

# POLICY NOTES

News from the ETS Policy Information Center

Volume 15, Number 2

Policy Evaluation & Research Center

Fall 2007

**NOT ALL PEOPLE WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES HAVE THE SAME PROFILE.  
THEREFORE, NOT ALL SOLUTIONS FOR SERVING THAT POPULATION ARE THE SAME.**

~ NOEL GREGG, DIRECTOR OF THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA REGENTS' CENTER FOR LEARNING DISORDERS

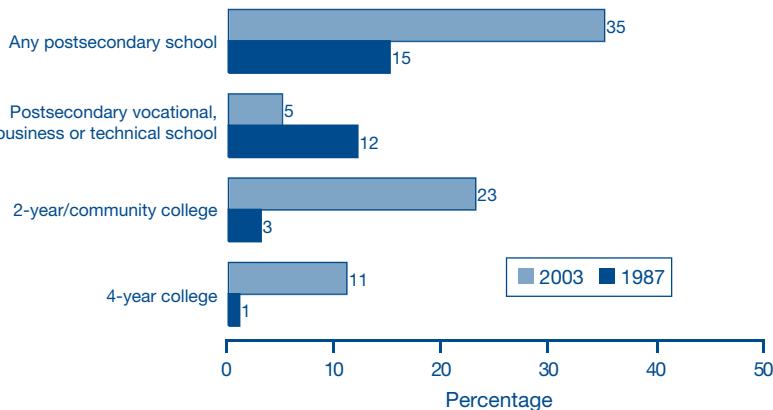
## A Moral Imperative

For far too long, issues involving students with learning disabilities have been overlooked in law, absent from public debate, and neglected by schools. This has been particularly true for the concerns of students with learning disabilities attempting the difficult transition from high school to higher education.

And that's not acceptable. As ETS president & CEO Kurt Landgraf has said, society has an obligation to make sure *all* students — including those with learning disabilities — have access to educational opportunities that will enable them to succeed in life.

The move from high school to college is rarely easy for any student. But for students with learning disabilities who are attempting that transition, the challenges can be enormous.

Between 1987 and 2003, there were large increases in postsecondary school enrollment of youth with learning disabilities



Sources: National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 Parent/Youth Interviews and for General Population,

NLSY 2000 data for 5- through 19-year-olds.

SRI International

Note: includes youth enrolled in any postsecondary classes since leaving high school.

**THIS ISSUE — STUDENTS  
WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES  
TRANSITIONING FROM HIGH SCHOOL  
TO COLLEGE — HIGHLIGHTS FROM  
AN ACHIEVEMENT GAP SYMPOSIUM  
Co-SPONSORED BY ETS AND THE  
NATIONAL CENTER FOR LEARNING  
DISABILITIES.**

The goal of the sixth ETS Addressing Achievement Gaps Symposium: *Students With Learning Disabilities Transitioning From High School to College* was to clarify what can — and must — be done to help students with learning disabilities succeed as they move from high school to college.

Jointly sponsored by ETS and the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) on Oct. 3 – 4, 2006, the symposium featured ETS and NCLD representatives, as well as other notable experts and practitioners in the field. Participants included parents, school administrators, guidance counselors, college admissions professionals, postsecondary disability coordinators, researchers, and members of learning disabilities advocacy groups.

As the number of students with learning disabilities attending colleges and universities has grown over the past 30 years, so has the range and complexity of

(continued on page 4)

Beyond the legal and logistical obstacle course these students must navigate as they work their way through the college admission process is the daunting reality that, once they've actually made it to college, the choices they'll have to make will likely be even more difficult. On their own, perhaps for the first time in their lives, they no longer have the built-in support of Individualized Education Program (IEP) protocols, proactive teachers, and protective parents to watch over them.

While some students with learning disabilities may thrive in a traditional college setting, with minimal supplemental supports and services, many falter — and far too many fail. For ETS and the NCLD, as well as the thousands of researchers, educators, and disabilities advocates who are fighting to improve educational opportunities for these students, this track record is unacceptable — particularly in light of the progress that's been made in learning and cognition, assessment, and assistive technology. It's time for this to change, said speakers and participants at the symposium.

"This is a moral imperative," Landgraf told the audience in his opening remarks. "We're not talking about policies concerning how many roads we have or how much sand is on the beach. This is about our children and our future."

"We've made substantive progress toward increasing the number of high school students with learning disabilities who plan to continue their education in postsecondary schools. There's growth in college programs providing services to students with learning disabilities," Landgraf said. "There's growth in assistive technologies that increase students' learning opportunities and independence in high schools."

But, he added, much more needs to be done to secure quality public education for students with learning disabilities, and to help them secure their own futures.

The nation's challenge, he and the other speakers agreed, is to change the existing systems to more effectively meet the needs of students with learning disabilities. For its part, said Landgraf, ETS is committed to researching issues related to teaching, learning, and assessment for students with learning disabilities; sharing and discussing its findings; and working to provide equitable testing practices.

## A Call to Action

"This is a call to action. It's not just a call to present. If no action results from this symposium, then there was no reason for any of us to be here."

These words, delivered by NCLD board member **Steven Kukic**, set the tone for two days of often intense, sometimes emotionally charged discourse on the legal, logistical, educational, political, and emotional realities faced by students with learning disabilities as they attempt the difficult transition from high school to college.

Kukic, vice president of professional services for Sopris West Educational Services, elucidated some of the problems contributing to the bumpy road these students must travel. "It's true that many more students with learning disabilities are having an opportunity to go on to higher education," he said. "But the number of them, and the percentage of them who graduate, isn't very high. And the great percentage of these students with learning disabilities who actually drop out of high school is very alarming."

"It is a daunting task to think about how to make effective the transition of students with learning disabilities from high school to college," Kukic added.

Many factors contribute to the problem, he said. Specifically:

- Teachers are not being given the training they need to properly address the needs of students with learning disabilities.
- Schools are not being held accountable for using research-based practices.
- Society's expectations for students with learning disabilities are too low.
- Students with learning disabilities aren't prepared to enter the world of higher education, where the learning supports they've had throughout their academic lives are no longer available to them.
- Colleges and universities aren't prepared to provide these students with appropriate support.

"If we work together, we can help these students succeed," Kukic concluded. "And that is the issue, isn't it? To enable these young people, these adults, to be able to take their place as full members of our society."

## Recognizing Differences

Exploring what she called the "Evolution of Access," **Noel Gregg**, director of the Regents' Center for Learning Disorders at the University of Georgia, noted that the advent of the Internet has profoundly changed higher education in ways that, for better or worse, greatly affect students with learning disabilities.

"Today's academic world is different from the one we experienced," she told the audience. Among other things, Gregg explained, knowledge has become a "huge commodity." And, like it or not, higher education has become a business in which students are the consumers, and institutions aggressively compete for their business.

Gregg also noted that, although the nation has seen an upward trend in students with learning disabilities attending colleges and universities, the increases are very minimal. Compared to their non-learning-disabled peers, she pointed out, "students with learning disabilities are less likely to pursue postsecondary education, frequently go to community colleges rather than four-year institutions, and are less likely to graduate."

Furthermore, "female students with learning disabilities are less likely to go on to postsecondary institutions than males, and less likely to graduate," Gregg said. "And that's a very different statistic than that for women without learning disabilities."

To more effectively meet the needs of these students as they seek futures beyond high school, she said, government, businesses, agencies, and schools need to collaborate, sharing their strengths to create alternative systematic solutions. A successful example of this type of collaboration, Gregg said, is the University of Georgia Regents' Center for Learning Disorders. By working with corporations and agencies, the center provides student evaluations at minimal or low cost. Under normal circumstances, such evaluations can be prohibitively expensive for many students.

Gregg also noted that it's essential for educators and policymakers to recognize the diversity that exists among learning disabled students, and address those differences. "We need to start putting the individual back in learning disabilities," she said. "Not all people with learning disabilities have the same profile. Therefore, not all solutions for serving that population are the same."

*(continued from page 1)*

issues they, their families, and educators must deal with. These include:

- increasingly complex challenges that students with disabilities face in college, where their high school support system of teachers, school counselors, and parents is no longer available to monitor and help them with their day-to-day school concerns
- changing demographics of students with disabilities who are attempting the transition from high school to postsecondary education
- the ever-changing, often conflicting array of rules, regulations, and documentation requirements students with disabilities must follow to obtain needed accommodations for learning and assessment
- the growing emphasis on transition planning in students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)
- changes in the reporting of admissions test scores for students with learning disabilities who receive accommodations
- increasing attention to issues surrounding high school exit exams and college admissions testing for students with learning disabilities
- the evolution of assistive technologies and how they can be used to enhance educational opportunities for students with learning disabilities

These are just a few of the issues affecting the higher-education aspirations of students with disabilities that speakers addressed at the symposium. Presentations focused on educational changes, and how they affect college opportunities, transitions, and outcomes for students with learning disabilities. Participants also discussed what students, their parents, educators, and

*(continued on page 6)*

## Changing Laws: Progress or Retreat?

State and federal regulations regarding the rights and responsibilities of students with learning disabilities are complex and constantly changing — and, to the consternation of students and practitioners in the learning disabilities community, they often conflict with each other.

These laws include the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, entitlement regulations under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and bans on disability-based discrimination under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), as well as a host of state directives.

While confusing and frustrating, the mandates “really exist only because they represent certain notions in our society about what is good public policy — what is for the common good in the way people with disabilities should be treated by educational institutions,” said **Diana Pullin**, professor of education law and public policy at Boston College’s Lynch School of Education.

Unfortunately, she said, recent changes to IDEA statutes are likely to complicate matters further for students with disabilities and those working to assure them access to higher education. Of concern, Pullin noted, is the underlying impetus for these changes: that “Congress was at least in part persuaded by the fact that some people could be able to avoid the Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) label in our K-12 system if they were to receive better instructional opportunities before a decision was made to classify them into a disability category.”

While perhaps based on a commendable objective, in Pullin’s opinion, the new provisions will challenge those working to help students with learning disabilities who are pursuing higher education. It behooves us to pay attention, through research and practice, to how these changes play out, she said.

Pullin wondered: Will these changes result in fewer students receiving SLD classifications under IDEA regulations? Will students with learning disabilities be left without legal protection assuring they receive the educational supports they need to succeed academically?

"Who will receive those labels, and how will those classifications be made?" she continued. "Will educators have the skills they need in order to be able to do what we're asking them to do under this new system? Will students have increased capabilities to succeed with the skills and knowledge they got in high school to succeed in college?"

Pullin predicted that state content standards and state assessments will become increasingly important, since "they will define the kinds of educational opportunities that kids get in secondary schools that will impact what they have available to them when they transition to higher education," she said.

Finally, picking up on a theme from earlier sessions, Pullin noted that, once in college, the challenges these students face are just beginning. "The irony in all of this is that at the K-12 level this very sophisticated, still-evolving system of provision of educational services for students with disabilities exists in a context in which the possession of all that support, the possession of those plans and programs, no matter how *imperfect* they are, results in a transition to higher education — where there are usually no plans in place whatsoever," she said.

And, like her fellow speakers, Pullin observed that, in the end, the ultimate question those attending the symposium are challenged to address is: How can we make sure higher education fully addresses the needs of this population?

## Conflicts and Resolutions

Continuing Pullin's theme, **Salome Heyward**, president of Salome Heyward & Associates and a civil rights attorney for more than 26 years, turned her attention to implications of new federal regulations on students with learning

disabilities as they enter — and try to succeed in — the world of postsecondary education.

Rather than helping students with learning disabilities, these new regulations are likely to create more problems, Heyward said. For one thing, she noted, the difficulties these students are already experiencing in negotiating the academic and legal landscapes of secondary and postsecondary education will likely be exacerbated because "we haven't thought about how we make the connection between secondary and postsecondary."

Ironically, students with learning disabilities enter college with a built-in disadvantage in addition to their disabilities: they can't bring with them the complex network of support involved in almost all aspects of their academic lives (e.g., parents, teachers, IEP teams, special education programs, and services). Consequently, Heyward said, many students with learning disabilities aren't ready for this new, independent role of being their own decision-makers. Society, she continued, is essentially handing them the keys to a new car and telling them to go for a nice long drive, even though they've never had a driving lesson.

"We're taking students with disabilities from an environment in which we have said to them, the school district is primarily responsible for your appropriate education, and your parents and advocates are intimately involved in that. Students, if they participate in the process, participate in a very passive way," Heyward explained. "We now bring them into an environment and say, 'OK, guess what guys, new day. Jim, Mary, you are now responsible for what happens with your education, what happens with your accommodations. You have to take an active role and work with the campus Disabilities Services Office to make this happen. Oh yeah, and by the way, Mom and Dad, you have to step back now.'"

(continued from page 4)

policymakers can do to improve the students' chances of success in higher education.

Specific symposium sessions included:

- The Evolution of the Research on Students With Learning Disabilities in College and University Preparation, Access, and Success
- The Progress and Status of Legal Rights and Protections in College Access
- Innovation and Technology, Two Key Ingredients for Improving Preparation and Transition to College
- High School Exit Exams and College Admissions Testing: Performance, Validity, and Use
- Facts About the Preparation and Transitions of Learning-Disabled Students: A Snapshot From the National Longitudinal Transition Study
- Tech Transition Planning: The Key to College Success
- Non-degree Learning Opportunities for Young Adults With Learning Disabilities and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
- Personal Accounts: Student Perspectives of Overcoming Obstacles and Opportunities
- The Passport to Higher Education: The Disability Documentation That Students Need
- Service and Support: Roles and Responsibilities of College Disability Service Personnel
- College Admissions: Special Considerations for Students With Learning Disabilities

This issue of *ETS Policy Notes* offers an overview of the concerns, considerations, and insights brought to light in these sessions.

*... and by the way, Mom and Dad,  
you have to step back now.*

— Salome Heyward

And while they're just getting used to this new game plan, society throws them another curve ball, Heyward said: "We tell them, 'Oh, and by the way, there are all these new rules and responsibilities that you and your institution of choice have to adhere to — make sure you don't mess up.' Surprise, surprise," she quipped. "We have conflicts."

Unfortunately, said Heyward, the areas of potential conflict don't stop here. Others include the fact that colleges and universities have the right to decide that a previously diagnosed student doesn't have a learning disability after all, or isn't entitled to the accommodations he or she is used to receiving, she explained. Institutions can even redefine a student's disability and decide the student requires academic adjustments that are different from the ones the student has become comfortable with.

There's also a question of equitability and fairness: Under recent changes to IDEA, high schools are no longer required to update documentation and conduct new testing, so how can society provide updated testing for students who need it and can't afford it?

"There's a huge gap between the haves and have-nots when it comes to providing this new documentation that every college and university demands in order to provide services to students with disabilities," Heyward noted.

And then there are parents. She pointed out that, once their child enters college, parents are expected to step back, relinquish their decades-long role as their child's primary advocate, and become passive observers of their child's educational progress. For most parents, taking a hands-off approach is easier said than done.

The question of what it means to provide “reasonable accommodations” must also be considered. “What we’re doing is balancing the right of an individual with a disability to be included against the right of the institution to protect the integrity of its services and programs,” Heyward explained. “And that’s not an exact science.”

The upshot of all this, she said, is that it creates an adversarial environment when the exact opposite is needed. “Much of what has happened in terms of the new legislation and new regulations sort of divides us and pushes us further away from the table and our ability to collaborate,” Heyward noted.

So what are students supposed to do if they want to make it in college? Heyward said that they — and their institutions — must be prepared to take on clear roles and responsibilities and deal with potential areas of conflict.

## Should Learning Be Addictive?

In his presentation on technology and how it's reshaping schools and education systems that students with learning disabilities rely on, **Richard Varn**, president of RJV Consulting, urged symposium attendees to think about diverse solutions.

“Innovation allows us to repurpose our time, our resources, our money, our people into something that’s a higher calling, a higher purpose,” said Varn, who’s also an ETS Trustee.

But far too often, he said, rather than using new, innovative tools to make a process more effective or more efficient, institutions continue to rely on old, tried-and-true ways.

### THE STUDENT'S ROLE

- Present documentation that their disability meets the legal definition and that supports the need for each and every accommodation requested
- Embrace new responsibilities
- Take ownership of disability
- Respect the obligation to be qualified
- Participate in the accommodation process

### THE INSTITUTION'S ROLE

- Educate the consumer
- Determine the proper role of parents
- Individualize assessments
- Lessen the burden of accessing helpful technology
- Help students re-establish that they have a disability and meet the legal definition of having a disability
- Participate fully in the accommodation process

### AREAS OF POTENTIAL CONFLICT

- Establishing entitlement to services
- Sharing responsibilities
- Determining the role of parents/advocates
- Balancing the right to accommodations and the right to protect the integrity of programs and services

"We keep doing everything we used to do with the old technology, the context of which is industrial era," Varn said, noting that educators didn't tap into the "I-era" (of the Internet) to change how they work. "And we're about to go into the R-era

## *Would it be unethical to actually make learning addictive?*

— Richard Varn

of robotics and artificial intelligence, and we still are operating under an industrial model."

"We passionately, methodically search for all the best ways to do everything in our society: the college of education teaching the best methods of teaching, the business people teaching the best way to manage something," Varn said. "We have this wealth of resources in higher education and, again, the education community and in business, but we don't apply it to ourselves."

He said that society could learn a lot from businesses that make their products — such as video games — cool, challenging, and fun so students get hooked on them. "Would it be unethical to actually make learning addictive?" Varn asked.

Because most parents and educators would probably be thrilled to see students as excited about learning as they are about the latest computer technology or game, it makes sense that society should look to technology to customize learning, integrate systems, and enhance data systems — changes that would improve education and engage more students, he said.

In particular, he said, educators and policymakers should be asking themselves, "What are the inherent advantages of technology that we should

be considering in the way we prepare our students in the K-12 environment, as they think about moving on?"

For example, Varn said that educators should be customizing and individualizing instruction for every student, not just for those with disabilities. "Democratization of access to everything, the content, the tool — it should be nonlinear," he said.

## Murky State Policies

The complexities of state accommodation regulations are enough to baffle just about anyone. Yet, said **Martha Thurlow**, director of the National Center on Educational Outcomes at the University of Minnesota, it's critical that educators and advocates who work with students with learning disabilities fully understand these policies.

"How many of you have actually looked at your state's accommodations policies?" she asked the audience during her presentation. "If you have, and you don't understand them, you're not alone."

According to Thurlow, these policies have become increasingly complex over the years. They're inconsistent from state to state and, more often than not, the language used to explain them is murky at best.

At the same time, regulations regarding accommodations have become increasingly important for students with learning disabilities — and the ramifications of misinterpreting them or overlooking important details can be devastating.

For example, allowing an accommodation on a high school exit exam in certain states could mean that the student using that accommodation won't receive a standard diploma, Thurlow said.

To complicate matters further, she continued, some states use a college admission test as their high school exit exam, which can affect accommodations policies.

Other states allow students to use “alternative routes” for their high school exit exams. These options, said Thurlow, are generally available to students with disabilities and those without, and include allowing students to use their scores from ACT® or SAT® tests in place of passing an exit exam. Or the state may let students use exceptional course grades or a portfolio of classroom accomplishments to demonstrate that they’ve met the graduation criteria.

When alternative route options are used appropriately, they can benefit students tremendously, Thurlow said, particularly those with learning disabilities. But she was quick to add that “many alternative routes are not alternative” but a “lowering of standards.”

“I would argue that, if we are really concerned about what’s going on for kids with disabilities, particularly kids with learning disabilities, we should be thinking really hard about … making sure that our accommodations are meeting students’ needs.”

## Insights on Accommodations

Picking up where Thurlow left off, ETS research scientist **Cara Cahalan-Laitusis** expanded on

### THE “BIG 4” ACCOMMODATIONS

- Extra time
- Read-aloud options for reading tests
- Calculator use for math tests
- Computer, spell-check, or scribe use for essay and writing tests

*How many of you have actually looked at your state's accommodations policies?*

— Martha Thurlow

inconsistencies between state and admissions assessments, focusing on what she calls the “Big 4” accommodations: extra time, read-aloud options for reading tests, calculator use for math tests, and using a computer, spell-check, or scribe for essay and writing tests.

She explained that, although several states don’t consider extra time to be an accommodation, it’s still considered an accommodation by all college admissions testing programs.

States are far less liberal when it comes to read-aloud options. For most states, said Cahalan-Laitusis, read-aloud is an accommodation that’s either not allowed or results in an unrecorded score. Most college admissions programs, however, treat it as an allowable accommodation.

Accommodation policies for using computers when taking a writing and essay test are similarly diverse: It’s an allowable accommodation for most state assessments (although spell-check and grammar-check are limited), while some college admissions programs treat it as a strictly regulated but allowable accommodation and other programs actually administer their test to all students via computer.

Cahalan-Laitusis also found differences among state and admissions programs with respect to their policies for using calculators on math tests. Most admissions programs permit all students to use calculators, while some states only allow test takers to use them on non-mathematics test sections.

Ironically, although extra time is perhaps the most popular accommodation, research shows

that, on average, extra time is more likely to help medium- and high-ability students than low-ability students without a disability, Cahalan-Laitusis reported. In fact, she noted, low-ability students with learning disabilities may actually perform worse when given extra time without section breaks.

Given these findings, Cahalan-Laitusis said that if students with learning disabilities were to ask her for advice, she would tell them the following:

- Research has shown that not all accommodations will improve test scores — some may actually decrease them. So students should take practice tests with and without the accommodations to find out which are best for them.

- Know what accommodations they need, both in the classroom and on tests, and why they need them so that they can advocate for themselves.
- Be prepared. Testing accommodations in K-12 are far more liberal than those offered after K-12, so students need to consider what they really need versus the accommodations they've become accustomed to.
- Have an updated psycho-educational evaluation before leaving high school.
- Be aware that documentation does not necessarily guarantee accommodations if the disability does not substantially limit a major life activity, relative to the average person.

### SAMPLING OF ACCOMMODATION POLICIES

Accommodation	State Policy	Admissions Policy
Extra time	Not considered an accommodation in several states; liberal time limits for all students in most states.	Accommodation on all admissions tests; still flagged on law school and medical school admissions tests.
Read-aloud for reading tests	Modification in most states; many states allow it and then do not aggregate test scores.	Allowable accommodation on most admissions tests.
Calculator for math tests	Some states allow calculators on math tests; others limit them only to non-calculation test sections.	Most admissions tests allow all students to use calculators.
Computer for essays	Allowable accommodation on most state assessments, although spell-check and grammar-check are limited.	Strictly regulated allowable accommodation on some admissions tests due to score comparability between computer and paper essays; method of assessing all students for other admissions tests.
Scribe for essays	Allowable on most state assessments, but some states are very strict with regard to implementation (e.g., regulations on spelling every word and indicating all punctuation marks and capitalizations).	Allowable accommodation on most admissions tests (varied guidelines on spelling and punctuation).

## Room for Improvement

Turning his attention to what research and data say about the progress students with learning disabilities have been making in education, **Jose Blackorby**, program manager for the Disability Policy Program and associate director in the Center for Education and Human Services at SRI International, provided an in-depth look at some of the information revealed by the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) and the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS-2).

The NLTS and the 10-year NLTS-2 provide extensive information about students with learning disabilities, said Blackorby, who codirects the Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study and is on the research team for NLTS-2.

Mandated by Congress in 1983, the NLTS is the first nationally representative database on students with disabilities. It provides the best picture available of the experiences of young people with disabilities while they are enrolled in secondary school and in subsequent years. The NLTS data provide a comprehensive look at aspects of the characteristics and lives of young people with disabilities such as: their disability categories and functional abilities, ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic status, school programs in which they participated, school performance including completion status, and participation in postsecondary education.

"There are literally thousands of questions that you can answer with the database," Blackorby explained. "But essentially, you can distill all of them down to these: Who are the kids? What are the programs that they receive? What kinds of achievements and outcomes do they achieve while in high school and later? What kinds of services

and experiences contribute to better results? And how have programs and experiences and achievements changed from the original NLTS in the late '80s?"

After detailing many of the most significant findings, Blackorby noted the following:

- More than half of students with learning disabilities have a primary transition goal of attending postsecondary education.
- As with students in the general population, the course load of students with learning disabilities is increasingly becoming heavily academic.
- They are participating in state tests to a greater degree, and they are taking college entrance examinations.
- To succeed in general education, many continue to need curriculum modification and accommodations.
- Even though many are pursuing postsecondary education directly after high school, employment is the most commonly cited primary transition goal for these students (57 percent).
- Participation in vocational education has declined over time as participation in academic courses has increased.
- There appears to be a trend for students with learning disabilities to achieve greater success in the labor market, but this trend is coupled with their participation in postsecondary education. So there's less full-time work and more part-time work, which is consistent with their roles as students.

According to Blackorby, the transition planning process seems to be working “reasonably well,” although there’s still room for improvement.

While “this trend toward greater participation in postsecondary education is a good one,” he said, it’s also important to “recognize that when we actually measure the academic performance of students with learning disabilities, many of them — far too many of them — still have very low levels of academic achievement, and that is going to affect them as they move to postsecondary education and into the workplace.”

## Smoothing the Transition

In addition to presentations from expert speakers, the symposium featured several concurrent panel discussions organized with the goal of giving participants an opportunity to explore and better understand the diverse concerns, viewpoints, and experiences of students, parents, and practitioners who deal first-hand with learning disabilities, either personally or professionally.

Panel contributors included disability service providers, school counselors, secondary and postsecondary educators, and parents. Two panel discussions featured students with learning disabilities, who presented candid and personal accounts of their experiences in preparing for, applying to, enrolling in, and attending college, and adjusting to postsecondary demands, as well as insights about the support they received and obstacles they encountered along the way.

In a panel session focusing on “tech transitional planning,” **Manju Banerjee**, former director of Disability Services at Lesley University in Cambridge, Mass., and currently an assistant

professor at the University of Connecticut, discussed the implications of today’s “digital-learning environment” for students with learning disabilities.

According to Banerjee, all students, including those with learning disabilities, need to be proficient users of mainstream technology, such as word processing, spreadsheet, database, web, e-mail, and multimedia applications. That being the case, she said, it’s more important than ever that transition plans address this need and for students and their advocates to consider schools’ technology-skill requirements in their transition inquiries.

A discussion led by **Arlyn Roffman**, professor of special education at Lesley University and the founding director of the Threshold Program, a non-degree transition program for young adults with learning disabilities, focused on learning opportunities for students with learning disabilities who opt against attending college.

According to Roffman, roughly 80 percent of students with learning disabilities decide not to seek a college degree. Too often, she said, these students are unemployed or underemployed in low-salary positions. They also tend to remain dependent on parents longer than their peers who don’t have learning disabilities. Clearly, Roffman said, these students need to pursue alternative

### **TRANSITION PLANS MUST ADDRESS:**

- More than auxiliary aids and assistive technologies for LD; change thinking from K-12 to K-21
- Study skills for technology-based learning environments, starting in high school
- Communication complexities in a digital age, and virtual learning communities
- An expanded repertoire of college transition inquiries to find a “technological match” for high school students with LD

options for continued learning beyond high school in order to acquire the skills and knowledge they need to lead more successful, independent lives.

Roffman then discussed the options available to these students, including college-based, non-degree transition programs; community-based independent-living programs; vocational training; and adult education programs.

Offering another perspective on the issue of postsecondary transitional planning for students with learning disabilities was **James Rein**, an expert on postsecondary options for young adults with learning disabilities and Asperger's syndrome, which is a neurobiological disorder that typically affects social and communication skills.

Rein focused his panel session on key questions school counselors, parents, and students with learning disabilities need to ask when sorting through postsecondary options.

Parents and other adult advisers need to help students make informed decisions when choosing a school, he said. And to do this, they must first evaluate the student's strengths and challenges as honestly and accurately as possible, and use that information to determine the best postsecondary situation for that student.

This assessment, Rein said, should begin with a careful appraisal of the student's academic skills and abilities (e.g., level and types of learning disabilities, accurate reading and math levels, level of motivation, and the student's willingness and ability to access resources). After that, the student's social skills, emotional development (e.g., ability to seek help and delay gratification, deal with stress, rejection, and failure), and ability to live independently must be considered.

Rein also reminded attendees that one of the main goals of college or a postsecondary program is to

enable students to live happy, independent lives. And this, he added, involves gaining skills for employment.

## CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING POSTSECONDARY OPTIONS

- Location.
- Level of competitiveness and admissions requirements.
- Programs of study. (Ideally, students should be able to acquire skills and knowledge that will help them to lead independent lives.)
- Cost.
- Support programs. (What's offered and what are the requirements?)
- Living conditions.
- Extracurricular activities.

**Sheldon Horowitz**, director of Professional Services at NCLD and **Penny Dragonetti**, director of Training and Education at the Family Support Center of New Jersey, used their symposium session to provide insight into the role parents play before, during, and after the postsecondary transition — and how that role changes.

Horowitz and Dragonetti emphasized the important role parents play in preparing their children, academically and emotionally, for life after high school. It's a difficult thing to do, they said, and there's almost no research-based information to help parents know how to do it well.

Still, based on professional and personal experience (Dragonetti has two children with learning disabilities), both maintained that parents and educators need to prepare their children — and themselves — for independence.

"Letting go with love" is a simple phrase, said Dragonetti, but it's by no means easy to do. "The

degree to which we support [our children] really needs to change, and parents need to stay in touch with the need to slowly make those changes, so that our children can take the ball and run with it when it's time for them to do that," she said.

"This notion of allowing your child to fail is particularly difficult for parents, but it is incredibly important, because once kids leave the protection of IDEA, the protections of high school, there are natural consequences that occur in life," Dragonetti added. "And it's important for us, while we have our kids still living at home, while our children are going through transition, that we support them in dealing with natural consequences."

An essential element in the transition process is the paperwork that's involved. In LD terms, that's documentation of the learning disabilities. **Loring Brinckerhoff**, director of the Office of Disability Policy for ETS, is an expert on documentation who provided extensive information to help parents, students, and evaluators better understand documentation requirements and what they need to do to make a convincing accommodation case.

### **PARENT ROLE IN SPECIAL EDUCATION, PRE-TRANSITION**

- Decision-maker/team member
- Source of information
- Source of support
- Advocate for student
- Teacher of self-advocacy skills

### **PARENT ROLE IN TRANSITION**

- Letting go with love
- Encouraging independence
- Allowing child to fail
- Listening

He noted that accommodation requests for licensure exams and other tests that are used to make high-stakes decisions are receiving greater scrutiny nowadays, and "relative performance deficits" are no longer "cutting it for accommodations." So, Brinckerhoff said, it's important that documentation be prepared correctly. Mistakes that can hinder the accommodation process include:

- an accommodation request that's too sweeping and includes the student's learning preferences
- accommodations that are presented as a menu of options for students to try out that may not be supported by data
- evaluation recommendations that reflect a laundry list of multiple accommodations for a specific functional limitation
- evaluations that don't distinguish among study skills, remedial strategies, counseling, and ADA accommodations
- an accommodation request that's couched in disability jargon and isn't warranted
- student requests for accommodations that he or she hasn't used in the classroom during test-taking situations

### **College Admissions**

The symposium concluded with a session featuring admissions officers, who discussed the state of admissions for students with learning disabilities.

Speakers **Vincent Varrassi**, campus director of the Regional Center for College Students with Learning Disabilities at Fairleigh Dickinson University in Madison, N.J.; **Peter Rice**, director of admissions

at Middlesex Community College in Edison, N.J.; and **Corey Leneker**, outreach coordinator for Evergreen State College in Olympia, Wash., addressed a range of issues. The discussions focused on the type of students their institutions are trying to attract, the factors admissions officers look at when reviewing a college application, letters of recommendation, on-campus interviews, and the importance of standardized test scores in the admissions process.

They all agreed that the interview offers students an opportunity to “make that folder a person,” Rice said. Because college interviews, whether scheduled or unscheduled, can make a lasting impression, Varrassi suggested that parents role-play with their children to help the students prepare for the interviews.

“Coach them with some of the kinds of questions they might want to ask, or how they may want to frame some things about themselves,” he said. “It could be 15 minutes that could affect their future.” Leneker added that it’s also important for students to have “a sense of the institution, and to give them the sorts of tips and tools they need so they can present themselves authentically.”

*Coach them ... the college interview could be 15 minutes that could affect their future.*

— Vincent Varrassi

The panelists also tackled the sticky disclosure question: Should students inform admissions officers that they have a learning disability? Varrassi said that, because of legal concerns, many admissions officers would rather not

## WRITING QUALITY LD REPORTS — DOCUMENTATION AND REPORTS SHOULD:

- Be typed or printed on letterhead, dated, signed, and legible with the evaluator’s name, title, and professional credentials.
- Be recent: no more than 5 years old for LD, 3 years old for ADHD, and 6 months old for psychiatric disability.
- List reasons for referral.
- Provide a listing of tests used to establish the disability and to support the accommodation request. (Evaluation measures selected for the assessment battery should be reliable, valid, and age-appropriate.)
- Include developmental, educational, and medical histories.
- Have a clear statement of the disability.
- Include a “rule-out” statement.
- Provide appropriate measures of achievement.
- Clearly state test results, with all subtests noted.
- Have a clinical summary that recaps the high points, rules out alternative examination, and summarizes how the findings support any “substantial limitation” to a major life activity.
- Tie support for the requested accommodations to specific test results.
- Specifically address support for extended testing time by the evaluator.

know. However, he noted, disclosure can be a good strategy for students who can present their disability in a way that accentuates their ability to succeed in spite of their challenges.

Rice, on the other hand, said that from the community college perspective, the more information admissions officers have, the better prepared they will be to make informed decisions. It helps them figure out “what can I do to put this person in the ‘yes pile,’” he said.

Noting that he represents the point of view of a “noncompetitive institution,” Leneker said, “The more I know about who you are as a student and where you are when you arrive at my doorstep,

the more tools I have to help you become a member of our community.” He added: “In a lot of ways, we have dreams and hopes in our hands, and we take that responsibility very seriously.”

ETS research scientist **Catherine Millett** thanked all of the participants and echoed Leneker’s sentiments in her closing remarks. “There are many individuals who devote their lives to thinking about these issues,” she said. “We want you to continue to think of us when you bring together other groups who might be thinking about testing accommodations, or how to think about the role of testing in college admissions, or products and services that could help students move forward.”

ETS Policy Notes is published by the  
ETS Policy Information Center  
Educational Testing Service  
Rosedale Road, MS 19-R  
Princeton, NJ 08541-0001  
(609) 734-5212

e-mail: [pic@ets.org](mailto:pic@ets.org)

[www.ets.org/research/pic](http://www.ets.org/research/pic)

Director: Richard J. Coley

Editors: Amanda McBride, Linda H. Scatton, and Richard J. Coley

Copyright © 2007 by Educational Testing Service. All rights reserved. Educational Testing Service is an Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity Employer.

ETS and the ETS logo are registered trademarks of Educational Testing Service (ETS). LISTENING, LEARNING, LEADING, is a trademark of ETS. SAT is a registered trademark of The College Board. ACT is a registered trademark of ACT, Inc. (4799)

NON-PROFIT  
ORGANIZATION  
US POSTAGE  
PAID  
EDUCATIONAL  
TESTING SERVICE



*Listening. Learning. Leading.*

[www.ets.org](http://www.ets.org)