

## Increasing Inclusion of Students with Complex Needs in Post-Secondary Education

**Jeffery L. Hart, Ph.D.**, *Western Washington University*, Washington, United States,  
hartj9@wwu.edu

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# Increasing Inclusion of Students with Complex Needs in Post-Secondary Education

**Jeffery L. Hart, PhD**

*Western Washington University, Washington, United States*

**Abstract:** Students with complex needs—intellectual and developmental disabilities—are often marginalized in post-secondary education settings. We present our three phase plan approach to inclusion for a college setting at the Western Washington University. We outline the process used to develop an inclusive program offering students with complex needs opportunities to experience campus life and to become a student at the institution.

**Keywords:** Post-secondary Education; Complex Needs; Inclusion

**Knowledge Focus:** Advocacy/Activism Focus

**Topic Area:** Inclusion; Post-Secondary Education

## **Introduction**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 2004 (IDEA) provides services and supports for students with disabilities in order to provide an educational experience that affords them an optimal chance for success in all of life's endeavors. By the age of 16 all students being served through IDEA receive transition services. That is, they are provided supports intended to help them transition out of the education system and into society and adulthood. A transition plan provides the basic structure for preparing the student to live, work, and play in the community as independently as possible (USDOE, 2017). Each child's transition plan is unique to the individual and their needs. Some common elements of transition plans include training on integrated employment and career development, independent living skills, self-determination, community and social participation, and recreation and leisure (Westling & Fox, 2004). One element that is often underutilized is a pursuit of postsecondary education and lifelong learning.

For students with complex needs who do not graduate with their peers around 18 years of age, these supports are provided through a student's 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday. Often these services are coordinated in the high school setting. That is, when their peers graduate and leave the high school for college or other life endeavors, these students remain on the high school campus for nearly 4 more years. These transitions students continue to eat lunch in the cafeteria with students as young as 14, and with whom they have no connection or do not consider a peer. They continue to receive support from the school district that is designed to work with younger students. They continue to struggle with the shift from teenager to adult. All this while their same age peers are living in dorms and experiencing college life.

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While they may have unique issues that necessitate additional supports, they yearn to fit in and to grow up and have experiences like their same aged peers. They want to experience life as college students and not as high school students. Providing students with complex needs the opportunity to experience college life has the ability to impact them in meaningful ways (Butler, Sheppard-Jones, Whaley, Harrison, & Osness, 2016; Grigal, Hart, & Weir, 2012). Recently, a student in the Community Transitions program at Bellingham High School lamented that she was still at the high school while her friends were at Western Washington. She continued that it made her feel less like an adult and was creating a divide in her relationships. Creating an inclusive environment for these students has the added benefit of increasing awareness, understanding and acceptance of this marginalized population in a campus setting.

### **Overarching Goal**

With the intent of creating a more inclusive environment a collaboration with the Bellingham School District and the Department of Special Education at Western Washington University (WWU) has been formed. This is a reciprocal relationship that will support growth of all involved, increasing social interaction, awareness, and acceptance (Beyer, Brown, Akandi, & Rapley, 2010; Björnsdóttir, 2017; Jones, Harrison, Harp, & Sheppard-Jones, 2016; Stefánsdóttir & Björnsdóttir, 2016). This collaboration is intended to foster a perceptual shift in perspective about the abilities of individuals with complex needs, particularly in a university community through the inclusion of individuals who might otherwise not have the opportunity to experience this environment. The collaboration has one main overarching goal:

*To the greatest extent possible, create opportunities for the inclusion of students with complex needs into the university community.*

The skills being taught at the Community Transition (CT) program are not aligned with the curriculum of the high school and there is no reason the content must be taught in that setting. In fact, there are many benefits to teaching these skills in a variety of settings including the improved perceptions and inclusion of a marginalized population (Jones et al., 2016; Westling & Fox, 2004).

We have developed a three phase plan that progressively increases the inclusion of these students into the WWU community.

### **Phase 1- Get the Students on Campus**

Phase 1 is simply getting the transition students on campus. Pre-service teacher preparation students in an upper division course (SPED 478) and I visited the CT program at the local high school where they are housed. This was intended to help establish rapport and foster a mentoring program. After our visit the transition students then visited our classroom on campus. During these two visits questions were asked by both the transition students and the SPED 478 students. In this initial we developed the peer mentor program that allowed CT students the

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opportunity to work on transition skills with a same age peer in a college setting. The pre-service teachers in SPED 478 gained experience in working on transition skills. Additional visits during this phase helped them become familiar with the campus and eating in the dining hall. CT students were introduced to the assistive technology center housed within the college where we began planning space and time for CT students to regularly work on transition skills on campus.

### **Phase 2- Provide Courses on Campus**

A Memorandum of Agreement (MOU) between the university and the local school district was negotiated to allow CT students college credit for instruction in their transition skills. CT students are non-matriculated students, but with a student identification card. The student identification card comes with most of the privileges afforded to matriculated students. The student identification card is only limited in allowing access to the student recreation center as this is cost prohibitive. For \$10 per student per quarter they are able to access and use the library, email services, other checkout services such as video and media equipment, community public transit, clubs, campus activities, and student association events.

Per IDEA, the student fees are covered by district and federal funds. A repeatable SPED 097 course provides for up to 6 quarters of instruction in transition skills in a campus setting. The university provides space for instruction in the Ershig Assistive Technology Resource Center housed within the Woodring College of Education. The school district agreed to have CT teachers teach these courses each quarter. In association with the increase in campus exposure, CT students have been paired with a peer mentor from SPED 478 to support campus life/transition skills instruction. This includes introducing CT students to student clubs, creating a student club for CT students and supporters, attending athletic events, attending music events, using the library, or other campus services.

CT students upon enrolling in SPED 097 are no longer considered CT students but Western students enrolled in SPED 097 and referred to as such. Scheduling of SPED 097 and 478 are aligned so they both meet on the same days and times. This provides a dedicated time where mentor and mentee can meet and work on skills together. The content of SPED 478 is flipped so that course instruction from the instructor of record is delivered online, providing dedicated time for mentor activities. Additional activities outside this time are encouraged and promoted.

This phase has been in effect for 6 quarters. Student feedback has been collected for all six quarters showing positive feedback and improved perceptions of college life for all participants in both courses.

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### Phase 3- Create a Certificate Program and Access to All Aspects of Student Life

This is a long term goal of creating a certificate program that would include full access to the course catalog and student life, including dorm living. Students with complex needs would go through an admissions process and be accepted into a certificated program of study, allowing them to receive their transition skills through dedicated coursework while having the opportunity to take (or audit) 1 or 2 courses per quarter. They would have program completion and a certificate to accompany that completion. There are federal grants, and state funds that can support this phase such as the Higher Education Opportunity Act (2008).

#### Author



**Jeffery L. Hart, PhD:** My research examines the importance of providing students with complex needs the opportunity to attend post-secondary education (PSE). This includes the benefits of attending PSE and improvements in life outcomes. Additionally, I conduct research in identifying key variables associated with exercise and classroom performance.

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