

## CHAPTER XI

# EDUCATIONAL CONCERNS FOR TRANSITION AGE YOUTH

*“You can learn new things at any time in your life if you’re willing to be a beginner. If you actually learn to like being a beginner, the whole world opens up to you.”*

— BARBARA SHER

## CHAPTER X

### EDUCATIONAL CONCERNS FOR TRANSITION AGE YOUTH

#### INTRODUCTION

“Individuals with psychiatric disabilities increasingly have recognized that education plays a critical role in enhancing their recovery and reintegration process. To assist them with reclaiming the valued role of ‘student’, the concept of *supported education* has come into being. Supported education for students with psychiatric disabilities can be defined as: *education in integrated settings for individuals with psychiatric disabilities for whom post secondary education has been interrupted or intermittent as a result of their disability, and who, because of their disability, need ongoing support services to be successful in the educational environment.*” (Adapted from the definition *Supported Employment, Rehabilitation Act Amendments, 1986; Unger, 1992.*

As the above quotation suggests, it is imperative that youth with psychiatric disabilities receive adequate supports to maximize their success as students. Transition Age Youth (TAY) frequently face disruption to their educational process brought on by the onset or exacerbation of a psychiatric disability. This can impair their ability to think, socialize, and learn in ways that can limit their ascension into adulthood. A major developmental milestone is successfully transitioning into a meaningful role in the community. When youth are left behind as their peers navigate through the educational transition, despair, isolation, and a sense of alienation begin to take hold. In place of hopes, dreams, and aspirations, a sense of futility and meaninglessness can emerge which can undermine the youth’s attempt to find a place in the community.

This chapter will cover the issues and recommended practices for secondary and post-secondary education.

#### SECONDARY EDUCATION TRANSITION PLANNING

There will always be students who experience symptoms of emotional or behavioral disorders, especially foster care students, who have not qualified for Special Education. These students face intense challenges in planning for college. Many of the entitlements and programs mentioned above may not be available to them as regular education students. These will be clients who may or may not be served by the Adult System of Care, yet, there is a high need for assistance to make this critical transition into a college setting to keep their natural developmental process unfolding. This planning for college should begin well before age 18. Whatever assistance case managers can give this group by referring them to their local community college for a free appointment with an academic counselor for the assessment process will be most beneficial. Another avenue might be to obtain a release to confer with the high school counselor to determine if an application to a state college or university is feasible.

Transitional age youth will benefit from educational opportunities which will help them to reach a successful adult life. Often the TAY can come from a background of involvement in Special Education while in grammar or high school. Both the State (Government Code Chapter 26.5) and the Federal Government (Individual with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA) have strong mandates that govern Special Education Programs. For youth in the Mental Health System, the qualifying disability will be an emotional disability. Education provides a structured setting for

youth as they progress toward independence and creates an excellent opportunity to generate Transition Age Plans.

IDEA requires that the planning for each student's needs happen at the individual education plan (IEP) meeting. The IEP Team is the school team assisting the student, which includes the parent of the student with the disability, and it is expected that this team will develop a plan that will allow the student to take advantage of his/her educational opportunity in spite of the handicapping condition. Once both the parent and the school sign the plan, the plan becomes binding and potentially can result in legal action if ignored. When the system is working well, it can assist the TAY obtain services or concessions that are critical to graduation.

IDEA also requires that the IEP address the individual's transition needs. A Transition Plan may be included in the student's IEP when he/she reaches the age of 14 years. An Individual Transition Plan (ITP) must be developed by age 16, at the latest. The ITP coordinates vocational activities, independent living skills, and other resources to meet the youth's educational needs. The ITP may address areas for both home and school. Once the student successfully graduates from high school, special education comes to an end. A student can focus on the goal of a high school education until age 22 and still be in Special Education.

“There are many positive outcomes for providing supported education services to people with psychiatric disabilities. A major one is that Mental Health Consumers become college students. The role of college student in our society is highly valued. The role of Mental Health consumer is much devalued. With this change in role and identity, students realize they are not their illness, but a functioning, productive member of the community. Symptoms become something to be taken care of so goals can be accomplished. Although attending college can increase stress, the stress can be managed with support and a symptom management plan.”

## **POST-SECONDARY TRANSITION PLANNING AND STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS**

Effective supported education approaches are rooted in common principles of recovery and rehabilitation and have been carefully documented in a variety of program approaches. Community integration is a major program goal and helps to provide meaning and direction for the educational experience. Various service approaches include both on- and off-campus support strategies and tend to focus on three key areas: *access, retention, and educational outcomes*. Practical experience and research has established that these three domains represent the service context to be considered when constructing a supported education program. This chapter will carefully detail the essential service elements of these three domains and will offer a practical approach to assisting the transition-age youth in completing their educational endeavors successfully.

### **ACCESS**

It is easy to imagine that the young adult who pictures himself or herself in a community college environment can easily make this become a reality. There are numerous ways to gain entry to a community college. With the advent of the Internet, most colleges have online registration that

makes it easy to find out about course offerings and enroll. Prospective students can obtain information about major programs and course offerings by physically going to the college and picking up a course schedule and catalogue of major programs. All California community colleges have counseling faculty that can provide academic advising and support to assist students in navigating the maze of the college environment. However, even with a number of access options available, the TAY very often has significant difficulty enrolling in classes.

For students with disabilities, specialized counseling and support services exist in the form of “Disability Program and Services” (DSPS) which offer an array of highly individualized services pertaining to the specific accommodation needs of each student. There is growing evidence that the DSPS service at each college is a pivotal resource in determining the academic success for students with disabilities. In fact, many successful Supported Education programs have established the DSPS resource as the “first point of contact” when assisting individuals with psychiatric disabilities to get started with their college careers.

In addition to California Community Colleges, TAY are often interested in academic or vocational programs offered through a variety of Adult Education settings. An example of such a program can be found in the Regional Occupation Programs which provide training for a variety of occupations. Examples include fork lift operation, electronics assembly, and refrigeration/cooling to name a few. Other training options can be found at the One-Stop career centers and trade guilds. TAY are often referred by their Department of Rehabilitation counselors as part of their Individual Plan for Employment (IPE).

When discussing access, it is also important to be clear that access not only relates to acquiring needed services, course enrollment information, and other critical resources at the educational institution, but it pertains to off-campus resources as well. Examples of such resources are mental health services, Department of Rehabilitation Services, housing services, medical services, etc. Many students may be able to locate these services without assistance, but some may require the help of a case manager to identify and secure the needed resource. TAY are often best helped by a “wraparound” service approach where a case manager knowledgeable in all key domains can help facilitate this process. Listed below are focus areas to consider when addressing access concerns:

- **Recruitment** – Engaging youth in the community and at the educational institution to provide information about courses, services, and available assistance. Recruitment can also include outreach to high school guidance counselors with attention to targeting at-risk youth.
- **Orientation** – Providing hands-on information to introduce prospective students to available support and college programs.
- **Identified Contact Person** – This pertains to the assignment of responsibility for ongoing on- and off-campus support needs.
- **Walk-Throughs, Maps, Bus Routes** – Typically this information is provided as part of the orientation and may include actual transportation training. Often transportation costs are covered by the IPE funded by DOR.
- **Assistance with Registration** – The assigned case manager should assist with this if necessary. Once a student registers for the first time, they may become more comfortable with the process and can handle this on their own.
- **Assistance with Financial Aid Forms** – The case manager may need to assist the youth with this process. College personnel in the DSPS program may also be able to help.

These are but a few of the areas to consider when assisting TAY to access the community college and other educational settings. It cannot be overstated that the circles of support, which make it possible for recovery in the community, also need to extend to include the resources in the educational setting itself. In essence, the college becomes part of the community experience for the TAY and this helps to make the hard work of recovery operational for the TAY. Once the TAY has successfully made the connection to the educational setting, the work of staying connected and becoming a student begins.

## **RETENTION**

As mentioned above, the transition from non-student to student can be an exciting expression of recovery for TAY. A sense of hope and promise begins to replace thoughts of doubt and feelings of despair. The whole educational experience brings TAY into contact with people of all ages and backgrounds and helps to shake loose the shackles of an identity steeped in disability, and in its place a new student identity emerges. At the same time, TAY will often experience increased anxiety resulting from new demands and stressors. There exists a certain level of risk of relapse for TAY as they venture forth on their path of academic pursuit. A solid, immediately accessible plan that identifies and makes available any necessary supports or services can help to mitigate this risk. Often in mental health recovery, TAY develops “Wellness Recovery Action Plans.”(WRAP) (Copeland). These plans identify crucial persons, services, and supports that are essential to help stabilize a burgeoning mental health crisis. These plans have been utilized by a number of individuals with psychiatric disabilities with great success. Many TAY have incorporated the services and supports available at the educational setting into their WRAP plans as well as the services and supports they have identified from other areas of their lives. The list below outlines the **Retention** oriented services that are important for the TAY to remain engaged with their educational program:

- **Identified On-Site Support Staff** –This is made clear during the initial contact and made part of the plan for ongoing support. Often a regular schedule of meetings is arranged with this person or support team. Assessment of learning needs and accommodations should be addressed early as TAY begins their educational experiences. Attention to previously identified learning obstacles, outlined in Individual Education Plans (IEPs) must be reviewed and attended to when developing the educational plan.
- **Transitional Classes** – These are classes designed to assist with the adjustment to the rigors of the educational setting. Time management, use of supports, and study skills are typical areas covered in such classes.
- **Counseling With Someone Who Cares** – This pertains to the identification of a point of contact that can provide the appropriate support. This must be made clear *before* a crisis occurs.
- **Peer Counseling** – More and more, programs are utilizing peer counselors to provide ongoing contact and support to help with the stresses and strains of college life. These counselors are being trained in the emerging Human Service Certificate programs that many California Community Colleges are now offering.
- **Priority Registration** – Prior to the beginning of the semester, community colleges offer pre-registration for those students that have special needs. Both college and support staff can assist TAY to take advantage of this opportunity.
- **Book Funds** – Community organizations such as the Alliance for the Mentally Ill and mental health programs may offer book purchasing support. This can help TAY to get started with school while either working on getting financial aid, or getting started with DOR, where their book needs would be covered by their IPE.

- **Tutoring** – The need for academic tutoring needs to be identified as soon as TAY begins their classes.
- **Monitoring** – Case management should focus on the student’s progress and continually review support needs. It may be necessary to provide additional or different supports to meet the student’s needs.
- **Crisis Intervention** – A solid resource for handling a mental health crisis needs to be readily accessible. On occasion, support staff can help the TAY to petition for an accommodation from an instructor in order to resolve the crisis and return to class. An example of a typical accommodation might be an extension of a deadline for turning in an assignment.
- **Social Activities** – On- and off-campus recreational and social outlets are an integral part of the educational experience. TAY needs to review this aspect of their recovery and plan according to their interests.
- **Mentor Programs** – This pertains to setting up a formal structure for utilizing peer counselors who have experience in educational settings in assisting TAY in handling the stresses and strains of going to school. Some successful programs have utilized mentors such as this in helping to teach Transition classes.
- **Safe Place to Meet** – What is meant by this is identifying a place either on or off campus where TAY students can meet to share experiences, or give or receive support without feeling exposed or uncomfortable.
- **Study Labs** – Study labs are the places on campus where reliable help is available to address any ongoing or emergent learning support need. Many schools have learning centers that offer support for computer skills and other assistance.
- **Faculty In-Service Training** – Successful programs have gone to great lengths to provide ongoing consultation and classroom training for college faculty. The goal for this activity is to help promote a campus-wide culture of sensitivity and tolerance for students with disabilities. Some programs have sponsored consumer discussion forums held in high student traffic areas in order to provide information and engage the campus community in dialogue about stigma and other issues.

It is easy to see from this list that there is a need for partnerships between various agencies and services that become part of the circle of support for TAY. These partnerships ensure seamless service delivery and support that helps reduce any delay in response. Another benefit of partnerships between agencies is the creative use of resources in times of financial challenge. An example is the utilization of peer counseling in DSPS services to help extend the reach of professional counseling staff. In many colleges in California, these peer counselors are being trained and placed by Human Services programs, which have been developed in response to the growing need for indigenous or lay helpers. (College of San Mateo, Solano Community College, Riverside Community College, and Merritt College, are a few colleges with this type of program).

## EDUCATION OUTCOMES

One of the most critical partnerships for both retention and further progress into the world of work is the collaboration between the community colleges and the State Department of Rehabilitation. This partnership is critical for the support and funding of the academic pursuits of TAY. Thriving supported education programs also involve local county mental health programs in a three-way partnership that provides a potent alliance for the support of TAY. Many successful program initiatives have developed Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) between county mental health programs and their local community college (e.g., Solano county mental

health and Solano College). These MOUs define and describe the overall working relationship between the community college and mental health staff. These MOUs are often referenced and supported by more formal cooperative contracts that exist between county mental health programs and DOR. These cooperative programs are the engines that can drive the educational program for the TAY and are directly tied to the long-term matriculation of the TAY into the work world. Listed below are items that pertain to **Outcomes** and represent the third domain of focus for successful supported education programs:

- **Service Coordination & Plan Coordination** – Services and supports need to be provided in a planned and purposeful manner. Examples may include Individualized Plans for Employment (IPE) developed with DOR, Service Planning with Mental Health, the “WRAP” plan as described elsewhere in this document, etc.
- **Comprehensive & Coordinated Career Assessment** – This includes the assessment process that TAY goes through with the assistance of the DOR counselor in setting up the IPE. Career counseling and assessment can also be provided through the career center at the college itself.
- **Skilled Academic Counseling** – The focus of this service is to review the catalogue requirements for a particular degree/certificate program to ensure appropriate course enrollment and certificate/degree completion.
- **Assistance With Degree & Certificate Applications** – Effective monitoring as described above will ensure that a schedule of important dates and deadlines are kept in relation to filing the necessary application materials for graduation or program completion.
- **Assistance With Transfer Applications** – This is again a function of ongoing monitoring that is related to the student’s goal of transferring to another educational program if desired. An example of this is a TAY transferring from a 2-year community college program to a 4-year program.
- **Liaison With Transfer & Employment Sites** – The focus here is linking the TAY to the employment service resource for job search and acquisition. One example is a TAY being referred by their DOR counselor to an approved DOR employment service vendor for placement services as specified in the IPE.
- **Assistance With Financial Aid** – This is a support that is both an access issue and a transfer issue, as many TAY move from the community college to the university.
- **Benefits Analysis And Counseling** – Many TAY rely on some form of Social Security Administration (SSA) benefits while they make their way to employment. Counseling support in this area is essential to help TAY students make the transition from student to worker.
- **Ongoing Monitoring And Coaching** – Once TAY finish the educational portion of their plan for employment, it is crucial that their plan include an identified resource for ongoing support and assistance.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- There is NOT one “right model” of service delivery. Successful programs operate in many different ways.
- Successful Supported Education programs rely on clearly defined agreements that reflect the various roles and responsibilities of participating staff.
- Quality oversight is shared by all partners and constant program review and revision is the norm.
- Resource sharing is pivotal in building the continuum of support for TAY who are pursuing educational goals.