

CASE STUDY ON THE ROLE OF THE REHABILITATION COUNSELOR IN TRANSITIONING YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

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Statement of the Problem

Business leaders across the country are clamoring for highly skilled workers in all industries to fill the large voids left by the retirement of the boomer generation and to meet the increased demands of a technological global economy. The U.S. Department of Education in their Strategic Plan of 1998-2000 has reported that postsecondary education is the entryway to professional and technical training and higher wages. Thus, in order for the U.S. to sustain the economy and remain competitive in the world market, it is imperative that young adults pursue some form of education and training beyond high school in order to meet the present workforce demands and to achieve economic independence. Furthermore, Bush's New Freedom Initiative 2001 delineates that all Americans with disabilities have the opportunity to learn and develop skills and engage in productive work. This means that postsecondary institutions are faced with the challenge of finding ways to successfully educate all youth including those with special needs.

According to Blackorby and Wagner (1996) youth with disabilities are pursuing postsecondary education in greater numbers climbing from 2.6% in 1978, to 9.4% in 1995, to nearly 19% in 1996. The most recent statistics reported by Henderson 1999 in HEATH Resource Center's Statistical Profile on College Freshmen indicated that the number of students with learning disabilities enrolling in higher education has increased 173% between the years of 1989 to 1998. In spite of students with disabilities increased access to higher education they have met with limited success in community college programs, resulting in poor employment outcomes (Stodden, 2000). In an article on postsecondary education and students with disabilities Burghstahler, Crawford, and Acosta (2000) report that only 25% of students with disabilities who have entered community colleges have earned an Associates Degree after five years. In a survey conducted by the National Organization on Disability (1998) only 29% of persons with disabilities, ages 18-64 works full or part-time. This statistic becomes even more alarming when considered in relation to the estimated size of the U.S. population of persons with disabilities, i.e., 10% of the population or approximately 28 million people (NOD, 1998). Given the present vacancies in the workforce and the projected future needs, it is critical that persons with disabilities enter and be able to succeed in postsecondary education and training in order to access high-skilled jobs and compete in the workforce.

Therefore, there is a compelling need for strong transition programs and practices to address the issues of postsecondary education and services for youth with disabilities. In the revision of the IDEA 1997 the definition of "transition services" is very similar to the definition of in the Rehabilitation Act of 1992. According to Kohler (1998) the intent of aligning these two laws was to remove the barriers to school/agency collaboration and facilitate a coordinated transition from school to postschool services and clear the way for the early involvement of Rehabilitation Counselors with high school students with disabilities. The active involvement of Rehabilitation

Counselors in transition planning is crucial in assisting students with disabilities in identifying postschool goals and objectives, and the supports necessary to achieve them, and the collaboration and coordination at the interagency systems level is critical (Kohler, 1998). In view of these changes in IDEA promoting the early involvement of Rehabilitation Counselors in providing transition services to high school students with disabilities for postsecondary education and employment, many questions arise regarding their role within both of these educational settings. Additional questions surface regarding the types of services and supports necessary for students with disabilities to experience success in post secondary education and the workplace.

Research Questions

What is the nature of the relationship between Rehabilitation Counselors and high school special education teachers in transitioning youth with disabilities into postsecondary education?

According to rehabilitation counselors and special education teachers, what is the role of the rehabilitation counselors in transitioning students to postsecondary settings?

What support services do students with disabilities believe are necessary to succeed in postsecondary education?

How does a rehabilitation counselor support students with disabilities enrolled in postsecondary education?

What is the role of an effective Rehabilitation Counselor in facilitating students with disabilities access to employment after completion of postsecondary education?

In order to begin to address these questions a qualitative research project was designed. The purpose of which was to develop a case study of best practices of Rehabilitation Counselors, who have successfully transitioned youth with disabilities through postsecondary education to employment. One way of defining a successful transition from high school to adult life for students with disabilities is the completion of postsecondary education/training and subsequent employment, since the disabilities population has such a high unemployment rate and only a small percentage complete postsecondary education/training. In the field of vocational rehabilitation the number of clients that become employed and stay employed for 90 days is the predominant measure of a counselor's success.

While the legal mandates (IDEA 1997 and ADA 1992) specify that agency counselors are to provide transition services for youth with disabilities in high school through postsecondary education, little is known about the complexity and processes involved in providing these transition services. There are several human relationships involved in providing these services. This study is interested in the relationships between the rehabilitation counselor and the special education teacher or transition specialist and the relationship between the counselor and the student with the disability. The intent of this project is to examine the experiences of the people involved in successful transitions from high school to postsecondary education and/or training to

employment and to provide the professionals and clients engaged in this process a case study of the best transition practices and implications for future work.

The qualitative method is interactive and therefore better able to provide insights into the complexities and processes involved in providing transition services (Marshall and Rossman, 1995). Since the transition planning and the implementation of transition services is process oriented a qualitative approach will enable the researcher to look at the context and the players from a holistic perspective without reducing them to variables and view them and the process as a whole (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). Further, the qualitative method maybe more effective when used to identify the links and the correlations that exist within and between groups rather than causations (Geertz, 1973).

The case study method is most appropriate for this study because the research questions are more explanatory in nature and the explanations will link the transition services and supports with the effects of postsecondary/training and employment. These research questions are being asked about a contemporary set of events, i.e., the transition process, and the role of the rehabilitation counselor in supporting this process, over which the researcher has little or no control (Yin, 1994). According to Borg and Gall, (1989) a qualitative inquiry methodology is appropriate when attempting to understand what is happening in a field, in this case the rehabilitation field and transition services. It also provides information about what the happenings (the counselors' interactions and services) mean to the people involved in the process, primarily students with disabilities and special education teachers.

There are three important guidelines for qualitative research that govern the value and usefulness of this type of study: credibility, dependability, and transferability (Guba, 1981). Credibility refers to the congruence between the intended meanings of the participants and those meanings interpreted and represented by the researchers. The study's credibility is increased by having multiple researchers read and analyze the data and by having them meet and discuss the data and come to consensus on the interpretations. An additional check on the interpretation of the data is the added step of having the participants (rehabilitation counselors and special education teachers) included in the initial phases of the analysis. "Crucial to inter reliability is inter-rater or inter-observer reliability--the extent to which the sets of meanings held by multiple observers are sufficiently congruent so that they describe the phenomena in the same way and arrive at the same conclusions about them" (LeCompte and Goetz, p.41).

Dependability involves maintaining stability and consistency while allowing for an emergent study design. This project's dependability is strengthened through the use of multiple researcher verification and by recording and transcribing the interviews. Further, Lincoln and Guba (1985) also recommend triangulation of data as a way to build the credibility and validity of data. Triangulation of data involves collecting multiple sets of data of events to develop accurate representations that can be compared and contrasted for corroboration. Hence, this study will conduct multiple interviews to examine the role of the rehabilitation counselor in providing transition services to youth with disabilities and the nature of the relationships between and among the participants in the process. The key participants in the transition process (rehabilitation counselors, special education teachers, and students with disabilities) will be interviewed separately about their experiences in the transition process. Each participant's

recorded experience will be used to corroborate the role of the Rehabilitation Counselor, the nature of the relationships in the process, and the supports necessary for successful transition of students with disabilities through postsecondary education/training to employment. It is believed that these measures to ensure credibility and dependability diminish the drawbacks often cited about case study methods namely that there is a perceived lack of rigor because the researcher, who is also the instrument of research may allow "equivocal evidence or biased views to influence the direction of findings and conclusions" (Yin, 1994, p.9.)

Transferability refers to the generalizability of the results, whether they will be applicable to another situation. Since all rehabilitation agencies are now required to offer services and supports to youth with disabilities transitioning to postsecondary education and employment, a case study describing the best practices of a rehabilitation counselor will be of interest to all rehabilitation agencies interested in improving the practice of their counselors and the transition services they provide youth with disabilities. In addition, since the tri-county area in the study consists of urban, suburban, and rural school districts the majority of counselors, special educators, and administrators involved in the transition process in other parts of Michigan and the United States will be able to relate to this case study.

Design of the Study

In order to gain a more holistic understanding of providing transition services to youth with disabilities the perceptions and experiences of the key players in this process and the dynamics of their relationships need to be investigated. This study is designed to take an in depth look at the role of a Rehabilitation Counselor and the nature of these relationships through a careful examination of the counseling practice of 4 Rehabilitation Counselors employed by Michigan Rehabilitation Services (MRS).

Site Selection

Four Rehabilitation Counselors designated to provide transition services to youth with disabilities in 36 school districts encompassing urban, suburban and rural settings in a tri-county area in Michigan have been identified as subjects for this study. The intent was to identify a site that would be enough of a cross section of school districts in various settings, so that the results of the study would be more readily transferable at the state and national levels.

Sampling Procedures/Recruitment

There are only 4 counselors designated by the tri-county rehabilitation office to provide transition services to youth with disabilities. Thus the sampling size for this study is 100%. All 4 of the counselors have been recruited and have agreed to participate in the study. However, it should be noted that both the length of employment and the time in the job serving youth customers varies for each of the rehabilitation counselors. While it would be ideal for the purposes of the study that each of the counselors identify the same number of clients on their caseload who have completed postsecondary education and secured employment this is not possible due to varying length of time of their employment in the position. See Table Below.

Counselor	Setting	Number of years transitioning youth
Candy	Suburban/Rural	7 years
Fiona	Rural	3.5 years
Wanda	Urban	3 years
Kate	Rural	9 months

The four counselors were asked identify clients who had been on their caseload that had completed postsecondary education (2 /4 year degree or certification program) and were employed. Candy identified eight students; Wanda and Fiona one student each, and Kate because of her limited time in the position (9months) did not have a client meeting the criteria. In spite of this it was felt that her views on the role of the rehabilitation counselor in transitioning youth would be worthwhile to the study and therefore she completed the counselor interview.

Every attempt was made to identify nearly equal numbers of male and female students with various disabilities (learning and emotional, physical, sensory etc.) schooled in urban, suburban, and rural settings, and as ethnically diverse as possible. However, while this would be ideal, it was not possible to have equal representation along each of these dimensions since the 36 school districts in this tri-county area are at various stages of implementation in providing transition services to secondary students. In addition, three of the four rehabilitation counselors have been assigned to work with the schools for only a few years or even less. See Table 2 for listing of students.

The third partner in the transition process is in most cases the secondary special education teacher, although not always. The school person interviewed for the project was the high school staff person who was primarily responsible for students' transition planning while in high school. Every effort was made to select students from urban, suburban, and rural settings within the tri-county area, so that people outside of the sample will be able to relate to the experiences of those in the study (Patton, 1989).

Data Sources and Collection

The data sources for this study are: 4 rehabilitation counselors, 2 special education teachers, and 10 students with disabilities. The four rehabilitation counselors were interviewed separately about their thoughts about the Rehabilitation Act of 1992, their role in the transition process, and their relationship with the special education teachers, and the supports/services they provided in transitioning students with disabilities through postsecondary education and employment.

Two special education teachers, who served as the primary case manager for three of the students with disabilities identified for this study, were interviewed individually about the transition process with these students and the role of the rehabilitation counselor. (Note: additional special education teachers are scheduled to be interviewed and their data will be added to the study). Two issues surfaced in the attempt to interview each of the ten students' secondary special education teachers. In most cases it has been between seven and eight years since the students in the study have graduated from high school and in several situations the special education teachers have either relocated or retired. In one instance the student acquired their disability in

college from a medical condition and therefore did not receive special education services. Ten students with disabilities have been interviewed about the role of their rehabilitation counselor in transitioning them through postsecondary education/training to employment and the supports they believe have been necessary for their success.

The research method was an in-depth interview developed for each of the partners in the transition process: rehabilitation counselors, special education teachers, and students with disabilities served by these professionals. The interviews consisted of 20-25 questions. Five to six of the questions were common questions asked of all three subjects about the role of the rehabilitation counselor and the nature of their relationships in the transition process. The remaining questions were tailored to the individual on specific issues related to their part in the transition process. For example, rehabilitation counselors were asked about the specific supports and services they provided individual students with disabilities on their caseload and these students were asked what supports/services they believed were necessary to succeed in postsecondary education/training. In-depth interviewing was the method selected for this study as it is one of the best ways to discern peoples' perceptions towards various events in a process, and to compare and contrast their unique interpretations of the roles and relationships of the participants and the effects or outcomes of the process (Patton, 1989).

Data Analysis Procedures

All of the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. In addition, the researcher took detailed notes during the interview as another source of verification for accuracy. Two researchers analyzed the data. For the first level of analysis one researcher read each of the transcriptions and summarized the content of the interviews. Then, the other researcher on the team read the interviews and initial summaries and revised the summaries, if necessary. The research team worked together to develop a final summary. The summaries were shared with the counselors and special educators and the students when possible for verification and corroboration of the content of their interviews.

Since the essential raw data of interviews are quotations and first hand experiences, the second level of analysis involved examining the content of the interviews to determine what issues or behaviors surfaced most frequently regarding the role of the rehabilitation counselor for most participants. Quotations and key words were grouped and catalogued according to the main topics and issues that emerged related to the role of the rehabilitation counselors, the nature of the relationships, and the transition supports and services and other major topics that were unanticipated (Seidman, 1991, p.12.). The researchers worked together to develop common categories from their analyses. In spite of these procedures in designing the study, gathering and analyzing the study has some limitations.

The final results from the data are presented in this paper as a case study of the best practices of rehabilitation counselors in providing transition services to students with disabilities as they transition from high school to postsecondary education/training to employment. The paper describes the themes that have emerged from the data regarding the transition mandate, the nature of the relationships between the players in the transition process, the role of an effective

rehabilitation counselor, and the supports and services students with disabilities believed necessary for success in postsecondary education/training and in accessing employment.

Limitations of the Study

Regardless of the care in designing the study and the procedures in gathering and analyzing the data, the study has several limitations. First, the study focuses on four rehabilitation counselors, two special education teachers, and ten students with disabilities who have completed college programs and are employed. Such a small sample raises questions about the generalizability, credibility, and dependability of the findings. The intent of the study, however, was less to produce generalizable results and more to learn about the nature of the human relationships in the transition process, the knowledge of the and beliefs of rehabilitation counselors concerning their roles in the transition process, and the students' perspective about the services and supports provided by their counselors contributed to their success in postsecondary education and employment.

A second limitation is that the author of the paper has a working relationship with the four rehabilitation counselors that may compromise the objectivity and credibility of the findings. However, several measures were taken to moderate the bias, the data was analyzed by both the author and a research assistant and the counselors were given opportunities to verify the findings. In addition, a transcriber was employed to transcribe the audiotaped interviews to ensure that the transcriptions were as close as possible to the original conversation. Despite these limitations this case study is a valuable contribution to the field on the role of the rehabilitation counselor in transitioning youth. It provides insights and questions for further research in this area, particularly since a review of the literature produced few studies on this topic.

Findings from the Interviews of Rehabilitation Counselors on Their Role in Transitioning Youth

In the data analysis of the interviews with the four rehabilitation counselors two major themes emerged: one about the Amendment to the Rehabilitation Act of 1992 to serve youth and the second regarding the role of rehabilitation counselor in transitioning youth. Following is a description of these themes with supporting excerpts from the four counselor interviews.

I. Themes on Amendments of the Rehabilitation Act of 1992 to Transition Youth with Disabilities

One major theme that emerged from the interview data was counselors' thoughts about the changes in the Rehabilitation Act in 1992 to serve youth customers. Fiona, Wanda, and Kate were all certified after the Amendment was passed, so they had some knowledge that Rehabilitation Services across the country were going to incorporate youth customers. Candy received her rehabilitation counseling certification in 1988, so serving youth customers was a more of a major shift in her role. However, regardless of the differing years of certification in relation to the amendment to the Rehabilitation Act of 1992 their beliefs about this change were very similar.

A. Practitioners' Beliefs About the Transition Amendment

One major theme that surfaced in all four interviews concerned the counselors' beliefs about the amendment to the Rehabilitation Act to transition youth with disabilities. All four of the counselors felt that the mandate to serve youth customers was a good change in that starting with students at the beginning of their work history builds positive experience and often prevents failures. Kate states, "If I start younger when they're in school we won't have return customers, with a bad work history (Kate, Interview, 12/5/02, p1)."

According to Fiona, "They don't have the failure; it just makes the job easier. To start out with them instead of waiting until they have failed a few times, or had some real hard knocks in their life." Fiona, who works in a rural area, feels that this change has "really impacted the out county because we are able to get a lot of people at a young age that would probably not drift into to this agency (located near the major city) from the out county...(Fiona, Interview, 2/8/02, p.3)."

Wanda, who serves youth in a large urban district, stated, "Well, I think it was a good change. I definitely see a benefit of starting work with students sooner vs. later and trying to teach them skills so they don't have to make as many mistakes, as some of our adults that are coming into our agency. I am really developing their skills rather than working to fix their problems. Rather than rehabilitating we are at the habilitation stage vs. rehabilitation." Wanda feels so strongly about this change that she believes the mandate should go a step further, "If I had my choice I would have a rehabilitation counselor in every (urban) high school. Yes, that would be my ideal job to work right in the school to work with a small group so I don't have to run around so much (Wanda, Interview, 2/2/02, p.2)."

Candy, who has worked with youth customers for seven years, thought about the changes in the amendment in relation to the use of resources and the value of initial good work experiences.

I think that it is a very intelligent strategic use of our dollars and resources. But what I'm learning is, if people can have good experiences right from the beginning that they can build on good experiences and continue to have exponentially more success. If people start having bad experiences it makes it more difficult for them to feel good about trying again and feel good about themselves. By good experiences I mean positive work experiences, whether they are paid or unpaid. But if people have good support and have a good match for what they are doing a good job worker match they are most likely to be successful in that experience. And they are most likely to build on that and have a more successful experience (Candy, Interview, 2/4/02, p.2).

In sum all four of the rehabilitation counselors believed that the changes in the Rehabilitation Act of 1992 to serve youth were in the long-term best interest of their clients because they could start with positive work experiences rather than a series of failures in the workplace.

B. Issues and Concerns Regarding Changes in Rehabilitation Amendment to Serve Youth

One major issue about serving youth expressed by two of the counselors concerned how rehabilitation counselors are evaluated, which is by the number of clients on their caseload that secure employment for 90 days. At this time the counselor can close their case. Both Kate and Candy expressed concerns about this traditional way that the Rehabilitation Services Agency rates the effectiveness of counselors who are serving youth customers. "In this field Rehabs (i.e. closed cases) are based on employment and it takes longer to employ youth," expressed Kate. Candy elaborated this point further in her interview; "It takes many years to for a youth customer to graduate from high school. Go to college, or any kind of postsecondary training, become successfully employed and have their case closed is any where from a 3 year proposition to a 10 year proposition. So one of the impacts that it had to our caseloads across the state was kind of a bottleneck so to speak...you're shifting from what you've been doing all these years to serving 40% youth. There should be some prediction and provisions for well if this occurs we are going to have a slow down in the number of rehabs. We still have to produce those rehabs some how (Candy, Interview, 2/4/02, p.3-4)."

Serving youth customers then can have great implications for the rehabilitation counselor and how successful they look on paper to the agency, which predominantly measures success on the number of clients they assist in gaining employment. A counselor whose caseload is 40-50% youth may have fewer cases that close on an annual basis. Yet they maybe investing a great deal of time doing vocational counseling, purchasing services for success in postsecondary education all of which may well yield gainful employment for a youth customer in five or six years or longer.

A second issue of concern expressed by Wanda and Candy regarding the dilemma of identifying and serving youth customers to fulfill the new mandate was the expansion of their caseload without additional resources. "The pressure is really on, at one point I am really seeking and trying to find students that are appropriate and in another respect I'm not really able to serve all that really need to be served... the monies the resources have not gone up (Wanda, Interview, 2/25/02, p.2-3)." Candy expressed similar thoughts in her interview, "It has had a huge impact on our caseload size, because when we added youth on as a strategic priority we didn't take anything away. We didn't increase our staff. So it had a huge impact on rehab counselors across the state where we had to absorb more responsibility. So there is a huge impact on caseload size and on resources being strained because we have to find the money obviously to serve all these people (Candy, Interview, 2/4/02, p.3)."

Wanda expressed a third issue of concern about serving youth customers. "I would like the policy makers to know that we need a step in between writing a vocational plan for students. Right now it is policy that we write a plan within 60 days or before the students graduate from high school. These plans that we are writing are really trash. It is really something to get down on paper but we really don't have the time to work with these students and explore what is available. So, I would like to see something where it gives an advantage to work with kids a little longer than the general population with coming up with an obtainable vocational goal (Wanda, Interview, 2/25/02, p.6)."

Fiona illuminated a fourth issue related to collaboration between school and agency regarding the funding of services. "I am somewhat restricted by agency rules and in doing job placement and activities. I can provide vocational counseling, guidance and vocational counseling on a vocational topic. I'm not supposed to be doing what the schools are mandated to do. So if there is a mandate the kids are suppose to be given exposure to explore vocations and that sort of thing it is suppose to be done through the schools. So I can't just go in and do that, but I could support it if it was there (Fiona, Interview, 2/8/02, p.8)."

In this passage Fiona is highlighting the fine line between agency and schools working together and which entity is responsible for funding programs and services. The joint transition mandate sets the stage for the overlapping of responsibilities between the special education teachers and rehabilitation counselors in the transition process. This means that both the school and the agency must identify who is responsible for providing the individual's transition services and whose funds will be used to pay for them. The commingling of services between any autonomous organizations can become very complicated especially when the organizations, like schools and human service agencies, are always in a position of high demands for services with limited or declining resources. A concern then for agencies, which are now mandated to collaborate with schools in the area of transition and provide some resources, is that schools may expect them to provide both the human resources, i.e., rehabilitation counselors, and the monetary resources to run the programs and thereby abdicate their mandated responsibility to provide these transition services to high school students.

In sum, the rehabilitation counselors in this study identified four issues related to changes in the Rehabilitation Act of 1992, the traditional ways in which their performance is evaluated, the expansion of their caseload with youth customers without additional resources, having to write vocational goals with students without sufficient time to get to know them, and the concern about funding of services by agencies in a school.

II. Themes on the Beliefs About The Role of the Rehabilitation Counselor in Transitioning Youth

Three themes emerged in the analysis of the four counselor interviews and the three special education teacher interviews about the role of the rehabilitation counselor in transitioning youth. The first theme concerned the need for counselors to connect with schools in transitioning youth.

A. Connecting with Educators to Transition Youth

All four of the counselors described their efforts in connecting with various professionals in the school district. In some instances the first step was with special education directors, or intermediate district transition coordinators, the special education building coordinator, or the special education teacher directly. These differences often were based on the whether the counselor's responsibility was in a rural or urban setting and on pre-existing relationships with educational professionals.

Kate, who is assigned to a rural county less than a year ago, made her first connection with the Transition Coordinator at the Intermediate School District (ISD) because she new her as former

rehabilitation counselor in the District Office. “I have a good working relationship with the ISD Transition Coordinator. She connects me with the special education teachers through meetings and introductions on site. She also has students on caseload with Michigan Rehabilitation Services. She was the former rehabilitation counselor for this county,” (Kate, Interview, 12/5/02, p. 2).

Fiona established the educational connections in the rural county that she serves differently.

I have been connected with the schools and the Michigan Transition Services Project. I attend workshops with the team of special education teachers and coordinators. These have helped me get involved with the school and understand school systems and how they work and get familiar with IDEA and that sort of thing. This project has offered a lot of workshops for people who are working with students in the schools from different agencies that are not in the schools. Last summer they put together a team of parents, teachers, outside agencies and transition people and we attended that conference as a group. It was excellent. I felt like I was really a part of the team. I have a regular schedule of meeting with the schools. Some schools are more open than others are. I usually start out by meeting with a special education director then the intermediate transition coordinator invites me to all of the district special education to make a presentation to staff on Michigan Rehabilitation Services. I usually get my referrals from the special education teachers and the directors. They funnel through the Intermediate Transition Coordinators so she knows who is getting services (Fiona, Interview, 2/8/02, p 4.).

Wanda, who serves the urban school district with three high schools, describes some challenges she has had in making the connections. She usually “connects with the special education coordinators in each high school. One school is really on the ball with things and keeps me up to date with things. I’ve had problems with some of the others ones getting on top of things and keeping me informed. I typically get referrals from teachers, or I get invited to the IEPCs. So I am made aware of students that are graduating. They have had a lot of changes in the coordinator positions. So that has made the connections harder (Wanda, Interview, 2/25/02, p.3).”

Candy in her interview indicated that she is responsible for 16 school districts that are a combination of rural and suburban and private schools as well. She starts with a more formal agreement with the Intermediate School District and then connects with individual schools. “The first thing that we do is to write a collaborative agreement and each year that agreement is reviewed with our staff and it outlines basically how much money the ISD is giving our agency and what our federal match is and what our budget is for youth. It has goals for how many customers will be served. It has kind of a written agreement on how the referrals will be made. And so we have this document that sort of sets the tone for the working relationship, but the document alone isn’t really effective. It is something that is essential that has to be done, but really you have your written document and then you have what I call your working relationships (Candy, Interview, 1/4/02, p.6).”

Candy shared in the interview that she has identified “liaison people at each one of the school sites.” They are the connection for MRS and the rest of the special education staff. “It is usually the person I think I have the best collaborative relationship with (Candy, Interview, 1/4/02, p.6).” She discusses with the liaison the referral process and the choices as to how the school might want to connect with the agency and gives them a set of MRS referral packets. “As the cases are opened I attend the transition meetings and IEPs and basically do whatever I can to participate in the transition process (Candy, Interview, 1/4/02, p.7).” Candy reported that the relationship with the special education teachers in each of the schools varies. Some times the teachers have a “detached approach to transition” and “sometimes it is a very open and sharing kind of a relationship. Sometimes the special education teacher does not know what to do at all and then the parent makes the referral. It is kind of a mixed bag. But when it works well, you have a special education teacher who is aware of their responsibility in transition and is aware of our role in transition and comes to the table willing to do their part. When everyone comes to the table willing to take responsibility for their part it can really work well (Candy, Interview, 1/4/02, p.7).”

All four of the rehabilitation counselors spoke about connecting with the schools as part of their role, although each of them reported a different process for doing so. In addition, three of counselors reported that their relationship varied with the depending on how opened the special education staff was in working with outside agencies and how aware they were of their role in the transition process. Changes in school personnel were reported as a limiting factor in connecting and maintaining collaborative relationships.

B. Rehabilitation Counselors as a Resource to Teachers and Students

All of the counselors reported in their interviews that a major part of their role was to be a resource to teachers and students. They reported the resources they provide are career counseling and assisting with goal setting. “My biggest role is making sure they are aware before they graduate of their career option that they know their strengths and weaknesses and that they are linked to community resources, i.e. colleges, transportation. Our roles is to help them fill out job applications, practice interviewing, and complete resumes and to learn about appropriate dress (Kate, Interview, 12/5/02, p. 3).” Wanda in her interview described her role this way, “I want to be a resource; I want to be able to provide the schools with information that is not readily available to them. I also like to bridge the support so once they are leaving school they now that they have another support system set up (Wanda, Interview, 2/25/02, p. 5).”

Fiona mentioned a specific resource she can provide in high school concerns transportation. “One of the actual services I can provide while they are still in high school is... How are you going to get to your training or job? You are going to need transportation. What ways do you see best for you? Are you going to depend on public transportation? Do you have the ability and the potential to learn to drive? I can get special driving services for people. We can start that while they are still in high school (Fiona, Interview, 2/8/02, p. 8).”

Both Wanda and Candy reported that part of their vocational counseling role with the student is to bring the reality of expectations and demands of the real world of work to the forefront. They reported that in some instances special educators and parents have encouraged unrealistic career

options with students and their role is to help students become aware of the educational demands of their career interest. Candy expressed it this way.

I think that one of the main roles of the counselors is to really bring the real world of experience of the world of work into the meeting. A lot of educators do get out and learn about the world of work. But most of them really don't want to get in the way of anyone's dream mode. The role of the counselor is to come in and reality-test a little bit. To say do you realize that if you want to be a lawyer you're going to be in school for the next 9 years? And teachers do that sometimes to a degree too, but counselors have really seen students with disabilities go to college or go out in certain jobs. They have seen what happens when people are successful and what happens when they struggle. So it is sort of a real world that the counselor brings to the table. It is the real world kind of questioning and prodding not to be heavy handed about it, but to start a real honest dialogue (Candy, Interview, 2/4/02, p. 7-8).

Wanda spoke about the role of the special education teacher being one to help student set realistic expectations and for the counselor to also assist with establishing realistic career goals.

I believe in working with students and letting them do about anything that they wanted. But what I have found is that the expectations have been so grand and it should be their responsibility to expose them to the different careers that are out there. I have had some students in special education that have 2nd and 3rd grade reading and math levels and are telling me that they want to be doctors or scientists. A lot of these students have never taken a regular ed class and they just have no clue. But what I have to do and, understand I'm not crushing the spirits of students, but another way of approaching it would be to pull up the information and say look this is what a doctor would have to do. You would have to have this many years of math. This many years of science and you will probably have to take a lot of remedial classes (Wanda, Interview, 2/25/02, p. 5-6).

Candy describes it in her interview as a role to help clients make informed choices, "It really is choice with responsibility though also, the customer (student) really needs to know that when they make a choice to go down a certain road, that they have to be responsible for that choice (Candy, Interview, 2/4/02, p.5)."

Jane, one of the special education teachers, in her interview stated, "I think their role is to help the student and the special education teacher to think about what we can do to while the student is still in school that is going to add to where they are vocationally before they exit, (Jane, Interview, 1/22/02, p.3)."

To summarize, all of the counselors felt that a major part of their role as a rehabilitation counselor was to act as a resource to teachers and students by providing support through vocational counseling, goal setting and exposing them to various career options. In some instances they believe their role is to ask the student tough questions about their knowledge of

the educational expectations for their career interest and the number of years of education required and guide them to make an informed, responsible choice.

C. Fostering Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy Skills

All four of the counselors discussed in their interviews that part of their role is to foster self-determination and self-advocacy skills within their youth customers and assist them in becoming more independent. Kate describes it this way, “It is very important that I am building relationships during the transition process. Mentor them but teach them to be independent. I see it as a constant support during the transition process (Kate, Interview, 12/5/02, p.4).” Wanda expressed similar thoughts in her interview, “As rehabilitation counselors we need to back off from hand holding these kids and doing everything for them to getting them to do things for themselves (Wanda, Interview, 2/25/02, p.5).”

Both Fiona and Candy indicated in their interviews that it was the special education teachers’ responsibility to initiate the development of students’ self-determination and self-advocacy skills and the role of the rehabilitation counselor to continue this process. According to Fiona, “I think that is what the caseload counselor relationship is about for both (special educators and rehabilitation counselors) is working on those self-determination skills, knowing their disability goal setting, being able to problem solve and self advocate. Our team in the county talked about is that all schools should have some sort of self-determination class. I can really see a difference in most of the kids who have taken the class (Fiona, Interview, 2/8/02, p.7).”

Candy held a similar view:

I think the role of the Special Ed Teacher is to start to instill those concepts (i.e. self-determination) and those practices for high school students when they are still in high school. So that when they get to the next arena they are not in a state of shock having to do that and know how to do that. I think the role of the rehab counselor is, for the first time, make this official shift with understanding and support. To realize that not everybody is ready, but so where the meetings have always been very directed by special education teachers and the families with obviously consulting with the students, the rehab counselor turns the focus on the young person and asking them directly, are you 18? Now that you are an adult you need to make these decisions yourself. What do you want to do? It’s not pretend. It’s not role-play. It’s not practice. It’s real. What goals do you have for yourself? What supports do you need to be successful in college or in postsecondary training or employment?.....The counselor needs to understand that not everybody is ready for that but my goal is to really have the client take charge to the greatest extent possible (Candy, Interview, 2/4/02, p.8).

In sum, all of the counselors see their role to assist students in becoming independent and taking charge of their life and continue the development of their as one self-determination and self-advocacy that have been ideally initiated in the school setting.

D. Using resources to overcome barriers to postsecondary education and employment

Two of the counselors talked about their role as one of using their resources in non-traditional ways to overcome barriers that students encounter in attending postsecondary education and employment. Fiona expressed the following.

I think that the agency role is to overcome barriers, whatever the barrier is. If there is a lack of resources within the family for being able to send a student for college training we can support with financial assistance, with that training. We can assist in some of the non traditional ways like if the family or financial aid is paying for all of the tuition and books we can provide transportation and some of the of the costs that are more hidden. Tutoring is one, if there is a training program that is at the community college and they get one hour of tutoring for every class and that is not enough, than we can extend that tutoring for them. If they have a special need, say they need a computer, for example, in order to do the writing for a class and that is related to their disability we can provide that kind of technology (Fiona, Interview, 2/8/02, p.9).

Candy shared similar thoughts in her interview.

I see myself offering the above and beyond services that people aren't able to receive either in the college arena or in the workplace. I think that that is one of the nice things about the role of the counselor is the flexibility to kind of go above and beyond to make a difference. And by that I mean assistive technology. It is something that doesn't always fall under the responsibility of the college, but it is something that we can do. People do need to apply for financial aid, but we can pay for tuition and for some books and supplies even dorm costs and personnel assistance and things like that. So we have a huge variety and a huge latitude to provide support in many different ways (Candy, Interview, 2/4/02, p.9).

Karen, a special education teacher, offered the same description of the rehabilitation counselor's role in her interview. "She helps me and the student write a transition plan together and she helps students with job placements. I know that she can help with vocational assessment, career information and job coaching. I know that she has provided technical support for students who have gone on to postsecondary education, (Karen, Interview, 1/22/02, p.3)."

In the final analysis these four rehabilitation counselors describe their roles as having many dimensions from connecting with educational professionals, to serving as a resource to students and teachers, fostering students' self-determination and independence, to providing resources to overcome students' barriers to postsecondary education and employment.

Services and Supports for Postsecondary Success

In order to begin to answer the questions what services and supports students with disabilities believe are necessary to succeed in postsecondary education, the counselors in the project were asked to review their caseloads and identify clients that had completed postsecondary education and were employed. Candy identified 8 of the 10 clients, which is understandable since she has

worked with youth for the last 7 years. Wanda and Fiona identified one client respectively. Kate having worked as a youth counselor for less than a year did not have a client meeting these criteria.

All ten clients were interviewed. The interviews were transcribed and then analyzed to document the supports and services they received from or through their rehabilitation counselor and identified as necessary for their postsecondary success and employment. The list of supports identified by each client were reviewed and verified by their counselors. The students identified 9 supports that they believed necessary for their success in postsecondary education. In the analysis of the supports three natural categories emerged: Psychological Supports, Academic Supports, and Employment Supports. See Graph in Table 3 for a breakdown of these support categories. Following is a description of each of these supports with excerpts from the students' interviews.

I. Psychological Supports

These supports are best described as services or interventions provided by either the rehabilitation counselor or other counseling professionals to provide the student or client with the necessary emotional support for continued success in their postsecondary program and subsequent employment.

A. Encouragement and Praise from the Rehabilitation Counselor

A critical finding in the analysis of the ten students' interviews was that nine of the ten students reported that a phone call or a note at the beginning and end of the semester to find out how they were doing in school, what assistance they needed, and to encourage and acknowledge their progress was very beneficial. Tom describes it in this way.

She would contact me and we would talk. She would emphasize having good luck. Wish you the best, have a good semester this semester. The semester would end. And she would evaluate it and make sure I did okay. She would ask for my grades; ask if I needed any more help. Do you need any assistance? Is anything going wrong? In that same phone call she would prepare me for the next semester and we would start all over again. It was a continual process. I really enjoyed talking to her. It felt good to know someone out there cared about me and wanted me to be successful besides my family. They (the phone calls) were very helpful in boosting my confidence (Tom, Interview, 1/3/02, p. 11-12).

Curt reported similar sentiments in his interview and even offered that this support made him feel like he had to do his best.

Candy would always encourage me; that is why we check in so often to see how I'm doing. I enjoyed it because what they were providing (Rehabilitation Services) me and giving her to support me. Sending her a copy of my report card one semester and seeing how I had done. She would congratulate me and basically give me a pat on the back and ask what was next: She has always been

very positive and helpful. I had to try my best, no slacking off in class and taking it easy. I think it kept me on track more, because I had to prove to myself that I was doing the best I could (Curt, Interview, 1/2/02, p.10-11).

When Jeremy was asked about supports from rehabilitation services he replied, “Moral support, I guess. Every time she gets a copy of my grades, she would call me up and tell me that I did a good job here, or if I worked better in a subject. It’s nice to know that someone is actually paying attention to what I’m doing. That I am not the only one out there (Jeremy, Interview, 2/2/02, p.2).” Kathryn, a student who was diagnosed with a brain tumor her freshmen year which resulted in a brain injury, described the emotional support like this, “I think that the support like getting back to me within a day and just writing me a note saying ‘great on grades we just heard, we’re so glad that you’re doing so well.’ Things like that were probable the most important (Kathryn, Interview, 1/10/02, p.13).

All of the students shared similar thoughts in the interview concerning these types of phone calls or notes at the beginning or end of the semester. It is worth noting that the counselor made the contact with the student rather than waiting for the student to call them. According to Candy, the rehabilitation counselor with the most experience in serving youth, “I have found that I need to initiate more of the contact with my youth customers in college then with adults, perhaps because of their age and the transition to independence they need to have that outside support but are reluctant to call and initiate it. Also in some instances I have not had a long term relationship with them so I need to make more of the contact in the beginning to build the relationship (Candy, Interview, 2/4/02, p.10).”

B. Access to Personal Counseling

Another form of psychological support reported by two of the students as beneficial was the purchase of personal counseling from a professional by the rehabilitation counselor. Kim, a student with mild cerebral palsy, started her first semester of college with 12 credits and a part time job.

My first semester I realized how hard it was, and I felt like I was in over my head at times. But I did not give up and kept going. I first started out ignoring my disability. I had a job that was causing more physical labor. I didn’t want to quit the job and it was causing physical pain. I told Candy (the rehabilitation counselor) my first semester in college felt so overwhelming and I knew I wanted to stay in school but the job and going to school full time was too much. And because of that I was felling negative toward the Cerebral Palsy and actually one of my former OTs suggested I get counseling. Candy found Dr. Brown for me. So in occupational therapy (OT) we talked about my disability effecting like my time management, how I should take care of my body and maybe go part time to school and think about a different job. So it took that whole first year in college to realize that I would have to go at a slower pace than everyone else (Kim, Interview, 1/2/02, p.2-4).

Kathryn, a student with a brain injury, described her need to access support from another professional this way. "At first I really didn't know, everyone was saying you kind of have to do this, and I was just trying to get some input. To see where my brain was and we didn't know in terms of attention and things like that, so we, I didn't know what to expect. I met with Candy the first time and we talked about taking a comprehension test, like focusing and skills related to the brain...a neuropsychological test. It sounded like a very good idea because at the time I was very weak and very tired a lot of the time. MRS ended up not paying for the exam because our insurance did, but Candy recommended the person who did it (Kathryn, Interview, 1/10/02, p.3-4)." Even though the agency did not pay for the exam, the point is that the Candy recommended this service to her client and was prepared to pay for it, since she knew that Kathryn needed support in figuring out how she was going to continue college, what her learning strengths and limitations would be after her surgeries and stroke, and what help she might need.

There are two major findings in terms of the psychological supports. One finding is that 90% or 9/10 students reported that having a phone call or note from the counselor at the beginning and end of the semester was viewed as encouraging, motivating, and very beneficial. The second point is that the rehabilitation counselor has to both listen and observe the psychological and emotional needs that a student is expressing or displaying and then individualize the counseling by making the suggestion for additional support from the appropriate professional and offering to pay for the service, if necessary. In the cases of Kim and Kathryn their first semester became very overwhelming and additional supports were essential in order for them to continue towards their postsecondary goals.

II. Academic Supports

A second area of supports that students identified as necessary for their postsecondary success were four different types of academic supports. The two major areas of academic support were Assistive Technology 80% (8/10 students) and Funding for Tuition, Books, and Supplies 70% (7/10 students). The two other areas of supports that students identified, Linkage to the College Support Services and Specialized Tutoring were both reported as critical by 40% of the students (4/10 students).

A. Assistive Technology

A major area of support that college students reported as very beneficial was the purchase of assistive technology by their rehabilitation counselor. For most students assistive technology was primarily a desk or laptop computer with specialized software to accommodate reading and writing difficulties.

Tom talked about the value of having a computer of his own to work in the privacy of his room anytime of the day. "Well, just having the opportunity to have a computer at my access 24 hours per day any time I wanted in my own setting in my own environment. If you're a person who struggles and is kind of embarrassed about their disability, well sitting in your apartment or by yourself where you don't have to worry about that sometimes that will take off some of the pressure of your disability. Maybe the student on the next computer is looking over, or you feel like they are watching and making judgements. Maybe they aren't, but you feel that (Tom,

Interview, 1/3/02, p.2)." He also talked about having his own computer served as a tool for career exploration. " I had this awesome computer that I had complete 100 per cent control of and I could just work on the ins and outs of. So then I started enjoying being on the computer, the programs, software, games. I knew I was an artist when I was in high school and I knew college was very challenging in terms of reading with great amounts of writing. So I put the two together and came up with graphic arts. I couldn't be more happy. I can set at a computer and design something in 4 hours and it's beautiful (Tom, Interview, 1/3/02, p. 2-3)."

Curt expressed similar thoughts about the value of having his own computer for learning as well as career exploration. " I needed help getting a computer, as a learning tool for voice recognition for writing, and a grammar and spell check for when I used the keyboard. Also looking at my career goal in technology they helped me get a computer so I could start working on it. Start sharpening my skills, once I got into a position where I liked the computers, I knew I wanted to go on this area (Curt, Interview, 1/2/02, p.2)." His majors were Network communication and Microcomputer Support. Since his case was opened the Rehabilitation Counselor has purchased a desktop computer, software to accommodate his disability, and a laptop for work.

Over the years of support I got a laptop and a desktop. One allows me to travel, take it to school and work there because the labs (in college) fill up and you can't get one. It is nice to be able to open the bag up and just go to work. Having it (the computer) I have taken a lot of my classes on-line and on the campus, or some were actually campus classes but they were like Internet design, web paging. So I did a lot of my work at home and then posted it on to the board via the Internet. It was critical because so many of my classes were technology and software base they gave me the tools to work right on there (Curt, Interview, 1/2/02, p.8-9)."

Curt, a student with a learning disability in writing and a mild visual impairment really used his computer to maximize his time and be more productive. He has completed two Associate Degrees in technology in four years and worked full time during this time as a computer support person. He was able to accomplish these goals not only because he is motivated, but also because he had the computers available to him, which enabled him to use his time to the fullest extent.

The other students who received computers through the support of their rehabilitation counselor reported similar thoughts about the necessity of a laptop for accommodating their writing, reading with special software, or taking courses on-line. Jeremy talked about the value of using both his audiotape and laptop purchased by his counselor in lecture classes, "I tape the lectures as much as possible, and I use a laptop if I feel the lecture is something I can't write because I have terrible handwriting (Jeremy, Interview, 1/2/01, p.3)." However, Kathryn identified a palm pilot purchased by her counselor as the most valuable assistive technology for her success. "MRS bought me a palm pilot last summer. It was incredibly great because I can keep my medication straight every day and gives me another way to organize my class. I can write down all of that kind of thing and keep it right there. I have it right now; I can flip it open and know exactly what my schedule is during the day and when I have time to rest and things like that. It has been extremely, extremely helpful (Kathryn, Interview, 1/1/0/02, p.8)."

In sum, the majority of college students with disabilities in the study indicated that assistive technology was very important to their academic success and in some instances assisting with career exploration. Even though college campuses offer access to computers all the time, one student made the point that having his own computer in his own space diminished the pressure he felt publicly in a lab about his disability because he could work at his own pace without feeling like he was being observed and disability was on public view. The transition to college for a person with a disability can be more emotionally challenging as they work to become their own advocate and the increased demand of the academic work adds a tremendous amount of pressure. According to these successful college students with a disability having their own assistive technology, i.e., a computer with the software to accommodate their needs or a palm pilot to help the organize made a difference in their ability to succeed. However, the assistive technology was customized to the individual's needs often requiring an assessment purchased by their counselor rather than providing a computer with like software for each client.

B. Monies for Tuition, Books, and Supplies

The majority of the students (70%) reported financial support in the form of tuition, books, and supplies were very important. The agency requires that students apply for financial aid first and that they or their family make a contribution, if possible, before they request this type of assistance. In most cases they needed some help with tuition or maybe just books and supplies. In all cases they reported that this financial assistance relieved the financial pressure for themselves or their family and allowed them to go to school full time or to continue their education rather than quitting to earn money for the next semester.

Kim had this to say about these supports, "The tuition has been so helpful, it has taken the pressure off of me and my parents having to find a way to pay for it (Kim, Interview, 1/2/02, p.6)." Jeremy felt even stronger about this assistance, "The most critical help was definitely the help with the books, if I didn't have that help I probably would never get through college because I would have to work a job to pay for my tuition and another to pay for the books (Jeremy, Interview 1/2/02, p.7)." Curt expressed the same feelings, "Assistance with tuition and books was critical, I might not have been able to do it on my own, but it would have been a lot harder. That's why I am working and trying to keep up with everything. It might have taken me 2 or 3 years longer to get my two Associate Degrees beyond what I am looking at now (Curt, Interview, 1/2/02, p.9)."

Nick reported a different experience in securing support for tuition from MRS. Nick has a learning disability in reading and writing. He transferred from a Community College to a small liberal arts private college and earned a 4-year degree in Business Administration with a major in accounting. He had two different rehabilitation counselors. With the first counselor he reported that he needed support for tuition starting his junior year but was denied by his first counselor at MRS on the basis of his family's income. He was transferred to Fiona's caseload his senior year. "I paid for my books I mainly asked for tuition help, but I was told my parents make too much, but they weren't able to pay so now I have a lot of student loans. Then the second counselor, Fiona helped me. She helped me with some of my student loans and paid for my last semester (Nick, Interview, 1/4/02, p.8-9)." In Nick's case there is some inconsistency in how the

counselors determine students' with disabilities support. He paid for all of his books and tuition for 2 years and then asked for tuition support. While the counselors in this interview they have a great deal of flexibility in supporting their clients, one wonders if there needs to be some agency guidelines in how they determine tuition support. Perhaps then there would be more consistency between counselors so that a client's support is not merely dependent on the flexibility and generosity of the counselor they are assigned.

C. Linkages to College Support Services

Four of the ten students reported that the linkage with the college support services were of great benefit in assisting them in the completion of their program. In some cases the rehabilitation counselor assisted their client in making the connection and then the student assumed responsibility for this support. Candy connected Chad with the disabilities counselor at the beginning of his first semester. He worked with the disabilities counselor, Mrs. Nielson, in the student services at his university. He found her to be helpful in securing accommodations from his instructors and in his personal adjustment to college life. "I would talk with my instructors to get accommodations and Mrs. Nielson would talk to them too. She would give me a form at the beginning of the semester to give to each of my professors to explain my situation. Also I had like social issues like anxiety about making mistakes, saying the wrong things, mainly. Mrs. Nielson saw it and was worried that I didn't seem happy. I seemed frustrated so she suggested that I see a psychologist. I saw a therapist and was diagnosed with social anxiety disorder. So I started taking medication (Chad, Interview, 12/27/01, p.7-8)."

Candy also connected Jeremy his first semester with Kim, a disabilities counselor, at the local community college. He talked about the value of the disabilities counselor, in providing him support. "I've been getting my counseling through the college counseling center. Kim helps me a lot. I usually ask her questions because mostly counseling type questions are towards my college goals, like if I take this class and this class will I be able to do this class? The supports from her have been most helpful with getting me books on tape. Kim and Candy talked back and forth about me too and how I was doing (Jeremy, Interview, 1/2/02, p. 6-7)."

In other situations the counselor used a team approach and established a more collaborative relationship with the disabilities counselor at an out of state university in order to better meet the needs of the client. Kathryn, who had brain surgery her second year of college, and became an MRS client, reported in her interview how Candy, her counselor, coordinated services for her with the disabilities counselor at Auburn University in Alabama. "Candy and I talked about Auburn and what we could do from her to Auburn. It sounded like a very good idea because at the time I was very weak and very tired a lot of the time. I needed extra help in classes just to get back on track. So the first thing that happened is she called down to Auburn and got me associated with someone at the disability center, which really helped me (Kathryn, Interview, 1/10/02, p.3-4)." Candy arranged for special parking, tape players for her classes and paid for her textbooks. When Kathryn had to transfer to Michigan State University because of continuing medical problems, Candy again connected her with disabilities services and worked closely with her counselor, Sunny. After the medical crisis was over, "My mom called her (Candy) and said look we really need some support because she is not going back to Auburn. The doctors have been straightforward about that and we need to know where to go. She immediately called

Sunny and arranged a meeting with the four of us. She did a lot of support through Sunny and Sunny would talk with her a lot (Kathryn, Interview, (1/10/2, p. 12).

Obviously, in these cases the rehabilitation counselor was very aware of these students academic needs for support and therefore made sure that they were connected with a disabilities counselor in their college and when necessary collaborate with that counselor to coordinate their services and supports. The coordination for these students was by their report very beneficial and according to Whelley, Hart, and Zaft, (2002) students often become overwhelmed and confused when trying to access postsecondary supports.

D. Specialized Tutoring

Four of the ten students reported receiving specialized tutoring from a cognitive learning specialist provided by their rehabilitation counselor as being very beneficial to their college success. The cognitive learning specialist provided students with reading, writing, and test taking strategies, as well as organizational and study skills. Kim talked about the value of the tutorial support in her interview, “She would verbally go through my notes. I would make an outline of notes and she would help me make the notes shorter, so I wasn’t typing more word for word what the textbook said. And then we verbally would talk about what the point of the chapter is and what my outline says. And that would help me prepare for tests. She would help me pull it together and get more efficient (Kim, Interview, 1/2/02, p.4).” Ryan also expressed the benefit from the special tutoring, “Dr. Sadavan, taught me learning and memory strategies. We talked about ways to remember and solve problems. She helped me with study skills and to set aside a quiet place and time to do my studying. This support has been one of the most valuable in helping me get my certification in technology (Ryan, Interview, 4/20/02, p.8).”

The other two students expressed similar thoughts on the value of this tutoring from a learning specialist. This is another example of when the rehabilitation counselor knows their client’s strengths and challenges they can customize their support by hiring specialists that can assist students in being more efficient learners. These types of supports often strengthen their confidence to succeed in their postsecondary program.

In sum, after interviewing ten students with disabilities who have completed their postsecondary program to determine what supports and services they felt were most beneficial to their success two major categories emerged, psychological supports and academic supports. The majority of the students indicated that a telephone call at the beginning and end of the semester from their rehabilitation counselor to encourage them and validate their efforts and ask about their needs was one of the most valuable psychological supports contributing to their success. In terms of academic supports having their own assistive technology in the form of a computer/software to accommodate their learning as well as monetary support for tuition and books were identified as the most significant to their academic success. Nearly half of the ten students also reported that connecting and coordination of support with the disabilities counselor in their college and special tutoring were very valuable in their college success.

III. Employment Supports

A third category of supports surfaced in the interview data of the ten students concerning employment supports. All of the rehabilitation counselors agreed that a major part of their role is vocational or career counseling. In fact the reason their agency exists is to assist people with disabilities in finding employment in their interest area. Consequently, all ten of the students received ongoing vocational counseling from the time their case was opened with rehabilitation services. In the early stages the counseling most likely will encourage and support career exploration in the students' interest areas. In some instances career exploration may include a career assessment and then a variety of college classes related to students' interests. This career exploration may include job shadowing, a mentorship, or a paid internship supported by agency dollars. In the last years of their college program it may be assistance in deciding a direction with in a particular career area, like computer or electrical engineering.

A. Career Counseling

Even though all of the students received career counseling in their meetings with their counselors when they developed their career and employment goals only six of the ten students indicated in their interview that this career counseling was significant to their success.

Curt described career counseling as one of the reasons that he wanted to start working with a rehabilitation services in his junior year in high school. "I wanted MRS services as my tool to help me focus on what I wanted to get into for a career. I would say it helped me expand my view of what I wanted to do, basically what I needed to go down the right path for me. Basically in my senior year of high schools Jeanne, (special education teacher) started me in a School-To-Work Mentorship Program. I wanted to try working with computers. And looking at my goal Candy got me a computer so I could start working on it. Once I got in the position I liked the computers and I wanted to go on in a computer program (Curt, Interview, 1/2/02, p.2)."

The career counseling offered by the rehabilitation counselor was very important to Josh. The first semester of his senior year in Computer Engineering his course work became so difficult and he became so frustrated that he was not able to complete the semester. "I am afraid I would have given up on myself without the support of Wanda, my counselor at MRS. At the end of the semester I was just so frustrated. She was so encouraging...don't beat yourself up there are other options. At the end of the meeting I definitely felt there were options. It wasn't the end of the world. I will not have to work for \$5.00 an hour (Josh, Interview, 5/28/02, p. 9)." Wanda helped him find a full time job in operating camera and computerized surveillance for a major retail store so that he could regain his confidence and then maybe think about his next step in school.

The other students described similar experiences of how their counselor assisted them in figuring out their career interest. Erin described how she told Candy, her counselor that she always enjoyed an office setting because her father was a doctor. "So Candy got me in a summer internship paid through MRS in a doctor's office. I decided that I would like to try medical billing (Erin, Interview, 12/27/01, p.5)."

Again from the reports of these six students their rehabilitation counselor listened to their career interests or problems and then helped them figure out a way to explore their interests or solve their career frustrations and then provided the resources, if necessary.

The final stage of the rehabilitation counseling process is after completion of their postsecondary program what supports and services do students need to gain employment. What do they identify as most beneficial in securing a job? In this study of ten students with disabilities not all of them needed assistance from their counselor in finding a job after completing their postsecondary program. See Table 3 for a description of their employment. Some did need employment counseling during their job search. Others needed more specialized intensive services from a job developer. Tom, Nick, Curt, and Kathryn found full time jobs on their own in their career areas. As mentioned above Josh needed some direction from his counselor to find his full time job. Kim and Jeremy work in part time jobs, which they secured, while they are working on their next college degree. Chad, Ryan, and Erin needed specialized support from a job developer purchased by their counselor to gain employment in their career area.

B. Employment Counseling

Three of the students in the project described as important, the employment counseling they received from their counselor either while they were seeking employment or once they were working. Tom decided to relocate in Chicago. So he sought Candy's counseling on how to look for a job there. Candy told him that all states have a one-stop center for people seeking employment and he should go there and put his resume online. Another option is to use the want ads in the newspaper or the Internet. Tom did find a full time position in advertising utilizing his degree in graphic arts. Kathryn needed different employment counseling. "Candy gave me a lot of support through this job search. Should I tell them about my disability should I not? She gave me a lot of material that I could read to get to know ADA. She was willing to get a hotel person here that she knows very well that could give me some ideas about what they were wanting (Kathryn, Interview, 1/10/02, p.12.)."

According to Candy, Kathryn felt a great dilemma about revealing her medical condition to a potential employer. She knew according to the Americans with Disabilities Act she did not have to disclose her disability until after she was hired and only if it would affect her job performance. However, Kathryn felt a moral obligation to be honest with the employer during the interview process about how the stress of the job could potentially cause migraine headaches and a seizure. She decided to tell her potential employer in the second interview. He still offered her a full time contract as the event coordinator for his hotel and was very willing to accommodate her in any way.

Kim reported the need for employment counseling on her first job. Kim has mild cerebral palsy that especially affects the use of her hands. She was working part time at a movie theater and had to tear the tickets and clean up. After a time the job was causing her extreme physical pain. She went to see Candy, her counselor. "I didn't want to quit the job and yet it was causing me physical pain. Candy suggested I go to an occupational therapist and a physical therapist. The OT kind of talked with me on how I should make adaptations so work would be less painful ...and how I should take care of my body (Kim, Interview, 1/2/02, p.3)." According to Candy, Kim decided to quit the job rather than ask for adaptations. However, in subsequent years she has gotten much better at taking care of her body and in thinking about what type of work environment will be best for her. She is now working part time as a personal assistant for a

social worker with a severe case of muscular dystrophy, while she completing her four-year degree in Occupational Therapy.

Thus, employment counseling from the rehabilitation counselor was a very important support for these three students in securing employment. Although in each case it was different and necessitated that the counselor customize the support to address the client's needs.

C. Job Placement Services

Three of the students required specialize job placement services in order to secure employment after completing their degree or certificate program. In some instances this was due to the nature of their disability, limitations in their social skills, and difficulty in interviewing. In each case their rehabilitation counselor, Candy, purchased the services of a job developer to address their needs. In a follow-up interview with Candy on 1/6/03, she relayed the following stories concerning her efforts in assisting Chad, Erin, and Ryan find employment in their career area.

Chad's Story

Chad had a great deal of difficulty securing his first work experience due to his extreme social anxiety. After several unsuccessful attempts he secured an entry-level cashier's position on campus his junior year with the support of his rehabilitation counselor. The summer between his junior and senior year, Candy arranged an internship in the accounting department of the local chamber of commerce. In this instance Candy arranged for the agency to pay his wages because she felt strongly that he needed experience in his field in order to be marketable after graduation. Upon graduation Chad initiated his own job search through the college placement services with no success. Given his limited experience, social anxiety and his speech difficulties, Candy hired a job developer to assist Chad in his search. She met with Chad and the job developer several times. Candy facilitated the meetings and provided the job developer with the specific supports he would need. Chad followed up on leads for jobs provided by the developer; he met with little success. With Chad's permission the job developer made follow-up phone calls to the employers that had interviewed Chad. He discovered that Chad interviewed poorly and failed the pre-employment test because of his anxiety and his failure to ask for accommodations to address his illegible handwriting. The job developer assisted Chad in revising his resume, developing better interviewing skills, ongoing support on how to look for work, and coaching in asking for accommodations on employment tests. An accounting position was identified in a private non profit rehabilitation training agency. Candy funded a three- month on the job training service (OJT) due to the difficulties Chad has experienced in finding a job in his field. She asked the members of the accounting office to assist Chad in identifying his strengths in their office. Auditing was his area of strength and interest and the company has carved out a full time position for him. In his interview Chad said of his counselor, "When she works with an individual she really tries; she tries to give personnel attention. It's doesn't seem like a job to her, she really wants to help people. She really goes the extra mile to help someone the best she can (Chad, Interview, 12/27/01, p.12)."

Erin's Story

Erin earned a certificate in medical billing from a local business college. She had excellent skills and a strong work ethic but was very shy and lacked confidence. While she was completing her

training she worked as a cashier at a grocery store. One day a state worker came in under the guise of a shopper to purchase some alcohol to find out if the cashiers checked for identification for proof of age to purchase liquor. Erin in her shyness failed to ask for the identification and was reported. She was fired the next day. She was devastated. Based on this experience Candy believed that she would need a “boost of confidence” in finding employment in her career area. Erin’s mother phoned Candy to encourage her to do her best in helping her daughter find a job. According to Candy the mother told her daughter deserved an opportunity, she had worked hard to get her certificate in medical billing, it is her time for a positive experience. Candy arranged for a job developer to meet with her and Erin. She used the same strategy with the job developer that Erin’s mother used with her. “Erin has worked hard, she deserves a chance, its her time to get a good job. I am counting on you to help her find a job (Candy, Interview, 1/6/02, p.5).” Shortly thereafter Erin was hired full time in the medical billing office of a large local hospital. Erin expressed her thoughts, ”Candy set me up with a job assistant and without her help I would not be able to do this. My counselors showed me that someone else cared about me finding a job. It would be tough without MRS it gives people the extra hope that they can succeed (Erin, Interview, 12/27/01, p. 9).”

Ryan’s Story

Ryan had earned a certificate in computer support from a technical training school. However, he had a great deal of trouble finding and keeping a job in his career area. He had many different jobs through several different temporary employment agencies. In some instances he quit the job in frustration in other instances he was dismissed. With his permission Candy called several of his employers to find out their perspective as Ryan never seemed to know why things did not work out on the job for him. She learned that he had difficulty taking multiple instructions. He didn’t always seem to understand what he was supposed to do. He also exhibited some social awkwardness. She coached him on some strategies for understanding directions: write them down, ask to have them repeated. She paid for a learning styles assessment to find out more specifically what kind of setting would accommodate his worker style. He needed a job that was repetitive and had a limited number of options or solutions to any problem. She hired a job developer to work with him to find a job. He is now employed full time with Michigan Works, a one-stop employment center helping people access computers to submit their resume and search for employment. He works one on one and has the same set of supports that he offers each customer. Ryan said it best, “I would not have these certifications without rehabilitation services. They provided someone who had been teased a chance to prove myself and to other that I can do something (Ryan, Interview, 4/20/02, p.8).”

In sum, all three of these students needed very individualized support to secure employment in their career area. Obviously, this very tailored approach of their rehabilitation counselor made a difference in their ability to be employed. Based on the high unemployment rate of people with disabilities who have completed postsecondary training more of the supports that the students in this study identified as being essential need to be used by other counselors.

In a second interview Candy, as the veteran rehabilitation counselor with seven years experience in transition, and counselor to eight of the ten successful college students with disabilities was asked if she could share some guiding principals for other rehabilitation counselors serving youth customers. After some discussion and thought she provided the following guides:

Guiding Principles for Rehabilitation Counselors Transitioning Youth

- Take time to learn about and understand the social and emotional dimensions of your youth clients through collaboration with special education teachers, school transition meetings with family and counselor/client meetings.
- Respect the developmental process of youth clients and carefully determine the optimum time to present information.
- Re-asses the strengths and limitations of youth customer's throughout the transition process as they develop and mature.
- Customize the supports and services to the youth customer's needs.
- Inject a dose of humor throughout in your interactions with youth customers as it can serve to diminish the intensity and frustration inherent in the transition process.
- Positively affirm the client's abilities to achieve their goals, i.e., I'm in this with you, never give up.
- Normalize their job search by relating it to the present day economy, unemployment rate, and the demand for their skills.
- Hire the best professionals to provide services to youth clients rather than the least expensive or the traditional vendor.
- Continue to search for new supports and services to meet the unique needs of youth customers, in other words, Pull every rabbit out of the hat! (Candy, Interview, 1/6/03, p.8).

While the implementation of these guidelines are documented in the interviews of Candy's students in the study and supported by the other rehabilitation counselors, the questions remains whether these principles would be illuminated by other rehabilitation counselors in other parts of the country encompassing different cultures or are unique to these counselors in this study?

Summary

In summary, this study has identified two major themes on the role of the rehabilitation counselor in transitioning youth. One theme concerned the Amendment to the Rehabilitation Act of 1992 to serve youth customers and the practitioners' beliefs about the change. All four counselors believed that this change was beneficial in that they could begin working with clients at an earlier age and support positive work experiences, rather than have to rehabilitate clients who had a series of negative work experiences. A second theme related to their issues and concerns regarding the change in the Act. These counselors raised concerns about the evaluation of their performance as counselors serving youth being based on the number of their clients that secured permanent employment. In transitioning youth, a counselor can invest several years of services and supports before they are employed. A second issue was the expansion of their caseload with youth customers without any additional resources to serve them. Counselors are expected to serve adult clients and youth clients with the same amount of dollars or less. One counselor was especially concerned about the agency requirement to write a comprehensive education and employment plan for youth customers within 90 days or prior to graduation after

opening their case when she had limited interactions with them. Another major concern was the overlapping of services between agency and school and the issues that arise about which institution is responsible for particular services and who is responsible to fund them. Several questions arise from these themes and concerns. Do a majority of rehabilitation counselors in the field believe the Amendment to the Rehabilitation Act of 1992 is a strategic use of their resources? Should there be policy changes in the way rehabilitation counselors serving youth are evaluated? Should there be allowances for more time beyond 90 days or graduation to write a comprehensive education and employment plan for youth customers? Can the majority of rehabilitation counselors successfully serve youth and adult clients without additional resources? Are these concerns shared by counselors in other regions?

These four counselors identified four major responsibilities in serving youth customers. Their roles encompassed, connecting with educational professionals in the schools who are responsible for transitioning youth, serving as a resource to teachers and students, fostering students' self-determination and self-advocacy skills, and using their resources to overcome students' barriers to postsecondary education and employment. The identification of these responsibilities for rehabilitation counselors serving youth customers also raises major questions. If surveyed nationally would most rehabilitation counselors serving youth identify these same responsibilities? Do rehabilitation counselors across the country believe that supporting youth with disabilities in postsecondary education is part of their role? What other responsibilities might other counselors identify in their region? Do these responsibilities vary in serving youth with differing cultures? Are there gender differences in serving youth customers? These are questions that researchers and policy makers must consider as they try to identify best practices for rehabilitation counselors.

The ten students in this study identified three major types of support as critical to their success in postsecondary education and in securing employment. They included psychological supports of which the encouragement of the rehabilitation counselor at the beginning and of the semester was very motivating. In terms of academic supports funding for assistive technology as well as tuition and books were viewed as critical by 70% or more of the students. While linkages to college support services and specialized tutoring were very beneficial to 40% of the students. Employment supports was a third area identified by the students. Over half of the students reported that career counseling was significant. Thirty percent of the students identified specific employment counseling in specific areas and job placement services as extremely helpful in gaining employment in their career. Would other successful college students with disabilities identify these same supports as critical? Are there regional, cultural and gender differences in the types of supports that successful college students identify as most significant? Are these same supports critical for all disabilities regardless of severity? What implications does the identification of the critical supports identified by students in this project have for the training and ongoing professional development of rehabilitation counselors serving youth?

The intent of this study was to begin to document best practices in the role of the rehabilitation counselor in transitioning youth to postsecondary education and employment as well as illuminate questions for further study in the field. Hopefully this paper has fulfilled both of these intentions.

Implications

Implications for Policy

1. Policy makers need to examine the rules of measurement in determining the success of rehabilitation counselors serving youth customers. According to the counselors in this study they are predominantly evaluated on the number of clients that secure permanent employment. In the case of youth customers, counselors can spend five years or more supporting their success in mentorships, internships, in college etc. and receive credit for only one rehabilitation at the end of several years of intensive work. These traditional evaluative measures may serve as a disincentive for rehabilitation counselors to add youth customers to their caseload and work with them over several years allowing them to achieve more advanced training and better jobs.
2. Policymakers need to consider increasing the funds allocated for rehabilitation services in order for counselors to successfully serve both youth and adult clients.
3. Policymakers need to develop regional systems for the coordination of supports and services between educators, rehabilitation counselors, and college disabilities counselors to better serve youth with disabilities in the transition process.

Implications for Practice

1. This study has implications for universities involved in training pre-service special education teachers, transition specialists, special education administrators, and rehabilitation counselors. Consideration needs to be given for joint training to develop greater understanding of the roles of these professionals in the transition process and to foster the development of more collaborative relationships.
2. As more research is conducted in the area of the role of the rehabilitation counselor in transitioning youth, model programs of professional development for veteran counselors will need to be developed and studied.
3. Studies that investigate the successes of youth with disabilities in postsecondary education and employment need to be funded in order to gain a better understanding of the types of supports that are most critical to their success.

In the final analysis the voice of a successful college student with a disability captures the value of rehabilitation services transitioning youth: “Rehabilitation services make a huge difference because some people have the potential to go really far in their lives and they need advocates to get them through it. They need support to make it, to fulfill their dreams and make a difference in society and without services people with disabilities would not have the chance to make it as far as people do without challenges (Kim, Interview, 1/2/02, p.8).

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank all of the participants in this study for giving of their valuable time to complete this study.

The development of this paper was supported by cooperative agreement #H326J000005 in partnership with the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), and by grant #H133B980043 from the National Institute on Disability Research and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR), U.S. Department of Education and the National Science Foundation Award ID Number HRD 9906043.

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TABLE 2: PROFILE OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES COMPLETING POST SECONDARY EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

STUDENT	GENDER	DISABILITY	COMMUNITY TYPE	DEGREE OR CERTIFICATE	TIME TO COMPLETE	EMPLOYMENT
Tom	M	LD (Writing)	Suburban	BA Fine Arts	4 years	Full-Time Advertising Company
Chad	M	LD/ADD (Speech, Finemotor)	Suburban	BA Finance & Accounting	4.5 years	Full-Time Accounting Position
Nick	M	LD (Reading, Writing)	Rural	BA Business Admin / Accounting	4 years	Full-Time Assistant Manager Restaurant
Kathryn	F	T.B.I. (2nd-Year College)	Suburban	BA Business / Hospitality	6 years	Full-Time Hotel Events Coordinator
Curt	M	LD/VI (Writing)	Suburban	AD Management, AD Network / Microcomputer Support, Completing 4-year degree.	4 years	Full-Time Manager Technical Support
Kim	F	Mild Cerebral Palsy	Suburban	General AD. Transfer for 4-yr degree in Occupational Therapy	3 years	Full Time College Student Part Time Personal Assistant for Adult with disability
Erin	F	Mild Cerebral Palsy	Suburban	Certification Medical Billing	2 years	Full Time Medical Billing Clerk
Ryan	M	LD/ADD (Math)	Suburban	Certification PC Specialist A+ Certification	2 years	Full Time Technical Assistant
Jeremy	M	LD (Reading, Math)	Rural	Certificate Emergency Med. Tech. Working on Criminal Justice Degree	3 years	Full Time College Student Part Time Radio Shack
Josh	M	LD (Reading, Writing)	Urban	3 years Mathematics / Technology	3 years (In progress)	Part Time College Student Full Time Surveillance Security

TABLE 3: SUPPORTS AND SERVICES PROVIDED BY REHABILITATION COUNSELORS IDENTIFIED BY COLLEGE STUDENTS AS MOST SIGNIFICANT

