for whom postsecondary education is an appropriate option. Given the experience is designed to reflect components of college life, students live in a dormitory, eat in a cafeteria, go to classes, and experience campus-like social life. During the week (see Figure 1), students attend classes in which they learn more about the logistics of and training for desired careers, create a presen-

tation on what they have discovered, and learn more about financial literacy. Classes focused on workplace readiness and job exploration are taught by a lecturer in the Department of Early and Special Education at the university involved, and the self-advocacy class (focused on financial literacy) is taught by undergraduate students in the university's accounting department using materials developed by Pricewaterhouse Coopers (<https://www.pwc.com/us/en/about-us/corporate-responsibility/access-your-potential/financial-literacy-curriculum.html>).

Students participate in activities alongside undergraduate student mentors. Mentors' primary responsibility was to serve as a peer to students, modeling appropriate behavior in class and on-campus in general (e.g., getting from building to building, interacting with professors, etc.) An important secondary responsibility of mentors includes providing appropriate supervision to students under the age of 18 years old and those from more vulnerable populations (e.g., students with mild intellectual disabilities). In turn, mentors are supervised both by a local Master's-level special education teacher and the first author, who serves as the project's director.

Evaluation of Observed Outcomes

To learn more about students' and parent/guardian perceptions of PREP Academy's effects on preparedness for postsecondary education, parents/guardians were given a pre-/post-survey that was administered electronically and students were given a similar survey (wording changed from "my student" to "me/I") in paper/pencil format. After analyzing the survey data, three parent/guardian-student pairs were interviewed to allow for expansion on their perspectives on PREP Academy. This 16-question survey focused on issues of career readiness, job exploration, and self-advocacy in addition to evaluation questions about PREP Academy and its activities (items can be reviewed in Tables 1 and 2). All 23 students completed pre- and post- surveys; six parent/guardians completed both the pre- and post-surveys; there were an additional four parent/guardians who completed only the post-survey.

One week after PREP Academy concluded, eight parent/guardian-child pairs ($N=3$ female students) were contacted for interviews. These pairs were chosen on the basis of complete or nearly-complete data sets (i.e., pre- and post-surveys completed by both student and parent/guardian). Of these eight pairs, three consented for interviews ($N=1$ female student). Interviews were conducted by the second author and focused on the student's goals for postsecondary ed-

ucation, the logistics of achieving those goals, and questions about activities during PREP Academy.

On the surveys, both students and parents/guardians were asked to rate how confident they were the student would be successful in their chosen postsecondary plan (e.g., two- or four-year college, military, etc.). There was a significant difference in both students' and parents'/guardians' pre-survey compared to their post-survey responses in favor of having greater confidence after attending. What follows next delves into more detail as to the areas that may have contributed to this increased confidence. See Tables 1 and 2 for complete results for students and parents/guardians, respectively.

Students' responses to all four items associated with workplace readiness were observed to be significantly different pre- and post-survey. Qualitative data indicates that students saw PREP Academy demystifying the college experience and providing more clarity related to college financial logistics. Students frequently made comments about how helpful it was to have a taste of college life and learn more about how it might differ from high school. In addition, students stated they learned about the cost of, and how to save for, attending college.

Parents'/guardians' responses to two items associated with workplace readiness were observed to be significantly different pre- and post-survey. Similar to student feedback about PREP Academy being a taste of college life, most parents viewed PREP Academy in terms of a 'trial run' in a safe space to see if students could handle the independence and different structures that come with attending college. Simple things, such as walking to different buildings for class, speaking to instructors, managing their own schedule (to a degree), and still doing homework, were often mentioned as concrete opportunities for students to try out college life.

Students' responses to all four items associated with job exploration were also significantly different between the pre- and post-survey. Students generally reported that they were able to learn more about what different careers entailed and what they needed to do to prepare for that career. Parents'/guardians' responses to two items associated with job exploration were observed to be significantly different pre- and post-survey. Similar to the students, many parents/guardians made general comments that as a result of their work in PREP Academy, their student had learned more details about desired career paths and requirements.

Students' responses to all four items associated with self-advocacy were also significantly different between the pre- and post-survey. Students' respons-

es focused on new realizations related to college and students with disabilities, learning about how colleges can assist with accommodations more generally, and how they need to advocate for themselves in terms of specific accommodations. No items associated with self-advocacy were observed to be significantly different when comparing pre- and post-survey responses from parents/guardians.

A theme emerged from the qualitative data that is worthy of mention, aptly described by a parent as “Take it up a notch.” Most closely related to the workplace readiness theme of demystifying the college experience, both students and parents seemed to want more college experiences within PREP Academy. These requested experiences included sitting in a real college lecture with hundreds of students in a large lecture hall, learning how to use a college online course system (e.g., Blackboard), having more unchaperoned free time, and practicing doing laundry. Each comment that was made in this vein related to the idea that students wanted to have the most authentic experience possible that would prepare them for college life.

Implications and Portability

Overall, findings are promising in terms of students’ and parents’/guardians’ perspectives of the PREP Academy experience; findings also indicate specific actions that could be taken to improve the project. To begin, it seems the most significant benefit of attending PREP Academy is its attempt at mirroring college life in a low-risk environment. Responses indicate participants wanted the student to have a more concrete understanding of what college life might be like on a daily basis. Students and parents commented that taking away the fear of the unknown was incredibly beneficial; not only could the student have this concrete experience, but this experience could then be used as a basis for further conversation.

Next, while participants perceived the whole variety of activities provided by PREP Academy to be useful, the area of job exploration appears to be an area that allowed students to think about next steps in a tangible way. For example, students were able to articulate what courses they would need to take, or what types of experiences they should have in order to pursue their career path. These findings warrant expansion on this point and including opportunities in PREP Academy to break down next steps into concrete intermediate steps that students and parents/guardians could enact. In addition, these findings indicate a need to strengthen PREP Academy’s partnership with DVR by sharing students’ career goals with

them so DVR may better target future supports for those students.

A final implication for PREP Academy is to increase attention to financial literacy. Participants appreciated the opportunity to learn more about financial aid, scholarships, and associated applications but, in the spirit of supporting self-advocacy, increasing attention to non-college-related finances would be beneficial. Further exploring scams, credit card debt, emergency funds, and long-term financial planning may be topics that would better position SWDs to handle financial issues that can arise during college and early-adult years.

In addition to these implications, these findings indicate that the development of PREP Academy has helped motivate further collaborations between DVR and other state Institutions of Higher Education to offer similar summer “academy” programs as well. Given the results we have obtained from evaluating our most recent efforts, we believe states that do not offer on campus experiences for SWDs should explore cross agency collaborations in order to do so.

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Table 1

Student Survey Paired Sample t-tests Results for Goal Associated Items

Theme	Item	Mean Difference	SD	SE	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Workplace Readiness	I have the skills and knowledge I will need for college-level classes.	0.83	1.1929	.2487	.3103	1.3419	3.321	22	.003**
	I know the steps I need to take to apply to college.	0.96	1.4295	.2981	.3384	1.5747	3.209	22	.004**
	I know the steps I need to take to financially plan for college.	1.04	1.8210	.3797	.2560	1.8310	2.748	22	.012*
Job Exploration	I know the steps I need to take to be successful in college.	0.77	.9351	.1994	.3127	1.1419	3.648	22	.002**
	I know what I would like to do for a career.	0.48	1.2800	.2700	-.0700	1.0300	1.800	22	0.086 [^]
Self-Advocacy	I know what sort of training/schooling I need for my chosen career.	0.83	1.3022	.2715	.2630	1.3892	3.042	22	.006**
	I understand what people in my chosen career do on a daily basis.	0.82	1.2458	.2656	.3113	1.4160	3.252	22	.004**
	I know where people with my chosen career work.	0.65	1.5553	.3243	-.0204	1.3247	2.011	22	.057 [^]
Self-Advocacy	I can list and discuss the academic accommodations I need to be successful in school.	0.65	1.2652	.2638	.1051	1.1993	2.472	22	.022*
	I can list and discuss the support services I need to be successful in a job.	0.48	1.1627	.2424	-.0245	0.9810	1.973	22	.061 [^]
Self-Advocacy	I can list and discuss my rights for reasonable accommodations under the law.	1.00	1.3143	.2740	.4317	1.5683	3.649	22	.001**
	I know what I need to do to take care of myself financially.	0.87	1.1795	.2460	.3595	1.3796	3.536	22	.002**

Note. N = 23; [^] p < .10; * p < .05; ** p < .01.

Table 2

Parent Survey Paired Sample *t*-tests Results for Goal Associated Items

Theme	Item	Mean Difference	SD	SE	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig. (2-tailed)
Workplace Readiness	My child has the skills and knowledge they will need for college-level classes.	.5000	1.3784	.5627	-.9465	1.9465	0.889	5	.415
	My child knows the steps they need to take to apply to college.	.5000	1.0488	.4282	-.6007	1.6007	1.168	5	.296
	My child knows the steps they need to take to financially plan for college.	1.5000	1.3784	.5627	.0535	2.9465	2.666	5	.045*
	My child knows the steps they need to take to be successful in college.	1.3333	1.5055	.6146	-.2466	2.9133	2.169	5	.082 [^]
Job Exploration	My child knows what they would like to do for a career.	.5000	1.2247	.5000	-.7853	1.7853	1.000	5	.363
	My child knows what sorts of training/schooling they need for their chosen career.	1.3333	0.8165	.3333	.4765	2.1902	4.000	5	.010**
	My child knows what people in their chosen career do on a daily basis.	1.3333	1.3663	.5578	-.1005	2.7671	2.390	5	.062 [^]
	My child knows where people with their chosen career work.	.6667	0.8165	.3333	-.1902	1.5235	2.000	5	.102
Self-Advocacy	My child can list and discuss the academic accommodations they need to be successful in school.	1.0000	1.7889	.7303	-.8773	2.8773	1.369	5	.229
	My child can list and discuss the support services they need to be successful in a job.	1.0000	1.7889	.7303	-.8773	2.8773	1.369	5	.229
	My child can list and discuss their rights for reasonable accommodations under the law.	1.0000	1.4142	.5774	-.4841	2.4841	1.732	5	.144
	My child knows what they need to do to take care of themselves financially.	.6667	1.6330	.6667	-1.0471	2.3804	1.000	5	.363

Note. $N = 6$; [^] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Day	Activity	Time
Sunday	Check-in	3:00 to 3:30 pm
	Orientation and student surveys	4:00 to 5:00 pm
	Campus tour led by mentors	5:00 to 6:00 pm
	Pizza and social time with mentors	6:00 to 8:00 pm
	Unstructured time	8:00 to 10:00 pm
	In room / Lights out	10:00 / 10:30 pm
Monday-Thurs- day	Breakfast	8:00 to 9:00 am
	Morning Activity	9:30 to 10:30 am
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disability Services Office presentation • Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math Activity • University football center / library tours (in groups of two) • Division of Vocational Rehabilitation presentation 	
	Workplace readiness class	11:00 to 12:00 pm
	Lunch / Unstructured time	12:00 to 1:30 pm
	Job exploration class	1:45 to 2:45 pm
	Study Table	3:00 to 4:00 pm
	Self-advocacy class	4:30 to 5:15 pm
	Dinner	5:30 to 6:00 pm
	Evening Activity	6:30 to 7:30 pm
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Campus Games Center • Students with Disabilities Roundtable • University Recreation Center • Dorm movie night 	
	Unstructured time	7:30 to 10:00 pm
	In room / Lights out	10:00 / 10:30 pm
Friday	Breakfast & Pack-up	8:00 to 9:00 am
	Free (presentation prep, sleep)	9:00 to 10:30 am
	Self-advocacy class	10:30 to 11:15 am
	Unstructured time and Lunch	11:15 to 12:15 pm
	Science Lecture	12:15 to 1:00 pm
	Break	1:00 to 1:15 pm
	Opening remarks / Students present	1:15 to 3:00 pm
	Closing remarks / Student surveys	3:00 to 3:30 pm
Check-out	4:00 pm	

Figure 1. Schedule for PREP Academy 2017.