1 Who Is the Student in Transition to Postsecondary?

INTRODUCTION

Although career development for children, youth, and adults of all exceptionalities has been evolving since the turn of the nineteenth nineteenth century, the concept of high school transition and preparation for careers has only emerged since the 1950s. More recently, educators and policy makers are recognizing how important it is to understand the role of career development and postsecondary planning within the overall framework of adolescent development. Researchers are interested in the range of interventions believed to be positively associated with improved graduation rates and transition of youth with disabilities from school to employment and adult life roles.

Societal interest in career awareness, career choice, graduation pathways, and adjustment to adult roles has emerged as a new subfield within education. Preparation for transition from high school to postsecondary education and adult life involves changes in the self-concept, motivation, and development of the individual and is a fragile passage for the adolescent seeking to make difficult life choices (German, Martin, Marshall, & Sale, 2000; Michaels, 1994). This passage is even more delicate for youth with disabilities who need additional support and preparation to make the journey. For professionals seeking to help students on this journey, the process involves forming linkages among education and other human service agencies, including employment and training, adult services, and rehabilitation.

This chapter introduces readers to the young people who are in the process of transition to postsecondary settings and the developmental tasks they face during that transition. It provides an overview of current national trends in the participation of graduates with disabilities in postsecondary education and the success of youth in the transition process. The chapter discusses what we know about barriers to transition and the roles of students, families, and professionals in supporting successful transition to postsecondary settings.

WHO PARTICIPATES IN POSTSECONDARY OPTIONS? PARTICIPATION IN AND OUTCOMES OF POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Although young adults with disabilities who complete a college degree are just as likely to become employed as their peers without disabilities, they are much less prepared to enter college, less likely to enroll, and much less likely to complete college (National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, 2004a; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005).

Preparation for postsecondary settings. Many youth with disabilities are not adequately prepared to meet the entrance requirements and academic rigor of postsecondary institutions. Students with disabilities are less likely than their peers without disabilities to complete a full secondary school academic curriculum, especially in the math and science curriculum areas. Furthermore, many are not encouraged in high school to extend their education beyond secondary school. It remains true today that secondary students with disabilities seldom attend or have minimal involvement in their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings and therefore are unprepared with a postsecondary transition plan or to self-advocate for their needs (Miller, Lombard, & Corbey, 2006; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, & Levine, 2005). When ranked according to qualifications for college admission, students with disabilities remain less likely than their peers to be minimally qualified, based on an index score of grades, class rank, National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) composite test scores, and SAT/ACT scores (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2000a). However, attention to helping youth prepare for postsecondary education is strengthening access across the nation.

Increased number of students in college who report disabilities. The number of postsecondary students (all types of institutions) reporting a disability has increased dramatically, climbing from 2.6 percent in 1978 to 9.2 percent in 1994, 19 percent in 1996 (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996), and 20 percent in 2002 (Wagner et al., 2005). This increase is partly a result of

changes in the Higher Education Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and Americans with Disabilities Act that require institutions of higher education (two- and four-year colleges and universities, and vocational and technical schools) to provide reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. Since 1990, there has been a 90 percent increase in the number of colleges, universities, technical institutions, and career technical centers offering opportunities for persons with disabilities to continue education (National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational Supports, 2000; Pierangelo & Crane, 1997; Sharpe, Bruininks, Blacklock, Benson, & Johnson, 2004; Skinner, 2004).

Long-term outcomes of participation in college. While substantial federal and state investments in creating a "seamless" transition for students with disabilities have increased enrollment in postsecondary education programs, they have not had a significant impact on the completion of programs by students with disabilities (Blackorby & Wagner, 2002; Gilmore, Bose, & Hart, 2002). Large gaps remain in comparison to students without disabilities. Studies have found that only 27 percent of students with disabilities enroll in postsecondary education compared with 69 percent of students without disabilities (U.S. Department of Labor, 2005). More than 26 percent of freshmen with disabilities at four-year colleges *do not return* for their sophomore year (Izzo, Hertzfeld, Simmons-Reed, & Aaron, 2001) compared with 73 percent of students without disabilities (ACT, 2008). Students with disabilities who enroll in postsecondary institutions are less likely than their nondisabled counterparts to complete a bachelor's degree (16 percent and 52 percent, respectively) (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2003a).

The good news is that students with disabilities who do earn a bachelor's degree do almost as well with employment as do those individuals without a disability (67 percent of youth with disabilities with a bachelor's degree were working full time compared with 73 percent for persons without disabilities holding the same degree) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000; Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE), 2008). Nonetheless, the enrollment of people with disabilities in postsecondary institutions is *still 50 percent lower than enrollment among the general population* (Getzel, Stodden, & Briel, 2001; Roessler & Rumrill, 1998; Sharpe & Johnson, 2001; Vreeburg-Izzo, Hertzfeld, Simmons-Reed, & Aaron, 2001). This gap in educational attainment effects long-term employment prospects.

What Are the Barriers to Participation in Postsecondary Education?

Many college students with and without disabilities are faced with challenging physical and social environments. These challenges are

compounded for students with disabilities because they are faced with architectural barriers, attitudinal misperceptions about their skills and abilities by faculty, staff, and their nondisabled peers (Justesen & Justesen, 2000), as well as scarce support services. Youth face several barriers as they prepare for and participate in postsecondary schools education.

Lack of identification of the disability in early school years. Many students with disabilities are not appropriately identified and provided special education and related services during childhood and adolescent years. For example, 31 percent of national survey respondents with specific learning disabilities (SLD) indicated that their disability was first identified at the postsecondary level (University of Hawai'i at Manoa, 2000). When declaring a primary disability, 44 percent of participants with an attention deficit disorder (ADD) indicated that their disability was first identified at the postsecondary level (Izzo & Lamb, 2002). Delayed identification prevents students from benefiting from years of needed services and often requires that they seek support services on the college campus. Greater attention to early identification and intervention can prevent these difficulties.

Lack of access to guidance counseling. Dropout rates and receipt of alternative diplomas are much higher for youth with disabilities than for their nondisabled peers. Many youth with disabilities at the high school level are pulled out of content classes and placed into special education classes and as a result may not meet the entry requirements of many postsecondary schools. Others face barriers to tests and assessments, such as the SAT Reasoning Test, which may require testing accommodations. Finally, many academic and career counselors lack the necessary skills to provide guidance to students with disabilities. Secondary students are often left with inadequate guidance because of poor coordination among teachers and counseling staff (Stodden, Galloway, & Stodden, 2003; Stodden, Jones, & Chang, 2002). Strengthening counselor understanding of the needs of youth with disabilities can overcome these challenges.

Lack of financial support through college. Individuals with disabilities are more likely to face financial barriers during postsecondary education. Individuals with disabilities are more than twice as likely to live below the poverty line as individuals without disabilities (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). At the same time, research has shown that few students with disabilities are accessing disability benefits that are available to them in postsecondary study. As one study shows, only 8.3 percent of postsecondary students with disabilities participate in supplemental security income (SSI) and social security disability insurance (SSDI) disability programs. In general, postsecondary students with disabilities, when compared with nondisabled peers, receive less financial aid and are unable to participate in assistance programs because of a lack of awareness about SSI

or SSDI disability benefits or work incentive programs (Berry & Jones, 2000). Educating students about available benefits and resources while they are in high school can make the difference between independence and long-term dependence.

Attitudes and stigma. Many youth who attend college experience negative self-concept, poor socialization skills, stress and anxiety, and professors who are reluctant to help (Chadsey & Sheldon, 1998; Wolanin & Steele, 2004). Students with disabilities choose to remain invisible because they may be concerned about the "*stigma of accommodations,*" believing that "Teachers and other students think I'm getting away with something when I'm given accommodations" (National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational Supports [NCSPES], 2000, p. 11). Preparation for self-advocacy in high school and a welcoming attitude on the part of postsecondary institutions can reduce these stresses.

Barriers for culturally and linguistically diverse students. Entering postsecondary education from high school can be a stressful process for students with disabilities. These gaps are even greater for students with significant disabilities and who are culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD). Compared with their non-CLD peers, CLD students with disabilities are more likely to face language and social barriers and the negative effects of having grown up in poverty, and have difficulty processing "standard English" oral and written information, all of which may contribute to their risk of school failure (Kochhar-Bryant & Greene, 2008; Greene & Nefsky, 1999).

Furthermore, students with disabilities who are from diverse cultures are less likely to disclose their disability and receive support services in postsecondary schools (Flowers, Edwards, & Pusch, 1996; Hart, Zafft, & Zimbrich, 2001; Hasnain, 2001; Stodden et al., 2002). These conditions point to the need for greater assistance to culturally and linguistically diverse postsecondary students.

Gap in technology access. Lack of access to technology impedes students' ability to achieve their potential in high school and to use technology in the postsecondary environments. Only 28.4 percent of Americans with disabilities have access to the Internet at home or work, compared with 56.7 percent of those without disabilities. Almost 60 percent of Americans with disabilities have never used a personal computer, compared with less than 25 percent of Americans without disabilities (Kaye, 2000; National Organization on Disability, 2000). When students with disabilities do have access to technology in high school, it is more than likely that they *will not be able to take the technology with them after graduation* (Gaylord, Johnson, Lehr, Bremer, & Hasazi, 2004). Students must be prepared to advocate for their technological needs in the postsecondary setting.

Inadequate preparation of college faculty. A very important factor that affects students' persistence and retention is the lack of awareness of faculty members of the disability needs of students, available supports on campus, and their responsibility for making accommodations. Failure to make needed accommodations may lead to diminished student performance and invite misunderstanding or conflict that could lead to dropping out or to adversarial relationships with the institution (National Council on Disability, 2003b). Postsecondary institutions can promote student persistence and retention by educating faculty in accommodations for students with disabilities, and promoting understanding of students' educational challenges. **Box 1.1** describes the postsecondary experiences of a twenty-one-year-old student with learning disabilities in his first year.

Box 1.1 **Reflection on My Cousin's Postsecondary Experience**

My cousin Brian is a 21-year-old student at Cypress College and he has a learning disability. He struggles with reading and writing, has difficulty understanding assignments, has very poor hand writing and has difficulty with written expressive language skills. As a result, he uses a computer for all his assignments and note taking. Brian worked very hard in high school and knew early on that he wanted to attend Cypress College. Although Brian did not believe that he faced special barriers to admission, once he enrolled in college he faced many obstacles. He found that it was too difficult for him to take the recommended full freshman course load and it took him longer to complete assignments and grasp academic concepts.

While Brian was in college, he struggled in English and Sociology classes, which were required, but he excelled in math and business courses. He had difficulty completing exams in the required time period so through student disability services he participated in special test taking facilities which allowed him extended time on tests. As a result, Brian saw a huge improvement in his grades and in his self-confidence. At Cypress College Brian has also had a lot of support from his professors. His supported him and made themselves available to assist with his academics outside of class. Some professors were willing to review lessons with him after class or during office hours. At first Brian was very hesitant to ask his professors for this extra help because he didn't want them to think that he was incapable of learning the material. However, later Brian realized that his teacher's time and patience with him was a key component to assisting him through the sometimes difficult course material.

Brian's support system of his family and teachers to encourage, assist and support him has played an important role in Brian's achievements. When I asked Brian where he sees himself in five years, he hesitated and said that was a very difficult question for him to answer. He is majoring in accounting and hopes to be as successful as he can in the field. Brian wants to use the skills he has learned in college to help him succeed in

his career. He does not want his learning disability to interfere with his desire to succeed. He understands that he will have to continue to work hard, stay focused and set realistic and achievable goals for himself. Brian knows that just because he has been able to be successful in college doesn't mean that his challenges will end when he graduates. He knows he will have lifelong struggles in certain areas and he feels that college has prepared him for many challenges he may face once he graduates. In his final year of college, Brian was offered a job at a top level accounting firm for when he graduates.

Brian's recommendations to postsecondary students are that he feels it is important not to waste time trying to push yourself beyond what you can really handle. Seeking help and using the supports of the college will make the postsecondary experience much more pleasant if you are having difficulties. Brian believes that having open communication with professors is key so they can help assist. He also learned that having a positive mindset will keep you focused to achieve the goals you have set for yourself (S. Kauffman, Special Educator, 2007, reprinted with permission).

What Do We Know About Youth Employment After High School?

Large gaps continue to exist between young people with disabilities and the remainder of the population with regard to education, transition, economic, and independent living outcomes. Despite decades of federal and state initiatives to improve employment outcomes for youth with disabilities, employment outcomes continue to reflect the widest gulf between youth with disabilities and the general population (Blanck, 2000). According to the Census Bureau (McNeil, 2000), only three in ten working-aged people with disabilities are employed full time, compared with eight in ten people in the rest of the population. Two years after high school, only about 43 percent of young people with disabilities were employed, compared with 69 percent of their peers (Cameto, 2005; Fabian, Lent, and Willis, 1998). Currently, 20 percent of students in special education who complete high school are enrolled in postsecondary education compared with 68 percent of the general student population (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, & Levine, 2005; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005). And, three to five years after high school, only a little more than half become employed compared with 69 percent of their peers.

What Are the Barriers to Employment for Youth with Disabilities?

Lack of career-related course work. While more than half (56 percent) of students with disabilities had a goal of finding competitive employment after leaving high school, many who choose to enter directly into employment

after completing high school are not adequately prepared to reach their goals (Wagner et al., 2005). Students with disabilities are less likely than students without disabilities to complete courses in high school that prepare them to succeed in skilled employment. Preparation must begin in the early school years to ensure that students participate in appropriate career development courses. *Schools can bridge the gap* by providing work experiences, career and academic counseling, job coaching, and mentoring opportunities while encouraging students to enroll in the kinds of academic courses that will prepare them to succeed in work and college.

Work-based learning experiences in school. Over the past 15 years, work-based learning experiences have become more available to youth with disabilities (Wagner et al., 2003). According to parents' reports, almost 60 percent of youth with disabilities were employed during a one-year period in high school, some at work-study jobs, but the vast majority at non–school-related jobs (Cameto, Marder, Wagner, & Cardoso, 2003). Approximately 15 percent of youth with disabilities held work-study jobs in a given year (6 percentage points more than in 1987); increases of 14 to 18 percentage points were significant for youth with cognitive disabilities, emotional disturbance, or multiple disabilities. The most common work-study placements are at food service (19 percent), maintenance (16 percent), and clerical (15 percent) jobs.

More than 90 percent of youth in work-study jobs receive school credit or pay for their work. Older youth are more likely than younger youth to have work-study jobs. Work-study employment rates are approximately 10 percent for youth fifteen years of age or younger, 15 percent for sixteen-year-olds, and 19 percent for seventeen-year-olds. The percentage of youth with work-study jobs varies for youth in different disability categories. Youth with speech impairments or learning disabilities are the least likely to have work-study jobs (7 percent and 10 percent, respectively). In contrast, approximately 30 percent of youth with mental retardation, autism, multiple disabilities, or deaf-blindness hold work-study jobs (Wagner & Cameto, 2004). Participation in work-based learning is associated with successful outcomes for youth with disabilities.

ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT, CAREER COUNSELING, AND POSTSECONDARY CHOICES

All adolescents face a range of developmental tasks as they make the transition from high school to adult roles and make difficult choices about relationships, careers, and postsecondary options. Exploring and forming a clear choice about a career path is a very important stage for older adolescents and young adults (Super, 1963). Transition from high school to postsecondary involves a

series of complex decisions that begin with defining the end point (the postsecondary goal). Older adolescents enter the high school transition process with the goal of becoming independently functioning adults, as they strive to meet both personal and career-related needs.

Adolescent Development and the Brain

The adolescent brain. With the exception of infancy, early adolescence is the time when a child's body and brain grow and change faster than in any other phase of life. The student is in a process of change from child to adolescent, yet the change in environment from middle school to high school is a sudden *event.* Since most children are developing at different rates, some come into high school ready for the changes, others struggle to keep up, and still others fall behind. As with all school transitions, the transition to high school occurs as a "one-size-fits-all" event to which all youth are expected to adapt.

Recent brain research reveals that during the teen years up to age fifteen, the areas in the middle and back of the brain associated with associative thinking and language reach their peak growth rates (Wilson & Horch, 2004). The growth spurt is most predominant just before puberty in the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain crucial to information synthesis. The prefrontal cortex is the area of the brain that controls planning, working memory, organization, insight, judgment, mood modulation, and inhibition of inappropriate behaviors (Arnsten & Shansky, 2004). This area of the brain is not mature until about eighteen years of age (Spinks, 2002). The prefrontal cortex appears to be the last region of the brain to mature (Casey, Giedd, & Thomas, 2000), undergoing major changes throughout puberty and continuing until age twenty-five. These recent findings about adolescent brain development have major implications for classroom practices, student supports, and transition. Only recently have educational researchers and practitioners begun to relate new brain research to learning, particularly for atypical learners.

Recent research also addresses new evidence that the nature of early adulthood is changing. The period before adulthood is lengthening, often spanning the twenties and even extending into the thirties. Pathways into and through adulthood have become less linear and predictable (Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2004). These changes have significance for postsecondary institutions, employers, and policies that are aimed at supporting adolescents and young adults as they make the transition to adulthood.

Adolescent Development and Implications for Transition

The concept of transition was introduced as part of Ginsberg, Ginsberg, Axelrod, and Herman's (1951) developmental/self-concept theory. Ginsberg and colleagues' vocational choice theory described three stages—the Fantasy

period, the Tentative period, and the Realistic period. The Fantasy period reflects the young child's arbitrary and unrealistic preferences about occupations and choices (Osipow, 1983; Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996).

In the Tentative period, children consider what they are interested in and like to do, their abilities, and the value of different vocations. Ginsberg and colleagues define the Transition stage as the closing of the Tentative period, which occurs at about age seventeen or eighteen. In this stage, individuals begin to make immediate, concrete, and realistic decisions about their career future. The Realistic period involves the actual entry into work or college and the development of a career pattern and ultimately a career focus or specialization. As Ginsberg and colleagues' theory demonstrates, the logic of transition planning is rooted in several assumptions about the tasks of adolescent development, one of which is career decision making and vocational awareness. Understanding the characteristics of the stages of adolescence helps educators design the types of education and transition services most appropriate for middle and high school age youth. Adolescence is recognized as a stage, or "passage," in which the adolescent undergoes substantial transformations, physically, psychologically, emotionally, and socially (Adams, Gullotta, & Montemayor, 1992; Blos, 1962, 1979; Erikson, 1968). Krup (1987) synthesized literature to yield the following definitions of transition

> A transition is a natural process of disorientation and reorientation, caused by an event or non-event, that alters the individual's perception of self and the world, demands a change in assumptions or behavior, and may lead either to growth or deterioration; the choice rests with the individual. (p. 4)

Smith, Price, and Marsh (1986) describe adolescence as (1) a transitional period between childhood and adulthood, (2) the period during which an emotionally mature person reaches the final stages of physical and mental development, and (3) the period of attainment of maturity (p. 212). Michaels (1994) asserted that the period of adolescence may be better conceptualized as one of floundering and experimentation, during which many different roles, identities, and experiences will be "tried on" (p. 12).

Phelan, Davidson, and Yu (1998) eloquently describe adolescence as a "critical period fraught with promise and peril—a time of passage in which biological, emotional, and social factors converge to forecast the future of youth adults" (p. 2).

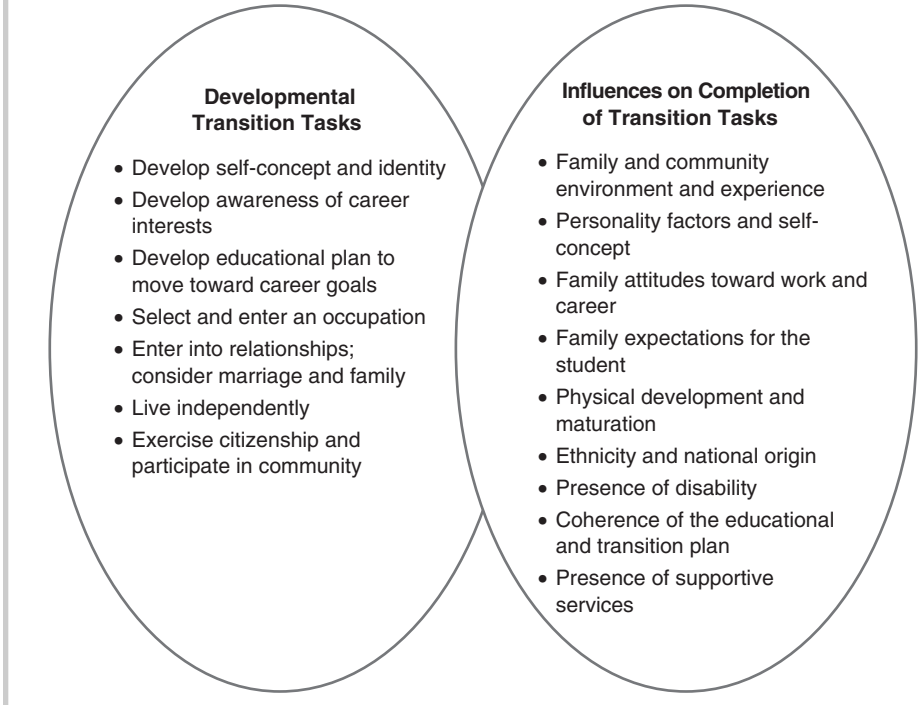
The processes of adjusting and adapting to the various "worlds" of adolescents—home, family, teachers, peer groups—requires competencies and skills for transitions to be successful, particularly for students with disabilities. Phelan, Davidson, and Yu point out that students' ability to move

between these settings and adapt to different settings has great implications for the quality of their lives and their chances of using the educational system as a stepping stone to further education, productive work experiences, and a meaningful adult life. Transition planning needs to address these multiple borders and the complexity of youths' efforts to negotiate them.

Among the various developmental frameworks, there are some common "tasks" or developmental transitions that the adolescent must accomplish. They must do the following:

- Look toward their future for the first time in their lives, as well as deal with the present (Bee & Mitchell, 1980).
- Confront the development of an identity or concept of self (Erikson, 1968).
- Pursue an occupation.
- Enter into intimate relationships and consider marriage and family.
- Live apart from the family.
- Exercise citizenship and participate in the community.

Figure 1.1 Developmental Transition Tasks of Adolescence and Influences on Successful Accomplishment



All adolescents vary in their rate of development and maturation and ability to negotiate the various tasks of childhood. The physical and social effects of disabilities, however, can provide special challenges and can interfere with the successful passage through each of the transitional areas outlined above. Transition service planning must be designed to respond to a wide range of disabling conditions, stages of adolescent adjustment, and family and environmental circumstances.

Career Counseling Needs

A longitudinal study by Amundson, Borgen, and Tench (1996) found that young people left high school unprepared for current career realities and that both the career and personal areas of their lives were in a state of change and uncertainty. At the end of their final year of high school, young people in the study expressed optimism about entering the career area of their choice and they expected to be successful workers in challenging jobs that offered personal satisfaction. About half of the respondents indicated some concern about meeting postsecondary entrance standards. Approximately nine and eighteen months following graduation, depression, self-esteem, and anxiety were correlated with a range of perceived problems, including money, lack of support from family and friends, internal attribution of general transition problems, external attribution of career/employment difficulties, and lack of job satisfaction.

At the end of the study, some of the young people were interviewed. They were asked about factors that helped or hindered the post–high school transition. Positive factors included supportive family and friends, making money, satisfying leisure activities, personal achievements, and educational success. Negative factors included relationship problems, career confusion, financial difficulties, unemployment, lack of satisfying work, lack of postsecondary educational opportunities, and difficulty in adjusting to postsecondary educational demands.

Developmentally, the young people were trying to meet personal and career-related needs, which were in a state of flux and uncertainty. It was apparent that a lack of progress in one area could have a negative influence on the other (e.g., an inability to gain postsecondary educational admission or paid work could drastically alter one's ability to move from being a dependent adolescent to an independent adult).

The above study, corroborated by additional recent studies (Amundson, Harris-Bowlsbey, & Niles, 2005; Borgen, Amundson, & Reuter, 2004), suggests a need for a broader view of career guidance and counseling—counseling that recognizes the developmental needs of young people, the influence of social and economic changes, and the importance of basing

intervention strategies on personal and career competence, all within a context of diminished and changing opportunities for choice. To address this broader range of issues, Amundson and colleagues employed a competence model with eight main areas: *purpose, problem solving, communication skills, theoretical knowledge, applied knowledge, organizational adaptability, human-relations skills*, and *self-confidence.* Counseling strategies that facilitate a smoother transition include developing flexibility in career planning and multiple plans for transition; self-advocacy and marketing; managing change; meeting basic needs for meaning, physical, and emotional security; coping with stress; coping with loss; bridging programs that link education and work experience; and information and information access on careers and skill requirements. **Box 1.2** illustrates an innovative program that links postsecondary education and independent living experiences for young adults with intellectual disabilities.

Box 1.2

Learning into Future Environment (LIFE) Program Provides Postsecondary Education for Young Adults with Severe Challenges

Over the past few years, some two- and four-year colleges and universities are providing innovative independent living programs and courses to students with disabilities. For example, the Kellar Institute for Human DisAbilities at the George Mason University in Virginia, has launched a new program to prepare students with disabilities for careers and independent living. The program blends functional instruction with academics to prepare young adults with significant disabilities for employment and independent living in their communities. The Learning into Future Environments (LIFE) Program, the first of its kind at a public four-year university, allows these students to obtain a postsecondary education in a supportive, inclusive environment. At the same time, the program provides Mason students majoring in disciplines such as education, psychology, assistive technology, and social work with practical experience in working with individuals with disabilities (George Mason University, Kellar Institute for Human Disabilities, 2002, reprinted with permission).

Personal and career issues are inextricably intertwined for young people. The ways in which young people make some of their transition experiences greatly influence their psychological well-being. Families and friends form a strong base for support during transition.