

# Postsecondary Academies



## Helping Students With Disabilities Transition to College

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*Postsecondary education within the reach of all? Even students with disabilities? Is this such a revolutionary idea? Could this be possible for our students? How can educators make such an exemplary goal happen?*

Despite many barriers (see box, “What Does the Literature Say?”), a group of Oregon educators began to discuss ideas about how they could provide information that would build skills to improve the entry and success rate for high school students with disabilities in postsecondary education. These educators included high school, community college, and university staff. The Postsecondary Academies are the result of these efforts.

### What Is a Postsecondary Academy?

Postsecondary Academies are 1-day conference-type events for high school

juniors and seniors with a wide range of disabilities. Their parents, teachers, transition specialists, and other high school staff are also welcome to attend. Breakout sessions cover specific topics and resemble college classes. In addition, tours of campuses familiarize students with various departments; college recreational programs; the disability services offices; and where to find tutoring, counseling, and advising services.

The first Postsecondary Academy was held in April of 2002 at Lane Community College, which serves a suburban-rural area. Thirty-five students, teachers, and parents were in attendance at that Academy. Since that time, two more community college regions of the state have added Academies: Clackamas Community College, in a larger, more urban area, and Rogue Community College, which serves two rural counties. The number of participants has increased each year with the

2005 Academies ranging from 110 to 250 participants per event. Table 1 shows the total number of participants and range of disabilities represented at the 2005 Postsecondary Academies.

### How to Host an Academy: Key Steps

Four steps were critical to the success of these events: establish a planning committee, identify content and format, market and implement the Academy, and evaluate the results.

#### Step 1: Establish a Planning Committee

A key aspect of the Academies was the participation and dedication of the planning committees. The members came from community colleges and universities (e.g., disability services and academic learning services), K-12 education (e.g., special education directors, teachers, and transition staff), and state

## What Does the Literature Say About Postsecondary Transition?

The provision of transition services for students with disabilities has for many years been a focus of policy-makers and practitioners. Transition services for these students includes planning and preparing for employment, postsecondary education, or a combination of the two (Brinckerhoff, McGuire, & Shaw, 2002). Even with these transition services, there remains a significant disparity between students' goals for the future and their actual outcomes (Horn, Berkold, & Bobbitt, 1999). Research shows that students with disabilities reach college settings at a significantly lower rate than their peers without disabilities (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005). In a National Organization on Disability study (1998), one third of people with disabilities report encountering key barriers to obtaining the education and training they desire. These barriers include the following:

- A lack of awareness by students, families, and school staff of postsecondary education opportunities and requirements.
- A lack of support to meet postsecondary education requirements.
- The inability of students to identify their own disabilities, recognize accommodation needs, and use self-advocacy skills necessary to access these accommodations (National Council on Disability, 2000; Smith, 1992).

agencies (e.g., vocational rehabilitation). Researchers have shown that such collaboration across multiple stakeholders improves student outcomes in the transition to postsecondary education (Johnson, Stodden, Emanuel, Luecking, & Mack, 2002; Mull, Sitlington, & Alper, 2001; Skinner & Lindstrom, 2003).

Each of the planning committees discussed how to improve transitions for

**Table 1. Number of Postsecondary Academy Participants Per College Site for 2005 and Participant Disability Information**

Participants	Community College			
	Lane	Rogue	Clackamas	Total
High school students	206	118	109	433
Teachers and transition specialists	21	7	13	41
Parents	60	3	8	71
Total	287	128	130	545
<b>Student Disabilities</b>				
Learning disabilities	159 (77%)	96 (81%)	71 (65%)	326 (75%)
ADD/ADHD	16 (6%)	14 (12%)	30 (27%)	60 (13%)
Mobility impairment	6 (2%)	5 (4%)	0	11 (2%)
Visual impairment	3 (1%)	4 (3%)	0	7 (2%)
Autism	13 (6%)	10 (8%)	3 (3%)	26 (6%)
Hearing impairment	7 (3%)	1 (> 1%)	0	8 (2%)
Emotional disturbance	2 (> 1%)	4 (3%)	2 (2%)	8 (2%)
Traumatic brain injury	0	2 (2%)	0	2 (> 1%)
Total	206	136	106	448

Note: ADD/ADHD = Attention deficit disorder; attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

students with disabilities. Individual planning committee members provided information about (a) funding the event, (b) locating where the Academy could take place, (c) planning presentations, and (d) recruiting presenters and panel members.

### Step 2: Identify Funding, Content, and Format

Wide representation in the planning committee members helped make available a variety of funding sources. For example, colleges donated meeting rooms, volunteered faculty time, and provided accommodations; and high school districts provided transportation for students to the event, as well as food.

The content presented at the Academies was determined by the planning committees. In the beginning, each committee generated a list of knowledge and skills important for students with disabilities transitioning to postsec-

ondary education. From this initial list, each committee then identified five key areas that were barriers for their students. These key areas were the overall goals of the Academies, so it was important that they were (a) broad enough to effect change for a wide number of students and (b) attainable. Table 2 lists these local goals and demonstrates their alignment with the three national needs and the key program components delivered by the Academies.

With content areas identified, the local planning committees next decided on the format in which this content would be delivered. The committees believed that it was important to keep activities and presenters varied using both hand-on activities and lectures to help students stay engaged. Presentation formats included large- and small-group sessions, tours, panel discussions, and small-group activities (see Figure 1 for a sample agenda).

**Table 2. Alignment of Nationally Identified Needs, Locally Identified Needs, and Academy Key Components to Meet Those Needs**

Nationally Identified Needs	Locally Identified Needs	How Needs Were Met: Academies Key Components
Lack of awareness of postsecondary education opportunities and requirements (Brinckerhoff, 1996; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Mull et al., 2001; Sitlington, 2003; Skinner & Lindstrom, 2003)	Lack of information about the differences between high school and college	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student panel</li> <li>• Disability services office (DSO) orientation</li> <li>• Breakout sessions</li> <li>• Disability accommodations provided at the Academy</li> </ul>
	Lack of awareness about college options	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Specific tours</li> <li>• Handout/materials</li> <li>• Parent/teacher panel</li> <li>• Student panel</li> </ul>
	Lack of familiarity with college campus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tours (college services)</li> <li>• College services panel</li> <li>• Handouts/materials</li> <li>• Breakout sessions</li> <li>• DSO orientation</li> <li>• Disability accommodations</li> </ul>
Lack of education and support to meet postsecondary education requirements (Hicks-Coolick & Kurtz, 1997; Hitchings, Retish, & Horvath, 2005; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Vogel 1993; Vogel & Adelman, 1992)	Lack of information regarding accessing college resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tours</li> <li>• Lunch</li> <li>• Student participants with disabilities</li> <li>• Overall college setting</li> </ul>
Lack of self advocacy, ability to identify disability and accommodation needs (Goldhammer & Brinckerhoff, 1992; Hicks-Coolick & Kurtz, 1997; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Vogel 1993; Vogel & Adelman, 1992)	Lack of self-awareness/advocacy skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student disability panel</li> <li>• DSO orientation</li> <li>• Breakout sessions</li> </ul>

Presenters at the Academies were college students with disabilities, instructors, department representatives, vocational rehabilitation counselors, and other postsecondary staff. Although some aspects of the agenda differed by site, several components, such as student panels, were critical at every Academy.

**Student Panels.** At each Academy the disability services representative facilitated a student panel of four to five college students with disabilities who shared their personal stories about

accessing postsecondary education and the essential aspects of college success. The panel speakers shared information about planning for college, differences between high school and college, understanding different college options (such as associate degree programs and occupational skills training programs), and the importance of self-awareness and self-advocacy.

Through these students' stories, participants at each Academy learned about documentation requirements, how to apply for services, and other important

information, such as recreation and extracurricular college activities.

**Tours.** Campus tours took students to locations such as the disability services office, campus tutoring center, library, cafeteria, and the counseling and advising office. Some tours also introduced students to specific campus facilities, such as culinary arts, welding, and auto body. Limiting tour groups to 10 participants provided the opportunities for one-on-one communication with the tour guides. These guides were usually college students or staff from the host college.

**Specific Sessions.** Informational sessions took place in college classrooms covering subjects such as improving study skills, determining learning styles, and choosing college courses. All sessions emphasized specific skills for success in college, as well as the need to understand the effect of one's disability so as to access appropriate accommodations. Also, because these sessions were held in campus classrooms, students had an opportunity to experience learning in a college environment.

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Researchers have shown that such collaboration across multiple stakeholders improves student outcomes in the transition to postsecondary education.

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**Handouts.** Each student's registration folder included handouts; the breakout sessions also provided handouts. These documents included information about the college programs, presentation materials, and helpful transition reminders for students, parents, and teachers. Alternate formats (e.g., Spanish, CD-ROM, large print, Braille) of the handouts were also available.

**Specific Sessions for Parents and Teachers.** Additional sessions for parents and teachers presented key information about how to support students as they transitioned to postsecondary education. These parent and teacher panels represented college and university staff from financial aid, disability services, tutoring, short-term and certificate training programs, and other support resources. They all emphasized the need for students to advocate for themselves, to understand the changes regarding the roles of their parents, and to be aware of the confidentiality requirements associated with colleges and universities. Parent and teacher availability was taken into account when planning these sessions and thus

**Figure 1. Sample Academy Agenda**

8:15 – 9:00	Registration with refreshments
9:00 – 9:15	Guest Speaker — President of college
9:15 – 9:20	Overview of the agenda and map of campus
9:20 – 10:20	Panel of college students with disabilities
10:20 – 10:30	Break and move to sessions
10:30 – 11:00	Concurrent Sessions a) Explore your career options b) Improve your note-taking and test-taking skills c) Learn about today's technology for disability accommodations d) What is your learning style? e) Thrive (not just survive) in college! — Panel of college staff f) Thinking about attending a University? g) Tours of campus — Three guides, only 12 people per guide
11:00 – 11:10	Break and move to sessions
11:10 – 11:40	Concurrent Sessions (See previous sessions)
11:40 – 12:40	Lunch in the college cafeteria
12:50 – 1:20	Concurrent Sessions (See previous sessions)
1:30 – 2:00	Summarize the day and evaluations

held near the lunch hour or the evening before an Academy.

**Step 3: Market and Implement**

To market the Academies to diverse stakeholders statewide, planning committee members presented Academy information at local teacher and transition specialist meetings, sent flyers and e-mails to special education teachers and high school counselors, and phoned specific high school staff notifying them about the local Academy. The committee members also sent announcements to state and local educational newsletters, posted information on related Web sites, and provided radio and print news releases.

Each Academy was scheduled for 1 full school day. Starting and ending times for the events depended on high school class and bus schedules. For example, some schools in rural areas had late start times; and other schools needed their students to be back at the high school by a specific time to ensure that students met their busses for their commute home. The dates of the Academies were coordinated with the high school and college schedules, teacher training days, finals and midterms, and holidays.

As for the location of these Academies, students said that just "being there, at college" was one of the most effective aspects of the event.

### Student and Teacher Quotes

Quotes from students who attended the Academy:

"I will need to self-advocate more than in high school."

"Help is available at college."

"I am not alone in having a disability."

"Students can advocate for themselves."

"You need to be more self-directed in college than in high school."

Teacher quote:

"The information provided at the Academy helped reinforce transition lesson plans with students and hopefully will help the students speak up for themselves . . . as they discuss their transition goals."

Being on campus provided more than just the opportunity for a tour: it helped students "warm up" to the campus and realize this was a place where they could study and learn. Not all Academies, however, were held on a college campus. One Academy for a rural area was held in the city library across the street from the college, using free large conference rooms and providing easy access to the college for tours.

Because the Academies were full-day events, food was an important consideration in planning. Unless there was a concurrent activity planned at lunch, such as a college fair or college program presentations, lunch was 30 minutes, allowing ample time for the students to eat and socialize. Some Academies also arranged and paid for lunch. While students at these events consistently loved the "free food," other Academies scheduled students to be on their own for lunch in the student union or cafeteria areas. This type of lunch also helped to familiarize students with more of the campus amenities.

### Step 4: Evaluate the Results

Participants' feedback provided important information for planning future

events. Each participant completed Academy evaluations at the end of the event; these evaluations have helped to clarify the most effective and popular activities. During the 2003 Academies, additional information was also obtained through follow-up interviews with students who provided consent.

The tours were consistently the most popular activities, and around half of the students mentioned tours as something they liked. Students were excited about seeing the layout of the campus and, in addition, they enjoyed the chance to move around. The students contacted in the 2003 follow-up phone interviews were able to recall visiting specific resource areas and talked about how the tours exposed them to new college options.

The follow-up phone interview data reaffirmed the effectiveness of the panel of college students with disabilities and the importance of having them relate their stories at these Academies. The student panel described how they had experienced new opportunities in college and faced some unexpected challenges. Participants reported that personal stories from successful students informed them about the importance of self-advocacy and self-awareness. In addition, panel members described how they overcame barriers and offered "survival strategies" for students with disabilities negotiating college for the first time. These presenters helped give students a clear picture of barriers that may be encountered, as well as some ideas for working through those barriers. They also emphasized to students the need to advocate for themselves and actively seek assistance from college staff to access college information and services.

Participants also enjoyed the student panel presenters' description of their journeys through college and how they chose their particular degree pathways. During this presentation, Academy participants gained information about degree choices such as certificate programs, hands-on learning programs, and transfer degrees. Although students may have heard about such programs previously, reiteration by the panel presenters helped students remember this important information.

In the follow-up phone interviews, many students commented about how they learned important things regarding disability services from the student panel presentation (see box "Student and Teacher Quotes"). Students said that this session taught them "you have to ask for help," "help is available," "talking first about your disability can help your learning," and to "go talk to the disability services coordinator." As is evident from these quotes, disability services presenters emphasized self-awareness and self-advocacy for the students as they navigate college. In fact, of the 2003 Academy participants who enrolled in classes at Clackamas Community College, 77% had accessed disability services by spring 2005.

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The breakout sessions provided instruction on specific skills for navigating academic barriers. The students stated that in the study skills sessions they learned tips to help them retain information and take effective notes. While these skills may be presented in the high school setting, students reported that learning about such skills in "real college classrooms" from "real college staff" helped to emphasize the ways in which college learning was more challenging, and also what resources were available to help them.

### Final Thoughts

As seen by the increase in the number of participants every year, the need for the Academies continues to be great. The Academies were instrumental in developing an awareness of college services and support programs for the high school students, teachers, and parents who participated in these events.

For high school students, the Academies helped build skills and

awareness and improved students' abilities to make informed choices regarding postsecondary education. For parents and teachers, the Academies provided an exciting opportunity to learn about postsecondary opportunities and how to help their students navigate these programs. Because it can be difficult to find appropriate transition activities for high school students relating to postsecondary education, the Academies were a perfect fit as a transition activity for the students.

High school teachers and transition specialists enthusiastically refer their students and parents to the Postsecondary Academy year after year. In the evaluation of the Academies, all participants stated they would recommend this event to a friend or colleague. Through careful planning by varied stakeholders, the Academies have had a positive influence on students, parents, and teachers, opening doors to postsecondary educational opportunities for high school students with disabilities.

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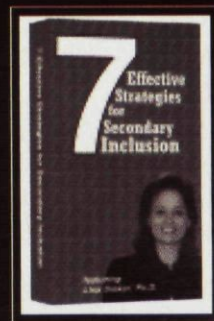


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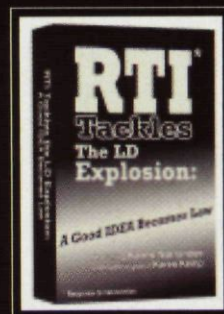
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