

## Transition University Answers the Challenge

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**Abstract:** The challenge of providing same-age peer mentoring in a community based setting to high school students with disabilities has been answered over the past few years by providing programs at local universities. Transition University (TU) is an on-campus biweekly program located at Jacksonville State University (JSU). This program provides over 50 high school students who are 18–21 with same-age peer mentoring and instruction in transition skills by teacher candidates completing an undergraduate special education teacher program at JSU. The success of this program has led to an increase in social and vocational transition skills for the high school students, hands-on teaching opportunities for the teacher candidates, and collaborative interaction among the high school teachers. Transition University has also led to the development of a grant which will fund a two-year residential program soon to be implemented at JSU.

**Key words:** transition, teacher education, collaboration

### 1. Introduction

For many students with significant intellectual disabilities who are ages 18–21, interacting during the school day with same-age peers without disabilities is a formidable challenge. Benefits of same-age peer mentoring to students with disabilities include an increase in self-confidence, self esteem, self-determination, and a decrease in problem behavior (McGuire & McDonnell, 2008; Zambo, 2010). However, a majority of students without disabilities who are 18–21 graduate from high school and move on to post-secondary education at a community college, vocational school, or university, or will join the work force (Causton-Theoharis, Ashby & DeClouette, 2009). Those students with intellectual disabilities who follow an alternative curriculum often remain behind in the high school setting until age 21 or 22. Therefore, opportunities to benefit from same age peer mentoring are very limited or non-existent.

University campus settings are becoming increasingly popular as a solution for providing students with intellectual disabilities access to same-age peer mentoring and the opportunity for additional vocational training (Carroll, Blumberg & Petroff, 2008; Farley, Gibbons & Cihak, 2014; Kelley & Westling, 2013; Papay & Bambara, 2011; Uditsky, Frank, Hart & Jeffery, 1987). On-campus programs for students with disabilities have increased over the past few decades from fewer than 25 fifteen years ago (Hart, Mele-McCarthy, Pasternack, Zimbrich & Parker, 2004), to almost 250 programs in the United States alone (Think College, 2016). Transition University is one such program.

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## 2. Description of Program

Transition University (TU) began as a collaboration between two high school teachers who taught transition skills to students with significant intellectual and other disabilities, and two university instructors of special education at Jacksonville State University (JSU). These two high school teachers had heard of programs where college age high school students with disabilities were able to visit local college campuses. The JSU instructors also saw this as an opportunity to: (1) assist the local teachers with transition training in a community based setting, (2) provide their high school students (18–21) with same-age peer mentoring from university teacher candidates in the special education teacher education program, and (3) give their teacher candidates the opportunity for community based practicum experiences where they would plan and implement both formal and informal instruction in needed transition areas such as community experiences, public transportation, financial management, employment development, self-advocacy, socialization, and recreation.

Any program like TU would not be possible without support from both the university and the local school systems. The high school students travel biweekly to the campus for this program where JSU classrooms are provided for TU activities. Participating school systems provide transportation to the campus. TU requires that certified teachers (or a licensed substitute) accompany high school students to campus. Therefore, the school also provides a half-day substitute to instruct any of the teacher's remaining younger students. The high school teachers are able to observe formally and informally the teacher candidates' lessons. They offer advice on how to improve instruction and submit topics to enhance their high school students' individual educational plan's (IEP) transition goals. Often the teachers follow up these lessons with further instruction upon return to the high school classrooms. Additionally, these teachers have opportunities to collaborate with each other. It is not unusual in small school systems to have only one high school transition teacher. Through TU, collaborative opportunities for these teachers are provided so that they can share instructional strategies and state standard updates.

The typical TU daily program begins with morning arrival where the high school students engage in socialization with the university teacher candidate peers and with students from other participating high schools. Because multiple schools participate, some students and teachers arrived early, while others who come from more distant districts arrive later. Teacher candidate peers meet the busses and escort the students and teachers to the designated meeting place. Once all high school students have arrived, instruction on the designated transition skill is provided by teacher candidate peers. These lessons have been planned in advance by the teacher candidates, approved by the university instructors and supervisors, and then shared with those teacher candidate peers who served as teacher assistants.

After classroom instruction, the entire group embark upon a trip (often using the campus transit system) that accentuates the lesson topic. Sites visited are both on-campus and off-campus and include the university art gallery, planetarium, post office, library, stadium, and coliseum, in addition to the local town pharmacy, bank, grocery store, discount store, nursing home, and hospital. Usually, the final stop for TU is at the JSU campus dining hall where TU participants have opportunities to mingle with other university students, make dining choices, and increase their self-determination skills.

Participation in JSU Transition University (TU) has multiplied from 8 students within two schools in one local school system, to over 50 high school students representing eight different school systems. Teacher candidate peers continue to take the lead in providing instruction, but additional teacher candidates, who are a semester behind in the program, are able to participate by providing assistance, much like paraprofessionals. This

experience not only benefits the high school students by allowing for additional one-on-one or small group interactions, but also benefits the teacher candidate peers, who will probably supervise paraprofessional in the future.

When interviewed, high school teachers who had participated in TU for at least one year or more indicated that they had witnessed positive educational outcomes in several of their students. One example involved a young woman with autism who usually did not speak in her high school classroom. She shocked her teacher and spoke in front of the TU students, and later proceeded to introduce herself to several college students sitting at a nearby table in the dining hall. A leap in communication skills was verified in several other students, as well. Teacher candidate peers also witnessed generalization of various other skills taught when after lessons on appropriate social contact, the high school students were able to introduce themselves and carry on conversations in several community settings. Many students return to their high school classrooms and share with their younger classmates the lesson learned at TU. The experiences at TU have also been known to reveal undiscovered talents. After visiting the on campus art gallery, one high school student went back to his classroom and sketched from memory a picture very similar to one of the ones he had seen on display.

### 3. Conclusion

The success of Transition University has led to the development of a new two- year residential program. This new on-campus vocational program entitled *On to JSU* is the result of a federal grant and revolves around the premise of person-centered planning. Once implemented, students with intellectual disabilities will be able to reside and take classes at JSU for two years. During that time, they will attend designated university classes, participate in campus social opportunities, and complete a vocational internship. Although such a program may not be appropriate for all TU high school participants, for some, this may be an option to continue transition and vocational training towards personal independence in a familiar setting.

Programs offering post-secondary opportunities to students with intellectual and developmental disabilities are increasing at colleges and universities nationwide and beyond. JSU's TU and *On to JSU* provide essential experiences for students and teacher candidate peers thus serving as a model for other institutions. Perhaps the lessons learned and the positive outcomes observed from these programs will serve to inspire more universities to provide similar opportunities for their local students with disabilities.

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