Exploring Expressions of Possible Selves with High School and College Students with Learning Disabilities

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Abstract

In this article, we explore a program designed to engage high school and college students with learning disabilities (LD) in conversations about their hopes, expectations, and fears for the future. We explore the mindset of students by focusing on their self-identified passions for life and sense of strengths and limitations. We found that males and females differed in goals related to *Academics, Work Ethic, Degree Specific Statements,* and *Money and Finances.* For example, females emphasized "Academic Goals" more frequently than males and focused on topics such as GPA and work ethic in school. However, males made more "Degree Specific Statements" than females, more often emphasizing the desire to be financially stable or have a career with a large income. These differences suggest that college transition staff may want to focus on goals identified by male and female students with LD as a way to be more responsive to student self-identified goals.

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Explorando Expresiones de Posibles Yoes con Estudiantes de Secundaria y Universitarios con Discapacidades de Aprendizaje

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Resumen

En este artículo, exploramos un programa diseñado para involucrar a estudiantes de secundaria y universitarios con discapacidades de aprendizaje (LD) en conversaciones sobre sus esperanzas, expectativas y temores para el futuro. Exploramos la mentalidad de los estudiantes enfocándonos en sus pasiones por la vida autoidenfificadas y en el sentido de fortalezas y limitaciones. Encontramos que los hombres y las mujeres diferían en las metas relacionadas con lo académico, la ética del trabajo, las declaraciones de títulos específicos y el dinero y las finanzas. Por ejemplo, las mujeres enfatizaron las "metas académicas" con más frecuencia que los hombres y se enfocaron en temas como el GAP y la ética laboral en la escuela. Sin embargo, los hombres hicieron más "declaraciones de grado especifico" que las mujeres, enfatizando más a menudo el deseo de ser financieramente estable o tener una carrera con grandes ingresos. Estas diferencias sugieren que el personal de transición universitaria puede querer enfocarse en las metas identificadas por los estudiantes masculinos y femeninos con DA como una forma de responder mejor a las metas identificadas por los estudiantes.

Palabras clave: posibles yoes, elestablecimiento de metas, estudiantes universitarios con discapacidades de aprendizaje.

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I have been fortunate to be able to avoid virtually everything that I have no potential for being good at or I am not interested in. More important, I have been fortunate to have had the space to explore my passions and experiment with different undertakings to discover my weaknesses and strengths. Most people are not born knowing what they are interested in and can be good at. They can only find out through experiences. (Zhao, 2018, p. 6)

In this article, we explore a program designed to engage high school and college students with learning disabilities (LD) in conversations about their hopes, expectations, and fears for the future. Recognizing that the transition from high school to post-secondary education can be a challenging experience for many students, we explore the mindset of high school seniors and college freshmen by focusing on their self-identified passions for life and sense of strengths and limitations. We agree with Zhao that every student can be great at what they are good at and passionate about. Helping students find that passion is important for educators. Helping students understand that greatness can take many shapes and forms is even more important.

Postsecondary Transition

The number of students with identified disabilities attending postsecondary education is increasing, and students with LD comprise one of the largest categories of students with disabilities in both the K12 (Snyder & Dillow, 2013) and university settings (Raue & Lewis, 2011). Despite access to accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Amendments Act, this growing population continues to have different and discouraging patterns of college attendance and completion than their peers without disabilities (Newman et al., 2011). Additionally, a number of students have learning characteristics similar to students with LD, but do not have the necessary documentation of a disability to receive much-needed supports. All of these students begin their college experience with a variety of expectations, previous educational experiences, and neurodevelopmental strengths and limitations. However, the transition for high school students to a post-secondary setting can be especially difficult for those who struggle with learning in general and planning and goal setting in particular. Often, students

with LD are among those who have deficits in these areas (Shogren et al., 2017).

For many students with LD, the transition from high school to college marks a time when demands for self-determination, self-advocacy, and self-regulation increase exponentially from what has often been a very structured home/school environment (Hoyle & Sherrill, 2006). Students living on a college campus find themselves away from their previous environments and faced with the opportunity and challenge to build new support structures. While some students with LD transition to college smoothly, develop support systems or strategies as necessary, and thrive in the university setting, others have difficulty finding academic success and as a result do not make steady progress toward graduation (Newman et al., 2011).

Post-high school goals have been shown to correlate with a student's secondary education program of study and services received (Daviso et al., 2011). Thus, educational professionals in K12 and postsecondary settings may want to help students and their families set goals, develop action plans, and prepare for the academic and nonacademic challenges of the postsecondary setting (Ankeny et al., 2009; Skinner & Lindstrom, 2003). Providing effective postsecondary education transition supports for any group of students requires an understanding of the students' high school experiences and their expectations for their first year of college (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2007). For students with LD, support involves more than assistance with preparation for a vocation (Repetto, 2003) or academic considerations (Morningstar et al., 2015). Students with an inconsistent academic track record may have limited confidence to bring to college-related decision-making opportunities such as selecting a major, envisioning a career, and choosing extra-curricular priorities (Klassen, 2010; Klassen et al., 2008; Lackaye & Margalit, 2008).

This article describes the self-reported possible selves of high school seniors and first-year college students through participation in an instructional program called Possible Selves (PS; Hock et al., 2003). PS is designed to nurture academic motivation in students by having them think about what is possible in the future. During this program, students reflect upon and share their hopes, expectations, and fears for the future, followed by engagement in activities that help clearly define their goals as persons, learners, and future workers. Allowing students to contemplate their future possible selves and

identify specific goals is critical for students to reach post-secondary goals (Hock et al., 2006). Additionally, when college mentors and faculty know a student's hopes, expectations, and fears for the future, they may be better able to provide personalized support to students as they transition to postsecondary education.

Description of Possible Selves

Possible selves are defined as "the representations of individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming" (Dunkel, 2000, p. 520). The concept of "possible selves" was first introduced by pioneering American psychologist William James in 1897. Hazel Markus used the term possible selves in relation to motivation, defining possible selves as "ideas about what one might become in the future" (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Ideas about one's self in the future can be very motivating. Youth with clear ideas and goals about what they want to be often seem willing to put forth the effort needed to attain these personal goals., Markus reported that some people will work just as hard to avoid the possible selves they fear. For example, students who have thought about living on little money to support a family may be more likely to work hard in school to avoid that future than students who have not considered such an outcome. In either case, the concept of possible selves, when put into practice, can increase motivation to work hard to attain specific and personal goals (Leondari et al., 1998; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman & Markus, 1990). Some researchers extended the possible selves concept as a visual metaphor—a Possible Selves Tree that bears the fruit of hopes and dreams (Borkowski et al., 1992; Day et al., 1994; Estrada, 1990). In the PS program used in this project (Hock et al., 2003), students create Possible Selves Trees as reflections of themselves as learners and as unique individuals whose qualities and fears are depicted as roots and branches. From this visual depiction, students can identify future hopes and related goals that they desire and believe they can attain. In this way, students make the connection between becoming proficient learners and achieving personal goals.

Possible Selves Program Components

The PS program is typically implemented in late adolescence, the time in which identity development is a critical developmental task. As suggested by Cross and Markus (1991), students in late adolescence generate more positive possible selves than other age groups. In the PS program, all lessons are specifically designed to (a) help students define success, (b) help students define who they are, (c) guide students to determine who they want to become, (d) support students to reflect on their goals, (e) help students develop action plans for attaining their goals, and (f) monitor students' action plans and aid in revising them. There are six program components, each with detailed lessons for teachers. An instructional manual (Hock et al., 2003) contains all lessons, detailed activities that support the lessons, and sample student products. All PS components are taught by explicit instruction. That is, teachers explain and provide rationales for each skill, model the skill or activity, and guide students through each activity. Finally, teachers monitor student progress toward goal attainment.

The first component, *Discovering*, helps the student answer the question, "What are my strengths and interests?" During this phase, teachers engage students in activities designed to help them identify areas in which they have interest and skills and feel good about themselves. The goal is to find an area in which each student has positive experiences and is willing to share those experiences. By finding an area about which the student feels positive, the "pump is primed," and the student becomes more willing to share information related to areas about which they may not feel as positive (e.g., learning). *Thinking,* the second program component, is designed to support the student in answering the question, "Who am I?" Here, the student completes a structured but open-ended interview with the teacher, individually or in a group. In the interview, students are asked to identify words or phrases that describe them in targeted areas (as a learner, person, and in a potential postsecondary career area). They are also asked to define their hopes, expectations, and fears for the future in each area. An outline of the current self and possibilities for the future is developed within each area. Once students complete the interview, the third component, *Sketching,* is introduced. This component supports the student to answer the question, "What am I like and what are my possible selves?" During this activity, the student draws a Possible Selves Tree (see Figure 1). The teacher guides

students by stating, "You've listed a lot of important information about yourself. From that information, you're going to create a Possible Selves Tree. The tree will have limbs that represent you as a learner, person, and worker. It will have branches that represent your hoped-for and expected possible selves in those areas. You will represent your feared possible selves with dangerous conditions for your tree (e.g., lightning, termites, poison in the soil). You'll use the exact words you recorded in the interview to add branches and roots to the tree and the dangers around it." After completing their trees, the teacher asks students to evaluate their trees to ensure they really represent the ideas they shared in their interviews.

Figure 1
Example Possible Selves Tree
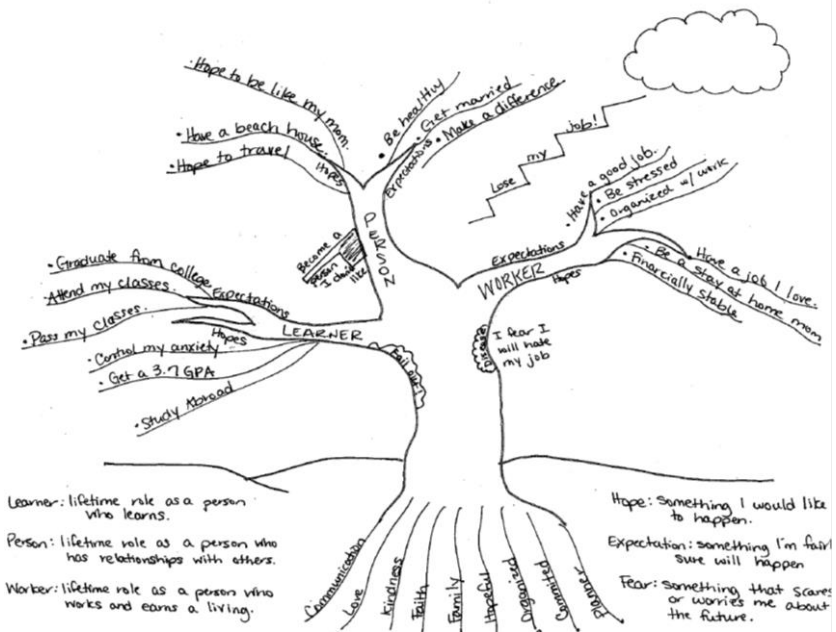
The fourth component of the program, *Reflecting*, helps students answer the question, "What can I be?" It provides an opportunity for the student to evaluate the condition of their tree and prioritize and set goals for the future.

The fifth component, *Growing,* helps the student answer the question "How do I get there?" It is utilized to get the student to start thinking about specific ways to nurture and "grow" their tree and attain identified goals. If, for example, a student identified a career hope of owning a retail business, the student and teacher can identify short- and long-term goals necessary to attain this possible self and develop a plan to reach these goals. In addition, students may discover that these same goals help them avoid the "feared selves" that have been identified (e.g., no job, no money, no friends). In short, during the GROWING activities, a well-developed Action Plan is constructed by the student and teacher, providing a pathway to support the attainment of long-term transition goals and hopes for the future. The sixth and final component is *Performing*. It helps students answer the question, "How am I doing?" During this phase, the Possible Selves Tree, the goals established to nurture the tree, and the action plans are revisited regularly. Task completion is reviewed, goals and action plans are modified, goal attainment is celebrated, new goals are added, and hopes, expectations, and fears are continually examined.

Research to Support Possible Selves
A longitudinal study (Packard & Nguyen, 2003) investigated whether and how 41 high school girls perceived themselves as future scientists after exposing them to summer science programs. Results showed the positive impact of these activities on transition outcomes, with participants maintaining their science career aspirations over time. Pizzolato (2007) found that students who have highly elaborative possible selves are more likely to set higher career goals and put actions in place to achieve them, leading to better transition outcomes. Oyserman and Fryberg (2006) found that possible selves predicted more positive performance on academic goals, improved grades, and more positive transition plans. For example, in a meta-analysis of possible selves' studies, Oyserman et al. (2006) and Oyserman & Destin (2010) found a range of effects from g = .25 to .36 on standardized academic tests.

Additional information on the impact of a possible selves program has accrued from studies with middle school and university-level students with LD or ADHD or who were not well prepared for the academic demands of school or college. One study involved 52 middle school students, including

students with disabilities, who attended an urban school serving a diverse population. Students in the experimental group (*n*=31) participated in the PS program throughout the fall semester during two class sessions a week for 12 weeks. Students in the comparison group received the traditional career orientation curriculum. Results showed that students who participated in the PS program identified significantly more roles they hoped to play in the future than those in the comparison group. Additionally, these students identified significantly more goals in academic and personal domains. The difference in specificity of goal statements was also significant. Finally, the experimental group teacher and students were highly satisfied with the program. Some students reported using the goal and action plan information they learned during IEP and transition conferences held at the school (Hock et al., 2006).

In another study, 60 university students were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. For the control condition, 20 students received tutorial support from trained tutors and academic advising from counselors. In the career-counseling condition, 20 students received the same tutoring and counseling services as the control group plus six to eight hours of career-counseling activities throughout a semester provided by staff at the university's Counseling and Psychological Services. The 20 students in the PS condition received the same tutoring and counseling services as the control group and participated in the PS program consisting of the Thinking, Sketching, and Reflecting components. Students received the PS program in one-to-one interactions with a counselor. The results showed that, at the end of the first semester freshman year, students in the PS group scored significantly higher than students in the control group on measures of goal identification; that is, they identified more goals as possible in life. The number of goals identified by students in the other conditions actually declined over the course of the first semester, while the PS group increased slightly or were maintained. Also, at the end of six years, the PS students had earned higher GPAs than students in the other groups. Moreover, 75% of the PS group had graduated from the university, compared to 45% of the control group and 60% of the career-counseling group (Hock et al., 2006).

The original PS program was revised after the study described above and additional components were added. The new components included developing elaborate goal-directed action plans (GROWING) and periodic monitoring and feedback on the completion of tasks and action plan goals

(PERFORMING). Researchers randomly assigned 32 freshmen student athletes, matched for ACT scores, sport, gender, and high school GPA, to either a comparison or experimental group. Education graduate students were recruited and taught how to guide the athletes through the PS program. Two peer mentors were assigned to each group of four to six athletes in the experimental group. Each group met for one hour a week for 12 weeks during the fall semester. The peer mentors taught the PS lessons during that time. The control students met individually with sport counselors during the same timeframe and for the same number of hours. Students in the PS program significantly outperformed the control group on measures of role identification and goal setting in the areas of academics and personal life. Additionally, they identified more goals for themselves as learners and persons, and the goals they identified were more specific than those identified by the comparison group. Finally, retention of students at the university was greater for the PS group than for the comparison group. After six years, 75% of students in the PS group were on track to graduate or had graduated, and 56% of students in the comparison condition were on track to graduate or had graduated (Hock, 2005). Missing from these studies is information describing the specific hopes and expectations of high school and first-year college students with LD. Additionally, similar information describing the hopes and expectations of female students with LD is, to our knowledge, not available. The current study addresses this need.

Method

This project represents the first in a series of studies to learn how to best support self-regulated goal setting, progress monitoring, problem solving and follow-through activities for students with LD transitioning from high school to college. The project seeks to answer the foundational question, How do high school and university students with LD describe their future possible selves and are there different patterns of comments among subgroups of students in their descriptions?

Research Questions
1. How do high school and college students with learning disabilities describe their future possible selves as workers, persons, and learners?

2. What do high school and college students with learning disabilities consider to be their strengths as workers, persons, and learners?
3. Are there differences based on gender in the type and number of worker, person, and learner goals identified by students with learning disabilities?
4. Are there differences in how high school and college students with learning disabilities describe their future possible selves as workers, persons, and learners?

Measure: Mission Statement

The student Mission Statement measure is an open-ended questionnaire that students complete as a pre/post measure as part of the PS program (See Figure 2). The student Mission Statement is analyzed, using a scoring rubric (see Figure 3), for thought or ideation units that describe (a) the roles students have identified as future selves, (b) the level of education associated with those roles, (c) the number and type of goals students identify, and (d) the specificity of their goal statements. Higher scores reflect more positive self-knowledge, role-identification, and self-identity (Hock et al., 2003).

Figure 2
Mission Statement Measure

PERSONAL MISSION STATEMENT

Name: _____   Date: _____

What I want to do, to become, and to be like:

POSSIBLE
SELVES

Figure 3
Possible Selves Mission Statement Score Sheet

I. Identify the number and type of roles.

Read each mission statement. Then, score a point for each role mentioned. Following the point score for each role, place the line number from the mission sheet in parenthesis. For example, the student mentioned a role related to learner in line three of the mission statement measure. The line below with learner would look like this: ___1(3)___ Learner. Students may earn more than one point for each area if they mention the same general goal more than once.

_____	Person
_____	Learner
_____	Worker/professional
_____	Family member
_____	Friend
_____	Community member
_____	other (list _____)
_____	**TOTAL Points**

II. Levels of Education Associated with Roles

Similar to the above, place the line number from the mission sheet in parenthesis.

_____	positive recognition of education/learning	1 point
_____	post-secondary degree required	2 points
_____	college degree required	3 points
_____	graduate degree required	4 points
_____	doctorate or MD required	5 points
_____	**TOTAL Points**	

III. Identify the number of goal statements by Category

_____	Number of LEARNER goal statements
_____	Number of PERSONAL goal statements
_____	Number of CAREER goals
_____	Number of OTHER goal statements
_____	**TOTAL Points**

IV. Determine the Specificity of Goals in the Mission Statement

Again, place the line number from the mission sheet in parenthesis.

Vague/General Statement:	Specific Statement	Very Specific Statement
"good education"	"college degree"	"degree in biology"
"learn all I can"	"skilled college grad"	"an expert in microbiology"
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
1 point each	2 points each	3 points each

_____ **TOTAL Points**

V. Total Points all categories: _____ (I + II + III + IV + V)

Participants

Students who participated in this study (*n*=140) were members of one of four student-support programs targeting students with identified LD or considered at-risk of postsecondary academic challenges. The students attended or were considering attendance at colleges in the southeastern United States. To participate in these programs, students provided documentation for prior identification as having LD in high school or were screened after a review of their application materials by college student support staff. Table 1 displays the focus and number of participants for each program.

Table 1

Participating Student-Support Programs

Academic Institution	Site Demographics	Student Participants

Campus 1	Public university in western North Carolina
	Overall campus enrollment: 18,811 students
	Student-support program target population:
	    Students with LD and executive functioning
	    challenges
		14

Campus 2	Public university in eastern North Carolina Overall campus enrollment: 29,131 students Student-support program target population: Students with identified LD	18

Campus 3	Public university in central North Carolina
	Overall campus enrollment: 5,540 students
	Student-support program target population:
	    Students with LD and executive functioning
	    challenges
		14

Campus 4	High school students served by college-
	    preparation program in public community
	    college in eastern North Carolina
	Overall campus enrollment: 8,902 students
	Student-support program target population: High
	    school and college students at risk for academic
	    challenges (e.g., first-generation, financial
	    need), some with documented LD and attention
	    differences
		94

Each of the four student-support programs utilizes a different model for serving students who had LD or are at risk of academic failure. For this project, facilitators in each program collaborated to determine what elements of the PS program would be implemented with consistency across the student-support settings. Facilitators on each campus participated in a training led by one of the PS program authors and worked together to determine a timeline for implementation. Specific start/end dates and amount of content covered during each session varied, but all campuses followed the same steps and implemented PS during the Spring 2016 semester. Campuses 1 and 2 implemented the PS program in a 3-week timeframe during a regularly scheduled seminar course, covering two to three lessons per week. Campus 3 provided the program during one-on-one meeting times through the course of two months. Campus 4 provided the program in two full group sessions (one at the beginning and one at the end of the strategy) and met one-on-one with students during a four-month timeline.

Prior to implementation, facilitators developed a fidelity checklist to ensure that specific program areas were delivered consistently, agreed upon a common evaluation measure that would describe student possible selves, and discussed ways to ensure that the strategy was delivered in a way that was age-appropriate for college-age students. Researchers observed instruction using the fidelity checklist and documented that all lessons were delivered to students. The PS curriculum for this study consisted of seven different lessons, each focusing on self-reflection, strength development, goal development, and progress monitoring. Lessons were delivered to groups of students ranging from 2 to 14 students at a time. Table 2 provides an overview of the lessons used for this project. Researchers felt that the PS program was delivered as intended by program developers.

Table 2
Description of Possible Selves (PS) Lessons

Lesson	Focus and Activities	Student Products
Lesson 1	Introduce students to PS and provide an overview of the strategy. Students commit to follow through with the program and write a personal mission statement.	Pre Mission Statement PS folder
Lesson 2	Focus on discovering interests. Students brainstorm individual interests, skills, strengths, and dreams.	Collage depicting their strengths, interests, and possible career paths
Lesson 3	Encourage students to identify their strengths and describe themselves as learners, workers, and people. Students also articulate hopes, expectations, and fears for each category.	PS questionnaire: individual strengths, student as a: learner, person, worker
Lesson 4	Students compile highlights from Lesson 3 questionnaires and sketch their responses onto a graphic organizer resembling a tree (see Figure 2). • Trunk depicts the student as a whole person, with each limb representing a major area of the student's life, such as a person, a learner, a worker, and a strength area. • Branches on each limb represent hopes and expectations in relation to that area. • Roots represent student's thoughts/descriptions about themselves. • Images of potential dangers to the tree (e.g. severe weather or insects) represent fears students feel about their goals or selves.	PS "tree" drawing
Lesson 5	Students analyze their tree images to find positive themes and identify areas that seem unbalanced (e.g., areas that had more branches than others). From there, students identify and rank short-term goals that could help lead to the "self" they wish to become.	PS Goal sheets

Lesson	Focus and Activities	Student Products
Lesson 6	Facilitate the development of goal-driven action plans based on reflections about all of the preceding lessons and the goals students articulated in Lesson 5.	PS Action Plan
Lesson 7	Enable students to review their action plans and revise goals and steps, if needed. Students are asked to write another mission statement and given the opportunity to update the content based on their current thinking about their possible future selves. Students discuss plans for revisiting their folders later in the semester and throughout their academic career.	Post Mission statement

Implementation

A goal of this research was to develop a baseline understanding about the kinds and levels of goals and issues high school and first-year college students express and to identify general themes or topics across different groups of students. To that end, participants wrote a mission statement during Lesson 1 describing what they wanted *to be*, *to do,* and *to be like* in life. Specifically, facilitators said to students, "I want to know what you want to accomplish in your life. Specifically, I would like to know what you want to be, what you want to do, and what you want to be like in the future. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions so tell me what you really think." Next, facilitators followed the steps in each lesson of the PS program. At the conclusion of all seven lessons, students were provided with the same prompt used with the earlier mission statement to write their post mission statements. Each campus facilitator collected and organized the pre and post mission statements, and the project coordinator compiled them and deidentified the data. Given that researchers found no statistically significant differences between the two measurement occasions, data from both assessment occasions were combined into a single data set.

Data Sources and Analysis
Researchers collected 266 out of a possible 280 student mission statement pairs. Using qualitative analyses methods, researchers evaluated and categorized all pre/post mission statements into ideation units or themes. Researchers also analyzed demographical data to explore differences in pre/post statements by subgroups. The qualitative review of student mission statements provided information about the goals, specificity of goals, and roles in life identified by participants. Specifically, we looked for common themes describing goals and roles in life identified by high school and college students in their individual mission statements. Data were analyzed through a qualitative content analysis process (Patton, 2002). First, the full set of 266 statements were compiled and reviewed separately by the authors.

During the initial review phase, researchers determined key ideas and categories that emerged from the data and developed working definitions of each. Reviewers then met to reach a consensus about themes that seemed to accurately represent the content of the participant mission statements and further refined those themes. Once the themes were finalized, the first reviewers revisited the mission statement transcripts to ensure they could be adequately coded using the new theme system and reached consensus about how to best define, summarize, and represent the data according to the agreed-upon themes.

During the audit phase, one researcher reviewed the mission statements prior to seeing the coded materials. After reading the statements, comparisons to the original list of defined categories were evaluated on whether the categories adequately represented the data. The researcher provided feedback to the first reviewers and the full group reached consensus for the themes. Then, the mission statements were coded using NVivo software to ensure that no data were missed by the initial research review.

Results

Results of the analysis found multiple themes across students in response to our first two research questions, *How do high school and college students with LD describe their future possible selves as workers, persons, and learners?* and *What do high school and college students with LD consider to be their strengths as workers, persons, and learners?*

In the **worker** category, most student comments fit three basic themes. Some students referenced a specific *career or job* (e.g., construction management, marketing, business) that they planned to pursue or referenced *financial* goals. Financial reference examples ranged from specific target salaries to comments about earning a sufficient salary for a particular purpose (e.g., to have fun, to care for family). A third and broader theme in this category included actions toward making their career/job possible. Examples included comments such as "helping children through teaching or speech pathology," "working in a creative field that pushes me out of my comfort zone, and "applying for an internship to gain experience in my field."

Three themes also emerged as students spoke of themselves as **learners**. Many comments related to seeking *postsecondary education*. Given the setting in which this project originated (college student-support programs), it is not surprising that all students were aspiring college students – either at the associate's or bachelor's level. Some students, however, were more explicit about their college goals. For example, some expressly stated the goal of *wanting* or *being* a college graduate. Others further articulated a desire to attend graduate school. A second theme in this category referenced a particular *major or degree* students planned to seek. Lastly, students identified *learner-category actions* related to reaching academic goals. Examples included statements such as "I want to graduate in 4-5 years" or "I want to improve my work ethic in school." Other statements were more specific, such as, "I want to obtain a 3.5 GPA this year" or "I want to be a better note-taker."

Six themes emerged in the **person** category. Some students mentioned friends, family, or other *personal relationships* either currently or as a desire to form these relationships in their future life. Examples included *"I hope to one day get married and have children"* and *"I want to have a lot of friends."* Some students tried to define what kind of person they wanted *to be* (e.g., "I want to be a kind person."), and others mentioned how they wanted *to be perceived by others* (e.g., someone others come to for advice, respected person in community, knowledgeable).

Several mentioned the desire to *make a difference*, or for their lives to have a purpose. Examples included comments like, "I want to make the world a better place," "I want to accomplish something that really makes a difference in someone's life;" or even just "I want to help others." Other students mentioned the desire to have a *happy*, fulfilled, balanced life themselves. As

with the first two categories, this one also included themes related to *person-category actions* that students felt would lead to their personal goals. Some comments reflected considerations like the intention to be "healthy" or to "work out more." Others emphasized "faith/spirituality" or a desire to "see the world."

The final category yielded three themes related to **strengths** the students perceived they held and/or wanted to build. Some comments reflected strengths students felt they already possessed and descriptions of what they felt they were "*good at*" (e.g., a hobby, a skill, a sport). For example, one student wrote, "…helping others has always been something that I love and am good at doing." Others spoke of something they "*loved*" to do (e.g., ride horses). Students also articulated various *action steps* for building a strength. For example, one student commented, "I want to attend Art Camp so that I may improve my art skills." Another mentioned, "I want to increase my practice time toward basketball, so I may become a better player."

Table 3 shows the results of an analysis of student comments by subgroups based on gender.

Table 3
Number of Comments for Each identified Theme by Gender

Theme	PS Category	Male	Female
Academic goals		28	34
Degree specific	Learner Comments *n*=208	26	19
Postsecondary education		56	45
Good at something		0	9
Love to do something	Strength Comments *n*=56	16	11
Strength action steps		10	10
Money or finances		36	19
Specific career or job	Worker Comments *n*=259	76	86
Career action steps		22	20
Desire to make a difference		24	46
Friends, family, personal relationships		50	47
Person they want to be	Person Comments *n*= 429	40	37
How they want to be perceived by others		26	30
Personal feelings		32	47
Person action steps		26	24

In order to explore the research question *Are there differences based on gender in the type and number of worker, person, and learner goals identified by students with LD?*, we compared the number of comments made by male

and female respondents in each of the categories and for each of the themes. We found both similarities and marked differences. For example, males and females in this project differed slightly in statements related to *Academic Goals, Work Ethic, Degree Specific statements, and Money and Finances.* Females emphasized "Academic Goals" more frequently than males and focused on topics such as academic GPA and work ethic in school. Females also made more statements related to a *"Desire to make a difference."* However, males made more *"Degree Specific statements"* (i.e., anticipated degree/major identification) than females. Additionally, significantly more males made statements in the *"Money and Finances"* theme in the Worker category than females, more often emphasizing the desire to be financially stable or have a career with a large income.

Neither males nor females made as many comments about themselves in the Person category as they did in the Worker or Learner categories. Across all categories and all themes, female and male students seem to be similar in the number of comments they identified as learners and workers. There were stark contrasts in the themes of having the strength to make a difference as a person with females making more comments in this area. Having a focus on making money was identified by males more often than females. Finally, more females made comments about having goals focused on being a kind and "good" person.

Data were also analyzed by subgroup for high school/college groups. Table 4 shows the results of the analysis for this subgroup.

Table 4
Number of Comments Coded for Each Theme – High School/College Student

Theme	PS Category	High School Students	College Students
Academic goals		22	53
Degree specific	Learner Comments *n*= 241	15	37
Postsecondary education		38	76
Good at something		2	13
Love to do something	Strength Comments *n*= 70	11	21
Strength action steps		7	16
Money or finances		24	29
Specific career or job	Worker Comments *n*= 268	87	74
Career action steps		12	42
Desire to make a difference		39	34
Friends, family, personal relationships		44	53
Person they want to be	Person Comments *n*= 466	26	66
How they want to be perceived by others		26	37
Personal feelings		41	45
Person action steps		21	34

With regard to research Question 4, *Are there differences in how high school and college students with LD describe their future possible selves as workers, persons, and learners?* researchers found that high school participants made more frequent references within two themes than their college student counterparts. Specifically, the high school students made more frequent mention of *specific careers or jobs* in their mission statements than the college students. In addition, they made more statements indicating a *desire to make a difference* in life. This is interesting, considering the majority of college students in the project were in their first or second year of postsecondary education and not much older than the high school senior participants.

College students addressed all other themes more frequently than the high school students in reference to *academic goals*, *specific degrees*, and *postsecondary education*. College students also mentioned more frequently specific *action steps* related to their future career and spoke of the kind of *person they wanted to be*. These contrasts suggest the postsecondary students, even after being in college for a relatively brief period, may have made a shift in the way they thought about the future.

Some students were able to articulate either a job-related aspiration (83%), and others (26%) spoke of financial aspirations. Twenty percent (20%) felt it important to mention specific actions that would lead to accomplishing those goals in the mission statements, but these statements did not appear as often as the general career/money references.

Even though all students in this project were connected with some form of college-related student support program, student comments about themselves as a learner were fairly general. Just under half (49%) reflected a vision of postsecondary activities that aligned with their learning goals. Even though a wider variety of themes emerged as students reflected on the person they hope to be and 24% of students identified some form of strength they felt they possessed, comments on strengths and the other two categories were often relatively general and vague.

Discussion

The themes generated through student mission statements can be used to inform the development of targeted discussions, interventions, or curriculum

resources to help students set transition goals and take proactive steps toward goals that have personal importance. When students are working toward goals they have identified and prioritized, educators may be able to directly link course work students are currently taking to their future goals. As a result, students may be more willing to engage in academic tasks if they perceive the tasks as helpful to achieving their goals as persons, learners, and workers. Themes in the mission statements collected for this project closely aligned with the PS categories of "person," "worker," and "learner" and addressed each of the three categories on a very high level with general, sweeping statements in both the pre and post mission statements. Thus, there may be a need to help support students as they move from broad goal statements to more specific, measurable, and targeted goals. The PS program supports specific action planning, but more emphasis on this process may be needed as stated goals by participants tended to be global in nature.

Students transitioning to the college setting have opportunities to make decisions with long-term implications. Naturally, not all students do or should enter college with a clear understanding of what they want to "be when they grow up," and these years can be a time for them to grow and learn more about themselves. That said, during these transformative years, students can build patterns of reflection and decision making that can help them proactively make decisions about their goals as well as periodically revisit and revise as they learn and grow. Previous school experience and mixed messages from peers, teachers, and families can leave students with LD to struggle with envisioning their future selves or establishing confidence in their ability to achieve those goals. An understanding of the nature of responses students made through mission statements in this project can help us meet students where they are with interventions, targeting goal setting and motivation for stepping toward a major or career that highlights their interests and strengths. Reviewing patterns of responses from subgroups of students can inform our ability to be watchful for and responsive to areas where some students may need more support than others to think proactively in the different categories addressed in the PS program. Moreover, helping students to frequently revisit, revise, and take steps toward their possible selves may have implications for retention and graduation rates that are problematic in universities across the US today.

This pilot project demonstrated that, even after use of a strategy that encouraged the development of specific action steps, student responses in mission statements were still very general. Future research and use of the strategy can analyze pre/post statement differences to address whether students are able to move from more sweeping general goal statements to confident, targeted, specific goals that reflect a well-rounded vision of possible selves balanced by the ability to picture their future selves with specificity. While these goals and action steps will naturally evolve over time, the establishment of a long-term vision and short-term action steps may contribute to our ability to retain college students with LD who may otherwise give up on college attendance or completion once they encounter difficulty.

Limitations
Although participants were drawn from one high school and three university campuses, the number of participants limits the generalizability of the results. Whether additional participants from different regions of the country and from more urban settings would respond differently to the questions posed by the researchers is unknown. In addition, the structured nature of the questions asked of students by researchers limited possible responses beyond descriptions of goals, roles, and future possible selves to those of worker, learner, and person. These areas are of interest to educators, but they may limit student responses. If the questions included additional student ideas such as "athlete," "artist," and "musician," future roles and goals might be quite different. The college students who participated in the study reported having multiple goals and identified roles at pretest. It was clear that many had already given thought to multiple goals for their future. Thus, it is unknown whether the program would have impacted the number of roles and goals identified by students who had not thought so deeply about their future prior to participating in the program.

Next Steps
While this project was the first in a series of steps we hope to take to learn how to effectively foster high school and college student goal setting and persistence, the results of this study show that some high school and first-year college student with disabilities have well-developed personal future possible selves. Supporting these students with action plan development and ways to

problem solve challenges may provide the support they need. In the current study, researchers were unable to determine the impact of PS on the number and type of future goals since there were more students with multiple goals at baseline than those without. What may be helpful for college staff working with students with LD is to consider what support and guidance is necessary to support students in the clarification of their goals and with development of realistic actions plans and problem-solving skills that support goal attainment.

Often students with learning and attention differences are anonymous on college campuses, making it difficult to identify individuals needing support, much less involve them in the goal setting and problem-solving process. This study found that, given an opportunity to share thoughts about their future possible selves, students can articulate these visions and share them with educational professionals, providing insights for building stronger relationships and providing appropriate support.

The patterns of responses from male and female high school and first year college students with LD identified both similar and unique ways of thinking about their future selves. College staff who support students with LD may want to take the unique needs of students into consideration when helping them explore and articulate their goals and sought-after future selves. Personalizing support programs may be more helpful than following one-size-fits-all models. While PS is an instructional approach that can be personalized to meet unique student needs, more research is needed within the college setting regarding the impact of PS on the quantity and quality of student goals and action plans. Emerging technologies bring promise that further development and research may help personalize PS to postsecondary learners.

While further research is needed, the differences between high school and college student responses imply that we can do more to help college-bound high school students begin to envision themselves in the college environment and develop intentional practices for reaching their postsecondary goals. While it would be an overstatement to assume from these data alone that only students who "get to college" begin to show these differences in thinking, college-preparation curricula and interventions associated with the transition support required through IDEA could be an excellent place to address key considerations for students with disabilities prior to matriculation. It may also be useful to consider different versions of the PS program or use understandings about each student population (e.g., instructional context,

technology available, and daily rhythms of the student) to inform the way we help students strategically approach transition to college and to exploring their possible selves.

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