

# transition

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## tools



## WHAT WILL I DO AFTER HIGH SCHOOL? FROM COLLEGE TO INDEPENDENT LIVING AND BEYOND

By Carrie Smoot

Young people see high school graduation as the start of their futures, and students with special needs are no different. Hard work, planning, persistence and family and teacher support are all part of a successful transition. Some people choose traditional college careers, while others enter the workforce or some kind of training program after leaving school. One size definitely does not fit all, and it takes time to find the best path.

Virginia College Quest is a Web resource designed to help Virginia's middle and high school students with disabilities prepare for a successful transition to postsecondary education in high school. The site offers general information, planning timelines and self-assessment tools. An online directory of Virginia colleges provides information about disability support services. Information for teachers, counselors and disability support personnel is also provided.

### EXPECTATIONS COUNT

"The biggest mistake students with disabilities make is that they don't start college and career planning early enough," says Advocacy Institute director Candace Cortiella. "We find a disproportionate number of students with disabilities in vocational schools and community colleges because their high school grades and courses were not enough to get into a four-year college or university."

Cortiella notes that students with disabilities are not represented well in

advanced placement courses or higher math and science classes. "People with disabilities are often plagued with a history of low expectations from parents, teachers, guidance counselors and even themselves. We have to continue encouraging young people and their families that college is an attainable goal, and to keep the ultimate goal in mind—a career."

The way to achieve that goal, Cortiella says, is for young people to map out the high school curriculum and diploma options that will help them reach their goals. Look at colleges based on their programs, campus size or affordability, and don't choose a school for disability-related reasons.

"Self-advocacy skills in college are important, but are often lacking," Cortiella says. "During the K-12 years, students are covered by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which requires team-approached individualized education programs (IEPs). But services in colleges are available only under the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and it's the student's responsibility to ask for accommodations and other needed support services. No one will do it for him or her." Good strategies for building self-advocacy skills include having the student run his or her IEP meeting, role-playing scenarios, such as asking for accommodations and communicating needs to guidance counselors, teachers and others. The Virginia College Quest Web site is [www.VaCollegeQuest.org](http://www.VaCollegeQuest.org).

### GATHERING INFORMATION

Colleges are beginning to recognize that higher education is a big step for lots of students. Two Virginia universities now offer programs that may help both students and parents with the decision making process.

Ginny Brennan, a career and transition coordinator for Fairfax County Public Schools, is a strong supporter of Future Quest, a day-long meeting at George Mason University that takes place every two years. High school students and parents attend workshops on financial aid, accommodations and other issues, and students meet with college disability support services staff. "Many kids are uncomfortable with identifying themselves as having a disability," Brennan says. "This is an opportunity to educate them and for them to learn how to ask for assistance."

Another option is the College Bound Summer Program, a 2 1/2-day event held the third week of June at Virginia Tech. This program is for rising high school students, especially juniors and seniors with disabilities and their parents. "It's a chance for the whole family to meet and talk with the college students with disabilities who lead sessions on advocacy, legal rights and general college life," says Jane Warner, College Bound director. "A lot of important networking goes on here, and the students get to stay overnight in a dorm. Some parents just aren't sure if their children are able to attend college, and this experience shows them and the

students that it's possible. There's also plenty of time for fun activities." Special education teachers, Department of Rehabilitative Services office representatives and other professional experts are on hand.

Even more important, Warner says, is that students get to meet with disability support services staff and learn how to obtain disability documentation so that college disability service providers and students can work together to provide appropriate accommodations. "It's best to have a plan and to know how you are going to approach accommodations at the outset," Warner says. She adds that enrolling in a community college course or attending the chosen college's summer program, if available, might be helpful in preparing a student for college.

## HELP ON CAMPUS

Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center in Fishersville, VA, offers an array of services to people with disabilities. What high school students with disabilities and their families may not know is that, depending on funding, Center occupational therapists may accompany soon-to-be college students on visits to in-state schools they have chosen to attend to see the campuses, assess their accessibility and meet with disability coordinators and professors. "In some cases, students prefer to do this on their own, and in other cases the family is really involved in the process. Ideally, this should be arranged for the summer between the junior and senior year of high school," says Paige Moore, director of occupational therapy at the Center. "I worked with one student with cerebral palsy just two months before she was supposed to begin her freshman year, which is not the best timing. Her family scrambled to find personal attendant services and other resources, and it also put pressure on the university to make the structural accommodations, but they were very willing to work with us in spite of the quick turnaround time. Everything eventually worked out well

for her."

Moore says colleges are very willing to work with students to accommodate their needs in the spirit of the ADA, such as building ramps, making restrooms and dorm rooms accessible, or providing emergency transportation in bad weather, such as a golf cart or accessible van transportation. "Young people with disabilities are striving so hard to be like others that sometimes they don't want to ask for accommodations," Moore says. "Yet, these accommodations allow the person to function optimally on campus. If your bed is too high or you're having too many difficulties with bathroom independence and getting around otherwise, you will lose study time and opportunities to enjoy campus life and to make friends."

Moore worked with another young woman who really wanted to share a dorm room with a roommate. But with her wheelchair, it was decided that she should have a private room, with refrigerator and microwave for added independence. "She was very upset," Moore remembers. "But I kept telling her, 'Do you know how many students would love to have a private room?' Eventually she adjusted to the arrangement, participating in dorm activities."

A unique effort at George Mason University is a program called GMU LIFE (Learning Into Future Environments) for people with autism and severe developmental and cognitive disabilities that make traditional college careers impossible. Students enroll between the ages of 18 and 22 and remain in the program for four years. Each student is assigned a mentor and campus e-mail address. Classes, which include reading, journalism, banking, technology, independent living, community access, fitness, science and office technology for campus work experiences like data entry, photocopying and scanning, are taught by graduate and undergraduate students in special education and related fields.

"Each year the LIFE students have been with us they have blossomed,"

says program director Clare Talbert, remembering how all the students continue to participate in campus life by going to sporting events, concerts, movies and joining campus organizations. "They have also grown in positive, appropriate behaviors: friendships, dealing with frustrations, money management, and navigating public transportation.

"The LIFE program began because these students were part of inclusive environments in high school. Their parents wanted them to have as much of a college experience as possible. Family support is key, because they must live at home." Talbert hopes that will change during the 2005-2006 academic year, when students may stay in on-campus housing with their friends. "Residential space is an issue on campus, so this may not be an option," she says, but certainly it is our goal."

The program is small and very competitive. Sixteen students are enrolled now, and six are admitted each academic year. They don't qualify for student loans, so families develop ways to finance the effort themselves. Talbert says parents can help their young adult children by teaching them how to use public transportation, access other community services and use cell phones, complete with memorizing home and emergency numbers and programming frequently used numbers into their phone books. "The LIFE program gives young people an entryway into the community as a whole," Talbert says. "Transition is a process, and ideally it should begin in middle school."

## START EARLY

Linda Kelleher, middle school transition coordinator at Arlington Public Schools, agrees that transition begins at middle school. She says most students expect to go to college, but others don't think they have that option. "Our students with disabilities are thinking about college and career options and learning to write résumés because we're asking them to think about it," she says.

"We use several career interest inventories that profile students' interests and show them options to follow in high school and beyond to reach those goals."

The U.S. Department of Education defines "college" as including apprenticeships, technical schools, trade schools and community colleges as well as the traditional four-year public and private colleges and universities. "So for instance, community college could be the right option for several reasons.

Students often don't realize that community colleges are very affordable and have excellent programs that allow them to earn certificates that make them immediately marketable or to transfer with credits into a four-year institution. It also provides students the opportunity to be introduced to college life."

Kelleher notes that Arlington Public Schools offers alternative programs for students with disabilities who require instruction in the areas of travel

training, independent living skills, community based skills and career exploration. "We want all students to see the many options available to them and then assist them to make a plan to pursue those choices." ■

*Carrie Smoot is a Northern Virginia freelance writer and frequent contributor to Celebrating Special Children.*

## Events

- The next Future Quest will be held on November 19, 2005 at the Johnson Center at George Mason University. It is sponsored by George Mason University and the Northern Virginia Transition Coalition, which includes representatives from six local school divisions, Virginia Department of Education Training/Technical Assistance Center staff located at GMU, as well as representatives from the Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services, the Parent Education Advocacy Training Center (PEATC), Parent Resource Centers, Northern Virginia Community College, and George Mason University.

## College and Career Planning Resources

- Virginia VIEW is the Commonwealth of Virginia's Career Information System  
[www.vaview.org/index.htm](http://www.vaview.org/index.htm)
- Virginia College Quest includes a wealth of information regarding postsecondary planning for students with disabilities, including access to information from the Virginia College Guide.  
[www.VaCollegeQuest.org](http://www.VaCollegeQuest.org)
- College Bound Summer Program  
[www.swwats.atc.vt.edu](http://www.swwats.atc.vt.edu)
- The Advocacy Institute  
[www.advocacyinstitute.org](http://www.advocacyinstitute.org)
- George Mason University's LIFE (Learning Into Future Environments) program  
[www.kihd.gmu.edu/gmulife](http://www.kihd.gmu.edu/gmulife)
- Virginia Department of Education Transition Services for Students with Disabilities—  
[www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/sped/transition](http://www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/sped/transition)

- The Virginia Department of Education's Training/Technical Assistance Centers (T/TAC) For Persons Serving Children and Youth With Disabilities  
<http://ttaconline.org>

## Publications

- *Students with Disabilities Preparing for Postsecondary Education: Know Your Rights and Responsibilities* (July 2002). U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights. Available at no cost; call 1-877-433-7827 or go to [www.ed.gov/pubs/edpubs.html](http://www.ed.gov/pubs/edpubs.html)
- *Transitions to Postsecondary Learning: Self-advocacy Handbook* (1998) by Howard Eaton and Leslie Coull. Eaton Coull Learning Group, Ltd. Cost is \$7.95; call 800-933-4063 or go to [www.eclg.com](http://www.eclg.com)
- *Virginia's College Guide for Students with Disabilities: You Know You Can Do It!* (January 2003) Virginia Department of Education, Division of Special Education and Student Services.
- *Your Guide to Planning Life After School* by Barbara A. Thompson (April 2003).

## Additional Organizations

- Virginia Board for People with Disabilities  
[www.vaboard.org](http://www.vaboard.org)
- Virginia Office of Protection and Advocacy  
[www.vopa.state.va.us](http://www.vopa.state.va.us)
- Virginia Disability Services Boards  
[www.vadrs.org/cbs/dsb.htm](http://www.vadrs.org/cbs/dsb.htm)
- Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center  
[www.wwrc.net](http://www.wwrc.net)