

## Self-Determination

### *A Key to Success in Postsecondary Education for Students with Learning Disabilities*

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#### ABSTRACT

Self-determination should be a central organizing concept in postsecondary programs for all students with disabilities, including those with learning disabilities. The importance of self-determination is supported by numerous studies, including one by Sarver (2000), who found a significant relationship between the grade point averages of students with learning disabilities and their levels of self-determination. Interviews with students about postsecondary environments demonstrate that specific environmental factors and personality markers are important to postsecondary success. Characteristics of environments that support self-determination are discussed within the context of postsecondary education settings. These characteristics include self-determined role models, self-determination skill instruction, opportunities for choice, positive communication patterns and relationships, and availability of supports. Universal Design for instruction, a new paradigm for college students with learning disabilities, fosters self-determination by offering students productive opportunities for learning.

nation based on disability and incorporated a focus on self-determination for persons with disabilities. A number of studies (e.g., Chadsey-Rusch, Rusch, & O'Reilly, 1991; Wagner, D'Amico, Marder, Newman, & Blackorby, 1992) found that adults with disabilities are less successful in seeking and maintaining employment, achieving a satisfactory standard of living, developing independence, and other quality-of-life indicators than persons without disabilities. These studies led to an emphasis on self-determination for persons with disabilities. A search began for educational and support strategies that would yield more positive adult outcomes for persons with disabilities. Placing a stronger focus on self-determination emerged from that search as a promising practice that could contribute to more positive experiences for persons with disabilities.

Several definitions of self-determination have been offered in the special education and disability literature (Field & Hoffman, 1994; Martin & Marshall, 1995; Ward, 1988; Wehmeyer, 1996). Although varied in perspective, the definitions tend to be consistent and complementary. Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, and Wehmeyer (1998) summarized the definitions by stating,

**S**ELF-DETERMINATION HAS RECENTLY BECOME A central concept in service delivery for persons with disabilities across their life span, from pre-K-12 educational services to adult settings. This emphasis emerged as a result of several factors. First, increased visibility of persons with disabilities came about as the logical extension of the independent living, normalization, and self-advocacy movements of recent decades (Ward, 1996). This visibility contributed to a growth in civil rights and legal protections that prohibited discrimi-

Self-determination is a combination of skills, knowledge and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior. An understanding of one's strengths and limitations together with a belief in oneself as capable and effective are essential to

TABLE 1: Differences Between High School and College Requirements

Item	High school	College
Class time	6 hours per day, 180 days Total: 1,080 hours	12 hours per week, 28 weeks Total: 336 hours
Class size	25-30 students	Up to 300 students
Study time	Whatever it takes to do your homework! 1-2 hours per day	Rule of thumb: 2 hours of study for 1 hour of class. 3-4 hours per day
Tests	Weekly; at the end of a chapter, frequent quizzes	2-4 per semester; at the end of four-chapter unit; at 8:00 a.m. on the Monday after Homecoming!
Grading	Passing grades guarantee you a seat! Performance evaluations may be subjective, based on level of effort or level of improvement.	Satisfactory academic standing requires grades of C or above; performance based on mastery of course content material.
Teaching	Teachers often take attendance. Teachers may regularly check notebooks and homework assignments. Teachers lecture from textbooks and often use the blackboard and worksheets. Teachers impart knowledge and facts.	Professors rarely take attendance and seldom check homework or monitor daily work. Professors lecture nonstop and rarely teach you the textbook. Professors require library research. Professors challenge you to integrate information from a variety of sources.
Freedom	Structured most of the time. Limits are set by parents, teachers, and other adults. High school buildings are monitored.	Managing time and personal freedom is the greatest problem college students face. Self-reliance is the key. College campuses are often extensive and security may be a concern.

Note. From "Preparing Students with Learning Disabilities for Postsecondary Education: Issues and Future Needs," by S. Shaw, L. C. Brinckerhoff, J. Kistler, and J. M. McGuire, 1991, *Learning Disabilities: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, 2, 21-26. Copyright 1991 by Learning Disabilities Association. Adapted with permission.

22, and 25 years old), and one was considerably older (42 years old). Two of the students had GPAs above the mean for the research group ( $N = 88$ ; mean GPA = 2.81), and two had GPAs below the mean for the same group. Three of the students were from the College of Engineering, and one was from the College of Journalism.

Themes that emerged from these interviews addressed both environmental factors and personality markers. Environmental factors included the importance of disability awareness by faculty and staff, the impact of environmental factors within the institutional infrastructure, and the contribution of social support systems external to the institution. Personality markers for academic success included autonomy, locus of identity, goal selection and implementation, and resilience in response to failure.

### Environmental Factors

The interview responses indicated that support for self-determination in postsecondary settings is strongly influenced by environmental factors, including institutional infrastructure, information access, availability of social support systems, and accessibility of faculty. Each of these major themes is discussed below.

### Institutional Infrastructure

Some of the participants interviewed found their experiences with community colleges more nurturing than those of the university. Many of their comments suggested differences between the community college environment and the university environment, stressing, in particular, the large size and impersonal qualities of the university. Community colleges were also singled out as more supportive of students' self-esteem than the university. Students' comments on difficulties with the university environment suggest they had been unaware of the complexities of independent living and that they had not been adequately prepared for it. In addition, they reported not having a realistic expectation regarding the academic rigors of a university education. These difficulties are consistent with the research about transition to postsecondary education (Goldstein, 1993; Minskoff, 1989; Repetto & Correa, 1996; Serebreni, Rumrill, Mullins, & Gordon, 1993).

### Information Access

Communication within the college environment is another area that presented difficulty for the participants. They related problems in receiving adequate and timely information about

ademic success. They told of continuing to study, meeting with advisers, going to tutoring, retaking courses when necessary, and even moving home to regroup, rather than abandoning their dreams. The essential message was "Do not quit; persistence will pay off." They spoke of repeatedly seeking out faculty for help despite negative responses from some of these instructors. They told of changing majors, or even changing colleges, but not of giving up. They believed not only that persistence was essential to success but also that they had to persist longer than most other students in order to succeed.

The findings from Sarver's qualitative investigation support the view that self-determination needs to be a central organizing feature of programs to support students with disabilities in postsecondary settings. Furthermore, the responses indicated that it is important for postsecondary programs to address both environmental factors, such as social support and accessibility of faculty, and the development of specific personality traits, such as autonomy and persistence. To be successful, college students with learning disabilities need to have a sense of themselves as individuals who make decisions about important matters in their lives. They need to understand and value themselves, and they need to take actions according to responsible plans in order to achieve their academic goals. Finally, they need to exhibit the behaviors indicative of reflective thinking and self-awareness consistent with an accurate evaluation of outcomes.

## SELF-DETERMINATION IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION SUPPORT PROGRAMS

Self-determination, given its importance for college students with learning disabilities, must be the prime directive for postsecondary disability personnel. Unfortunately, postsecondary personnel have often inadvertently adopted the dependence-provoking behaviors typical in many elementary and secondary programs (Cullen, Shaw, & McGuire, 1996). Research indicates that "practices that promote dependence in students with LD are given more emphasis than strategies that foster independence and self-determination" despite the knowledge and desire of postsecondary personnel to do the opposite (Yost, Shaw, Cullen, & Bigaj, 1994, p. 638). A critical goal for personnel who work in college Offices for Students with Disabilities (OSD) and other college personnel (e.g., administrators and faculty) is the long-term development of self-determined adults.

Five important characteristics of environments that support self-determination were identified by Field and Hoffman (1996). Field and Hoffman stated that such environments have (a) self-determined role models; (b) instruction and support for the development of knowledge, skills, and beliefs that lead to self-determination; (c) opportunities for choice; (d) communication patterns that support self-determination; and (e) availability of student supports. Table 2 provides

examples of how each of these components can be applied within postsecondary education settings.

### Self-Determined Role Models

Postsecondary disability personnel must themselves demonstrate the characteristics of self-determination. Powers (1997) claimed that "modeling is a critical ingredient for bolstering self-determination. It is essential for teachers to have the information, skills, and supports necessary to function as instructors and role models" (p. 1). Martin (1997) also emphasized the importance of modeling in self-determination when he stated, "Teacher self-determined behavior does indeed impact student self-determination. This comes through in every-day student-teacher interactions, as well as how the teachers model their own self-determination" (p. 2).

Unfortunately, postsecondary support personnel have often been described as either advocates or gatekeepers. Both of these roles are clearly in direct opposition to statements made by students in Sarver's (2000) interviews that emphasized the importance of accessibility to faculty and information. Clearly, a better approach is to have (a) self-determined professionals with personal and professional goals; (b) institutional policies and procedures that encourage effective problem solving and collaborative decision making; and (c) program and personal evaluation activities that reinforce self-efficacy and positive outcomes (Brinckerhoff et al., 2002). Such an approach for learning disability professionals will foster self-determination in students, faculty, staff, and administration.

Supporting the development and expression of self-determination for learning disability professionals has important implications for both initial preparation and in-service personnel preparation programs. Field and Hoffman (2001) developed a model, Teaching with Integrity, Reflection, and Self-Determination, that applies self-determination concepts to the role of educators. The model has three basic components: (a) core knowledge, beliefs, and skills, (b) application to the educational process, and (c) application to promoting self-determination across the K-adult curriculum. This model is based on Field and Hoffman's earlier (1994) model of self-determination, which identified five key components of self-determination: know yourself, value yourself, plan, act, experience outcomes, and learn. The model asserts that self-determination is promoted or inhibited both by factors that are within the individual's control (e.g., knowledge, values, and skills) and by variables that are more external or environmental in nature (e.g., opportunities for choice making and support of important others). Although the model recognizes the importance of environmental variables, it focuses primarily on factors within the individual's control—the knowledge and skills that enable an individual to be self-determined in environments of varying levels of receptivity and support. (For more information about the basic self-determination model, please see Field and Hoffman, 1994.)

personnel are actively engaged in identifying the types of staff development opportunities offered. The Professional Standards, Program Standards, and Code of Ethics (Brinckerhoff et al., 2002) promulgated by the Association on Higher Education and Disability provide a basis for postsecondary professionals to identify their training needs. In-service programs that allow postsecondary personnel to identify and work on their own goals and that also support staff in the attainment of their goals can be a powerful means toward strengthening staff self-determination.

### **Instruction and Support for Self-Determination Knowledge, Beliefs, and Skills**

It is important that postsecondary students be provided with the opportunity to receive instruction and support for the individual characteristics that lead to self-determination (e.g., self-awareness, goal-setting and decision-making skills, assertive communication, negotiation skills). Students are not expected to develop content area skills without specific instruction in those skills. In the same way, they cannot be expected to acquire the skills necessary for self-determination without instruction that specifically targets the development of those skills. Development of knowledge, skills, and beliefs that lead to self-determination is an important consideration throughout the life span from the preschool through the retirement years. Some examples of strategies and supports that promote self-determination can be found in the recommended practices section of Table 2.

Many materials and strategies have been developed that support the acquisition of self-determination skills as part of transition programming (Ward & Kohler, 1996). Reviews of materials to teach self-determination can be found on the Web site for the self-determination synthesis project at the University of North Carolina (<http://www.uncc.edu/sdsp>) and in the Council for Exceptional Children publication *A Practical Guide to Teaching Self-Determination* (Field, Martin, et al., 1998). Price and Patton (this issue) present a model of adult development that frames approaches to instruction for students with learning disabilities that foster self-determination.

### **Opportunities for Choice**

College students with learning disabilities must be afforded choices so they can learn to take responsibility for their own lives. If the professional takes the advocacy role, then the student cannot *self-advocate*. A better approach is for the professional to be the manager of the process, someone who provides support for the student to learn to navigate the system. The professional should offer information, ask questions, and foster reflection to help the student make choices and achieve personal goals.

The importance of opportunities for choice for students with learning disabilities was underscored by the respondents' comments in Sarver's (2000) interviews. According to one participant, the availability of choices is particularly important to success if you are a student with a disability.

*I try to build a road map to where I will be successful. . . . I try to pair up a hard class and an easy class to balance my load and don't get overwhelmed at any one time. The reason . . . I picked my schedule is because I have some understanding of where I can go and I pick the buildings and all the . . . the rooms. (p. 101)*

### **Positive Communication Patterns and Personal Relationships**

Responses by faculty and other school personnel to students' actions affect the level of encouragement they feel to express themselves, initiate actions, and take risks, as does the climate that exists within the academic setting (Field, Hoffman, & Spezia, 1998). The communication patterns within an organization both reflect and create the types of relationships that occur within the organization.

The importance of positive relationships for increased self-determination has been highlighted throughout the self-determination literature. Guided by self-determination theory, R. M. Ryan and Deci (2000) postulated that relatedness is a basic psychological need that, when satisfied, yields enhanced self-motivation and mental health and leads to increased self-determination. Their self-determination theory hypothesizes that intrinsic motivation is more likely to flourish in contexts characterized by a sense of security and relatedness.

Interviews conducted by Field, Hoffman, and Fullerton (2001) with public school personnel also revealed a strong emphasis on the importance of positive relationships to support self-determination. Field and colleagues conducted interviews with 60 educators to determine the supports and barriers respondents perceived to their self-determination in school settings. The importance of positive relationships as a support for self-determination was a consistent theme throughout the interviews. For example, respondents' statements included the following:

*I say "we" a lot because we operate as a team and I think that is a huge part of when I feel sure about me. I can let go of things, and it isn't just delegating, it's letting go and trusting others to be a part of what's going on and to seek their input, because I'm not complete without it. I'm not solid without it . . . . (p. 5)*

*I think the thing that supports me in being self-determined is surrounding myself with like-minded*

*I have accommodation letters . . . that request that I have extra time to do things. I've had professors that are very old-school, or they put up a fight. . . . They just have a really negative attitude towards me, even though they don't even know me. . . . One time, I'll never forget this, I brought my letter in to this one professor, and I said, "It's an accommodation letter from Student Services." [He said,] "Like, so what is it, a whole bunch of legal mumbo jumbo?" His attitude was just so negative. . . . Don't you know, this . . . involves me and the way I work. (p. 86)*

Interviews conducted by Stodden (2000) echoed the feelings of humiliation about the accommodation process expressed in the Sarver interview. Concerns raised by students included the following:

*Teachers and other students think I'm getting away with something when I'm given accommodations. (p. 11)*

*I'll be honest with you, if you've got a hidden disability, you might not want to be identified with us. . . . it's better to keep it hidden. (p. 12)*

*I had a professor who once went, "We want to accommodate certain people in here," being sarcastic, but I know he was talking about me. (p. 12)*

These same students correctly note that faculty need to learn different teaching approaches, which would help all students, not just those with disabilities (Stodden, 2000). An approach to instruction that seeks to overcome these problems is the Universal Design for Instruction (UDI), described in detail by Scott, McGuire, and Shaw (this issue). UDI is designed to anticipate the needs of diverse learners and incorporate effective strategies to make learning more accessible to a wide variety of students. Just as a student in a wheelchair needs no disability services in a physically accessible environment, a student with a learning disability may not need disability services in an instructionally accessible environment. Such an environment will obviously foster student self-determination because options are available that allow the student to select personally productive approaches to learning.

We recommend that disability personnel focus on effective instruction and self-determination for all, rather than just accommodations and modifications for students with disabilities. Efforts to improve campus instruction should be given as high a priority as providing physical access was in previous decades. Collaboration with personnel from the faculty resource lab, the learning center, and undergraduate and aca-

demical affairs deans should become a priority (Brinckerhoff et al., 2002). Furthermore, we recommend that this broader focus of providing effective instruction for all students, based on universal instructional design and self-determination principles, be used in the K-12 system as well as in postsecondary settings. By using strategies that promote responsibility and effective instruction for all students throughout the educational continuum, students with learning disabilities can receive appropriate instruction and supports without the stigma that is so often attached to special accommodations. It is well documented in the literature and illustrated in the interviews by Sarver (2000) quoted in this article that students' experiences in postsecondary settings are very different from what they experienced in the K-12 system. By providing greater consistency between the two systems, students will be able to experience smoother transitions between the two settings.

## CONCLUSION

Research has demonstrated that individuals who are self-determined are more successful in achievement of their stated goals. Critics of services for students with disabilities claim that the focus remains too much on process and accommodations and not on demonstrating effective outcomes (Finn, Rotherham, & Hokanson, 2001). A case has been presented that a focus on self-determination will help both postsecondary disability personnel and higher education faculty provide productive interventions and effective instruction to assist students with learning disabilities to successfully function in adult environments, including postsecondary education and employment. Examples of strategies that promote self-determination and success for students with learning disabilities in postsecondary settings include using universal design principles when preparing and delivering instruction, offering opportunities for students to set personal goals and make choices, and providing self-determination skill instruction and support for students and faculty.

If a campuswide focus on self-determination and universal design for instruction was undertaken, the research indicates that it would likely increase achievement and effectiveness across the campus, among staff and faculty as well as among students, both with and without disabilities. This would hold true for K-12 settings as well as postsecondary environments. Furthermore, by promoting an emphasis on universal instructional design and self-determination in the K-12 system, students with learning disabilities would also be better prepared for postsecondary educational and employment opportunities. Although self-determination efforts can be effective when they are implemented within support programs for students with disabilities, the most dramatic effects are likely to be obtained when a schoolwide focus is taken through a partnership representing a variety of perspectives from students, faculty, and administration.

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## Transition Time

ABOUT T/TAC:

by Dale Pennell, C.A.S.

Services

Staff

from T/TAC Link Lines  
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Service Area

Statewide TAC

### Self-Determination, Part 1: Assessment

Assistance  
Request

"Self-determination is a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior" (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998, p. 2). These skills, knowledge, and beliefs include:

Employment

RESOURCES

Link Lines

Collaborative  
Leadership

Self-awareness	Assertiveness	Problemsolving
Self-knowledge	Self-advocacy	Goal setting and attainment
Self-concept	Choice making	Self-observation skills
Self-esteem	Control (Internal focus)	Self-evaluation skills
Self-efficacy	Decision making	Self-reinforcement skills

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(Adapted from St. Peter, Field, & Hoffman, 1992; St. Peter, Field, Hoffman, & Keena, 1992; Wehmeyer, 1997.)

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Support Teams

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Students who develop self-determination are better able to direct their career development in adulthood (Sitlington, Neubert, Begun, Lombard, & LeConte, 1996). Therefore, self-determination skill development is an important consideration for IEP teams of students of transition age. Since assessment and instruction are linked in all successful educational efforts (Field et al., 1998), "assessment is integral to the self-determination process for all students with disabilities, even those with the most severe conditions" (Sitlington et al., 1996).



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A variety of assessment methods are available and should be used to assess student characteristics related to self-determination. These include analysis of background information contained in school records; interviews with the student, family, friends, and coworkers; behavioral observations in natural environments; curriculum-based assessment techniques; and psychometric tests (Field et al., 1998).

In 1992, the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS), funded the development of a series of instruments to assess self-determination skills. These include:

- Self-Determination Scale and User Guide (Wolman, Campeau, DuBois, Mithaug, & Stolarski, 1994)

- The Arc's Self-Determination Scale (Wehmeyer, 1995)
- Choicemaker Self-Determination Assessment (Martin & Marshall, 1996)
- The Self-Determination Assessment Battery (Hoffman, Field, & Sawilowsky, 1995)
- The Self-Determination Profile: An Assessment Package (Curtis, 1996)

Through the combined use of multiple types of assessments IEP teams can develop the comprehensive and accurate picture they need of students' self-determination skills and instructional needs. These skills and needs can then be incorporated in the Present Level of Educational Performance and be reflected in students statements of Transition Service Needs, Needed Transition Services, annual goals, and objectives/benchmarks.

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## Transition Time

by Dale Pennell, C.A.S.

from T/TAC Link Lines  
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### Self-Determination, Part 2: Curricular Components

"Self-determination is a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior" (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998a, p. 2). A number of authors (e.g., St. Peter, Field, & Hoffman, 1992; St. Peter, Field, Hoffman & Keena, 1992; Wehmeyer, 1997) have identified specific curricular components associated with self-determination. These skills, knowledge, and beliefs include:

- Self-awareness      understanding of one's personality and individuality
- Self-knowledge      recognition of one's capabilities, character, feelings, and motivations
- Self-concept      mental image of oneself
- Self-esteem      confidence in and satisfaction with oneself
- Self-efficacy      "belief that one can achieve goals and attain outcomes" (Field et al., 1998, p. 14)
- Self-advocacy      the "ability to know rights, determine supports, and conduct own affairs" (Field et al., 1998, p. 14)
- Assertiveness      willingness to compel recognition of one's rights
- Choice making      ability to consider and select options carefully
- Internal locus of control      ability to guide or manage one's own life
- Problem solving      process by which one resolves a complex question or an unsettled matter
- Decision making      "ability to set goals and standards, generate strategies, and complete a plan" (Field et al., 1998, p. 14)
- Goal setting      establishment of an end toward which effort is directed
- Goal attainment      achievement of an end toward which effort has been directed
- Self-observation      the ability to recognize, note, and make inferences from what one has observed about one's actions
- Self-evaluation      the "ability to compare performance to a standard and evaluate" the effectiveness of one's plan (Field et al., 1998, p.14)
- Self-reinforcement      the ability to reward oneself for effective achievement of one's plan

Field and colleagues (1998b) report that students with disabilities do not learn the skills related to self-determination informally. These skills and attitudes must be structured into the school curriculum. "Reexamination and re-focusing of educational programs to address these important skills must occur so that more

students will attain ... the postsecondary outcomes they desire" (Field et al., 1998b, p. 118).

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