

Building Career Confidence: Issues and Strategies for Helping Students with Learning Disabilities Attain Career Self-Efficacy

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Author's Note

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Abstract

This paper is a general review of issues and strategies pertinent to the delivery of career development services to postsecondary students with learning disabilities. The authors both explore the literature and offer suggestions from clinical practice. Strategies recommended were derived from knowledge of career relevant student attributes, as well as common characteristics of the school environment. Emphasized are the need to focus on student strengths, and corresponding techniques which address affective, cognitive and behavioral domains

As a result of several U.S. federal statutes, a growing number of students diagnosed with learning disabilities (LD) are enrolling in universities, creating unparalleled opportunities for this population of young adults in the arena of education. Students with learning disabilities increasingly see college edu-

cation as an attainable goal and not just an opportunity reserved for a privileged few (Dipeolu, 2002). The implication is that additional efforts at the college level should be made not only to increase access for such students, but more importantly to help them succeed once enrolled (Madaus, Foley, McGuire, & Rubin, 2001).

Years of research have led to the conclusion that learning disabilities are not just school based disorders (Price & Shaw, 2000). Instead, they are heterogeneous and longitudinal in nature, with accompanying life-long issues which may require on-going support. Students experience difficulties in important areas of functioning, preventing optimal performance at school and work. Many of these problem areas are exacerbated in adulthood by the need to perform increasingly complex tasks, deal with differential environmental demands, and negotiate critical life transitions (Price & Shaw, 2000). The same deficits that created school difficulties can act as barriers to employment, block on the job advancement, and/or complicate overall life tasks and relationships (Reekie, 1995).

Successful transition from adolescence to adulthood is critical for members of any culture. Society expects that during this period, its youthful members will assume the roles and responsibilities of adulthood (Ramamany, Duffy, & Camp, 2000). For youth with learning disabilities, progression through this process is often hampered by additional personal or societal barriers (Brown, 2003; Powers, Wilson, Matuszewski, Philips, Rein, Schumacher, & Gensert, 1996). In order to receive accommodations in accordance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (1973; 1998) and the American with Disabilities Act (1990), an individual must self-identify to the postsecondary institution

(Mazurek & Shoemaker, 1997). However, the literature is replete with stories of students with learning disabilities who purposely chose not to self-disclose their disability status once they enroll in college, in order to avoid a repeat of the negative experiences often associated with having a learning disability that were experienced at the K-12 level (Kuykendall, 1994; Markham, 1997).

An important key toward accomplishing this goal is the career development connection (Dipeolu, 2002; Dipeolu, Reardon, Sampson, & Burkhead, 2002). The focus of this article is on career development strategies to help students become more independent and also promote successful functioning beyond the walls of the post-secondary institution. Strategies recommended were derived from knowledge of career relevant student and parent attributes, as well as common characteristics of the school environment. An understanding of these characteristics serves as a foundation for effective implementation of specific work related skills training. This article will identify the work related skills that career counselors should focus on to help students with learning disabilities succeed in the arena of life. Lastly, it should be noted that the following discussion addresses these issues within the context of American legislation. While there may be parallel issues for counselors from Canada and other countries, our review is couched within the framework of current US policy and statutes, particularly at the federal level.

Family Factors

Developmentally, late adolescence is a time when youth struggle to gain independence from their families, with parents gradually decreasing their involvement in their children's decision

making process. However, this is often a more difficult process for young adults with learning disabilities. Although these youth experience a similar desire and need for independence, they typically continue to need their parents' active advocacy and support at a greater level than peers without disabilities (Brotherson, Berdine, & Sartin, 1993; Brown, 2003). This is true with respect to a number of needs, including dealing with academic demands such as homework but also accessing supports within the school and community. Understanding how the presence of a learning disability complicates this development dynamic is important for counselors who work with these students. Career counselors need to see parents as an important ally. Involving parents, siblings, spouses, and close friends in counseling (where possible) only helps to multiply the sources of informed verbal persuasion (Amundson, 1984; Bearg, 1980; Brown, 2003; Young, 1994). Research indicates that an important outcome of this involvement is that parents, along with their children, increasingly envision post secondary education as an appropriate transition from high school. Moreover, parents usually express positive beliefs about their offspring's ability to become competitively employed (Benz & Helpem, 1987; Tilson & Neubert, 1988). While examining career development of young women with learning disabilities, Lindstrom and Benz (2002) found that key elements which seemed to influence the phases of career development included individual motivation and personal determination, family support and advocacy, opportunities for career development, and on-the-job or postsecondary vocational training. To address these needs comprehensively, career development theory typically calls for early program development (even as early as elementary school) to be linked with individual strengths and needs as well as interests of all students (Magnuson & Starr, 2000). A diagnosis of learning disability complicates this and underscores the need to accommodate and/or remediate students' weaknesses. Academic planning and transition should center around these core issues, and individualized for each student.

However, parents of students with learning disabilities may have limited understanding of the range of occupations available for their children, and lack awareness of the children's vocational strengths and weaknesses (Neubert & Taymaus, 1999). These issues, if left unaddressed, could produce unrealistic expectations with regards to attainment and outcome of higher education degrees. Career development professionals should make available reliable occupational information to both students and their families that could help address this area of need. This type of information fosters parental confidence in the system, and students begin to see the value of making career choice around individual interests and strengths. The focus here is to help students move from seeing parents as the sole architect/source of their career decision making efforts, to regarding parents as resources and additional allies in career decision making.

Experiential Barriers to Career Confidence/Self-Efficacy

There is a broad consensus in the literature of several disciplines (e.g., special education, rehabilitation and counseling) that the transition needs of students with learning disabilities are still not being addressed in an effective and efficient manner. This includes preparation for either the postsecondary education or employment settings (Adelman & Vogel, 1993; Blalock & Patton, 1996; Dunn, 1996; Sitlington & Fran, 1990). Career development interventions are a significant transition need, with research indicating that students with learning disabilities often obtain lower scores on measures of career maturity. This is important because a lower degree of career maturity may result in unrealistic job expectations, inappropriate career goals and inability to relate personal strengths and challenges to vocational success (Cummings, Maddox, & Casey, 2000).

Experiences while in school typically teach students with learning disabilities much about their weaknesses (Szymanski, Hewitt, Watson, & Sweet, 1999), and too little about personal strengths. As a result, students often bring to the college environment negative self-concepts developed over time.

Though students may be all too familiar with their challenges, they nonetheless often experience great difficulty articulating their needs and advocating for themselves. An individual who cannot explain his or her disability, foresee possible difficulties, and who lacks strategies to compensate for weaknesses may well have trouble in current/future endeavors, whether in academic or employment settings (Mazurek & Shoemaker, 1997).

Students with learning disabilities may perceive and adopt doubts expressed by their teachers, families and peers concerning their abilities to pursue more challenging careers (Panagos & DuBois, 1999). Despite such discouragement, many students with learning disabilities see their lives in college as an opportunity to wipe off the old slate and start with a new one. Career counseling interventions can be one means of encouraging these efforts. As we know, career counseling interventions by their nature are strength based and not pathology-focused. Therefore, interventions should be shaped in a positive light and capitalize on student strengths, which may act as a catalyst in helping them reframe negative self-talk and concepts (Price & Shaw, 2000)

Implications of Primary and Secondary Characteristics of LD

In order to fully address student needs, counselors need to be familiar with common characteristics of learning disabilities in general, as well as some specifics for learning disabilities in various areas (e.g. written expression, reading comprehension). In addition, it is helpful for counselors to understand primary (e.g. processing deficits) versus secondary characteristics of learning disabilities (such as low self esteem), in that secondary characteristics (which develop as sequelae from primary issues) may be effectively addressed with quality programming and identification. This is important to understand, both in terms of educating others but also as a framework for understanding students' context of presenting problems and how best to deal with them from a counseling perspective (NJCLD, 1994; Rosenberg, 1997).

Primary characteristics of learning disabilities include problems with processing information (slowed or inaccurate information processing difficulty; poor incidental learning), distractibility, impulsiveness, and a discrepancy between intellectual ability (which is by definition average to above average) and student academic achievement in one or more of seven primary areas (written expression, reading comprehension, basic reading skills, math computation, math comprehension, oral expression, and listening comprehension) (Blumsack, Lewandowski, & Waterman, 1997). Primary characteristics are one which are inherent to the learning disability in question, and which typically respond best to early intervention and accommodation or compensation, rather than remediation.

On the other hand, secondary characteristics of learning disabilities include such variables as lowered self-esteem, depression; anxiety, low tolerance for frustration; decrease in (positive) risk-taking behavior; development of inappropriate behaviors as a means of deflecting attention from academic or interpersonal issues; decreased motivation and problems with social skills (initiating and or maintaining relationships with others). Individuals may also attempt to self-medicate by using alcohol or drugs to help lessen the negative feelings resultant from these issues (Blumsack, Lewandowski, & Waterman, 1997; Rosenberg, 1997). Early identification and intervention can be key in helping to lessen the appearance of effects of these characteristics. Again, this means that while this information can be used to proactively educate families in the community, the implication for students who come to counseling without effective prior intervention is that it will likely be more difficult to deal with these long-term issues, but that by virtue of being secondary characteristics, remediation and rehabilitation strategies would be appropriate means of address.

Transition Planning and Relationship to Career Counseling

Best practice in preparing youth with disabilities for adult responsibilities and roles centers around a process of individualized planning in transition-

ing students from the K-12 setting to post-secondary settings and eventual careers/independent living. While these activities by definition should occur prior to students interacting with counselors in the college setting, a brief discussion of elements of that process may be helpful in understanding what is supposed to be happening and also in planning ad hoc interventions.

The individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1997) defines transition as an "...outcome-oriented process that promotes movement from school to postschool activities...is based on the individual student's needs, taking into account the student's preferences and interests...and includes instruction, related services, community experiences, and the development of employment and other postschool adult living objectives." (Wehman, 2001). Current students are most likely to have come through school after the 1997 reauthorization of the law in which the minimum age to begin transition planning was moved from 14 to 16. (As a point of interest, the 2004 reauthorization moved the required age of initiation back to age 16, effective July 2005).

Important aspects of effective transition planning include promoting self-determination and self-advocacy; interagency cooperation and joint planning; strong input and involvement from the family and student; community-based instruction; "person-centered" planning in which the student "drives" the process; vocational assessment and training (including employment experience), and support in accessing postsecondary education, the world of work, and/or independent living options.

With respect to self-efficacy issues, most of the extant literature in the area of learning disabilities focuses on changing self-efficacy and efficacy expectation through environmental or instructional modifications (Schunk, 1989; Wehman, 2001). Several factors may limit acquisition of these perceptions, including overprotectiveness by others; environments that are too structured and limit choice and decision-making by students and lack of self-knowledge about oneself and one's disability. Within transition planning, self-efficacy may be addressed through several means. These include individual

counseling; use of self-determination curricula and instructional model; incorporation of self-advocacy groups; use of student-directed/self-regulated learning strategies, goal-oriented action planning. Although it is certainly hoped that students have had effective transition services incorporating the above elements at the secondary level (or ideally even before!), the postsecondary counselor can still use many of these same tools in assisting students at the postsecondary level.

Occupational Issues

Career service providers are enjoined to assist students in breaking away from the negative associations they may bring with them (Price & Shaw, 2000). Counselors can, in tangible ways, help students translate skills acquired in college and elsewhere to future employment. When academic skills are explicitly linked to job or career skills, students are more likely to transfer and/or generalize academic skills to current or future work performance. This is particularly true for students with learning disabilities, who frequently experience difficulty in generalizing information and behaviors from one setting to another (Mercer & Mercer, 2005).

One means by which students may be helped to reframe past negative experiences is through self-reflection and use of metacognitive strategies. Past experiences can be reframed as lessons for what did or did not work at a particular stage in their lives, and examples of challenges through which students have learned to persevere (Gerber, 1997). The goal is to aid students in generalizing lessons previously learned to current life events, and to learn to use negative experiences in a positive way. Specifically, professionals should ask students to talk or write a few paragraphs by addressing questions such as: "What is your proudest achievement, and why? What would you do over again if you could, and what would you do differently? What have you learned from these experiences, and how might this help you now or in the future?" Responding to these types of questions engages the student in a reflective process which helps them to link difficulties or failures with means for suc-

cess. With the answers to these questions, students will begin to build a more positive base on which to launch their college careers and future job development (Gerber, 1997).

Career development efforts should ideally address a number of needs, including fostering development of a sense of confidence, or self-efficacy. Once confidence is attained, students become more motivated to focus and develop goals. Similarly, they are more able to learn skills required for career exploration, decision-making, and goal setting (Neubert & Taymans, 1989). Building confidence (or sense of self-efficacy, as it is commonly referred to in the literature) can yield positive influence on an individual's decision-making ability, willingness to take initiative, and perseverance in spite of obstacles (Hua, 2002). All these are necessary attributes for success in the world of work, and important if we are to help students develop career confidence.

Strength-Based Strategies

As noted before, despite the problematic issues inherent to a diagnosis of learning disability, college students with learning disorders do embody notable strengths. These students arrive on college campuses with a rich background of experiences which should not be shunted aside, but used as vital clues to unlock their unique learning potential and help build confidence (Knowles, 1970). When existing strengths are reinforced by relevant and age appropriate career interventions, these students are more capable of addressing the academic demands of the college environment. Parallels between school and work should be explicitly linked by the counselor in order to aid students in generalization between the two settings. The career counselors' role then becomes that of facilitator in helping students unlock their potential through strategic, strength-based career interventions.

Career confidence also develops when students engage directly in the work process. Counselors should encourage students to develop a work history. Having a relevant work history is a critical component of a successful outcome for any job candidate (Brown, 2003), especially for students with dis-

abilities. Through hands-on participation, students learn to take ownership of their skills, their strengths and weaknesses. This is important for several reasons. For example, the vocational rehabilitation literature clearly indicates that work experience is one of the most important predictors of future career success (Brown, 2003; Kohler, 1993). However, this is also important in helping to address tendencies towards negative external locus of control common to individuals with learning disabilities (Dipeolu et al., 2002; Luzzo, Hitchings, Retish & Shoemaker, 1999). The act of engaging the world of work means that students learn how their special skills and talents fit in real life, as well as obtaining experiences that better enable them to understand and accept how their own efforts affect eventual life outcomes. The students also have an opportunity to identify those skills that are consistent with their interests, values and personal characteristics.

This process of "doing" (articulating strengths, acquiring information through real-world experience) takes the mystery out of the often elusive task of finding a major/career that is well suited for students' unique characteristics, as well as offering a forum for testing and refining new skills. Young adults learn best when they apply classroom learning to achieve their personal goals through an individualized problem solving approach, and when they resolve genuine problems in their everyday environment (Knowles, 1970). Students then become partners with the counselor, helping to weave and construct their own path to career success.

Paradigm Shift

If students are to attain confidence in the career development area, the orientation of the career development professional may need some reformulation from "fixing" students, to that of professionals who guide them in finding their way through the maze of the college environment (Szymanski, Hewitt, Watson, & Sweet, 1999). Career counselors' interventions with students with learning disabilities should then change the focus of question from "You need to enroll in math or take math class, etc..." to career focused questions such as "What are your strengths and weakness-

es? Where do you want to be in a year from now, five years from now? How can we help you get there? And what is the quality of life you visualize for yourself?"

Betz (2004) advocated that counselors should encourage students to explore areas of behavior where they feel their lack of skills is holding them back from pursuing desired options. By asking these career relevant questions, career professionals help students make the necessary connection between acquired college credits, life/work skills and eventual career and personal satisfaction.

Service Delivery Options

Group format is often not a primary delivery mode in the postsecondary setting, except in the context of workshop, training and/or teaching. Yet, group interventions have consistently been shown to be effective in promoting a wide variety of career outcomes for participants (Lapan, 2004). When students are able to find others who are going through (or have overcome) similar struggles, they are more apt to persist in their efforts toward success. Compared to individual counseling, the group modality is a naturally occurring support system for most individuals (Brotherson, Berdine, & Sartin, 1993). Research indicates that many individuals diagnosed with a learning disability require some type of support to locate and maintain their first job (Neubert & Taymans, 1989). Career counselors are therefore encouraged to use group format as one means by which to provide this needed support.

The focus of the group modality should be to reinforce appropriate job behaviors, discuss job related problems and offer participants a chance to both exchange information and obtain emotional support (Brown, 2003; Neubert & Taymans, 1989). Group format is especially useful for reinforcement, confirmation, and for students to find others who share their particular struggles. Instead of rigidly adhering to one particular modality however, group activities and interventions should be considered in light of each student's interest and need.

Counselors can help to tailor interventions toward helping students with

learning disabilities develop specific skills that will foster career confidence. Specific skill development activities can be addressed in a group setting through a variety of means, including role-playing and video taping of performance. When individuals have had little previous success, an important source of self efficacy for them is to provide opportunities for vicarious experience (Bandura, 1977; Hershenson & Szymanski, 1998). It is through this repeated activity involvement, modeling, and feedback from others that individuals develop self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations for academic and career-related tasks (Gore & Leuwerke, 2000). Group format provides the forum to attain to this level of skill refinement and it helps multiply and generalize confidence in skills attainment.

Domain-Based Interventions

Additional specific skills as identified below are helpful to the career development process of students diagnosed with learning disabilities. The attainment of career confidence may be conceptualized as requiring a three prong approach that focuses on cognitive, affective and behavior domains. This means of categorization is similar in tone to the listing presented by Paulsen and Betz (2004), who enumerated efficacy-based interventions incorporating performance accomplishments; vicarious learning, anxiety management and social encouragement. These are separated here into three cluster areas of affective, cognitive and behavioral based interventions.

Affective Interventions

1) **Address dysfunctional emotion:** The first priority is to identify any disabling emotion, and to reduce accompanying symptoms. The existence of severe or moderate anxiety/depression (not uncommon among persons with learning disabilities) will no doubt destabilize efforts to solve career-related problems. Towards this end, a routine screening for psychological problems such as anxiety and depression is recommended. Career counselors should strive to stabilize affect before working on presenting

career problems to maximize the effectiveness of the chosen intervention (Saka, Gati, & Kelly, 2004), with appropriate referrals made (e.g., for medication management) if warranted.

- 2) **Build self-esteem:** Creating a supportive atmosphere to help students appraise their lack of self esteem as a solvable problem increases internal motivational level that, in turn, contributes to the development of career confidence. According to Goleman (1998), three of the five elements of emotional intelligence are self-esteem, self-awareness, and assertiveness. These are ingredients in the development of emotional intelligence, a critical competency in career attainment. For a number of years a well known saying among employers has been, "IQ gets you hired, emotional intelligence gets you promoted" (Clay, 1999). Thus, elements of emotional intelligence help prepare students for the world beyond the college environment. We as counselors may help them by promoting development of concomitant skills that are important for survival in the world of work. Self identity is another critical building block of self esteem. Career counselors cannot build on sand (Saka, Gati, & Kelly, 2004). They can avoid building on sand by dealing with the issues of self-identity and self-esteem. Students are assisted to identify accomplishments and use it as a building block for strong positive self esteem.
- 3) **Self-awareness skills:** This includes the identification of personal characteristics, including personal strengths and weaknesses. In order to make career related decisions, students need to learn about themselves, the world and people around them. Self knowledge is necessary for good career decision making because limited awareness of one's personal strengths and weaknesses could lead to unrealistic expectations (Sampson, Reardon, Peterson, & Lenz, 2004).
- 4) **Interpersonal/relational skills:** The results of a metaanalysis across 152 studies indicate that

75% of students with learning disabilities have social skill deficits (Forness & Kavale, 1996). Jones (1996) identified several foundational social skills needed by students entering the work force, which included interpersonal skills. This includes communication, negotiation, leadership skills, ability to work as a team member, and ability to function in a multicultural setting. No two students will be alike. Because each student may be lacking in different social skills, the first task is to identify the area of need. This is done through an inventory of social skill attainment of each student. However, regardless of the area of need of each student, volunteerism and/or service learning is a good place to begin. Volunteering involves connecting with and contributing to the welfare of another person (Clay, 1999). There are different ways we learn to connect through service to others. If anything, the volunteer begins to move from self focus to other focus, a necessary starting point to learning how to relate comfortably to others.

- 5) **Job satisfaction.** Since work is one of the central components of life activities for most adults therefore, it is easy to assume that satisfaction derived from work is an important determinant in an individual total life satisfaction (Brown, 2003). A key element of job satisfaction is to create the awareness early. Needless to say, job satisfaction is a by-product of successful acquisition of the above skills. The development of these skills will then lead to readiness for job advancement, hence job satisfaction.

Cognitive Interventions

- 6) **Screening for negative cognition.** The presence of dysfunctional cognition affects one's ability to make decisions and proceed in the career counseling process, because it distorts reality and sets up a false basis on which individuals may make inferences. It helps to expose students' negative career-related beliefs, in order to alter or reduce them. Reed, Reardon, Lenz, and

Leirer (2001) indicated that the reduction of negative career thoughts enabled students with higher levels of negative thoughts to more effectively participate in the career counseling process. Identifying dysfunctional beliefs and showing students how these may be reframed or countered will help to focus efforts, facilitate change and give direction to the career counseling process (Sampson, Reardon, Peterson, & Lenz, 2004).

- 7) **Occupational and/or career information.** Research suggests individuals with learning disabilities may be confused by information they receive regarding the world of work, along with lack of opportunity to see and imitate work-related behavior (Smedley, Levinson, Barker, & DeAngelis, 2003). The effectiveness of any career decision making is to a large measure dependent on the nature and extent of career information on which the decision is based. Limited awareness of employment opportunities and information is often cited as a problem area for students with learning disabilities. Students with disabilities are not alone here; in that many clients who come for career counseling lack information about careers (Brown, 2003). Brown, Minor, and Jepsen (1991) indicated that 25% of a national sample of adults reported that they had never used any source of occupational information in preparing for work or in obtaining a job.

Consequently, the counselor can help by initiating career information gathering process. We suggest a focused but intense information gathering process, including utilizing several resources such as career center libraries, career-related Internet sites, public libraries, etc. Useful career information sources include: The *Dictionary of Occupational Title (DOT)*, the *O*NET*, the *Occupational Outlook Handbook (OOH)* and the *Guide for Occupational Exploration (GOE)* and program such as *DISCOVER* or *SIGI*. These resources

contain information about occupations, training time, and work situation environmental conditions, necessary information to consider in the career decision making process.

- 8) **Career exploration.** Occupational exploration opportunities should be provided early in college to allow enough time for students diagnosed with learning disorders to make adequate gain. We suggest that career development professionals offer their expertise during a student's first year of school by providing workshops tailored to encourage career exploration, with follow up of attendees. This is best accomplished through collaboration with the university disability office. Since students with learning disabilities have multifaceted needs, they are best addressed using a multidisciplinary team working in the interest of the student. This includes collaboration with other offices/centers and professionals from other disciplines who may also interact with these students, within student affairs and even at the academic department level.
- 9) **Decision making skills.** Decision making skills should be built on a crystallized identity. Unless there is a solid self schema on which to base the career decision, indecisiveness, and indecision would tend to be present (Saka, ati, & Kelly, 2004). Among several available decision making schema is the Cognitive Information Processing decision-making model. Its theoretical underpinning is consistent with the processing deficit model proposed to explain learning disabilities. Additionally, the approach is relevant to career problem solving and decision making and has been used effectively with students diagnosed with learning disabilities (Dipeolu et al., 2002). However, in the final analysis, the choice should be based upon what would best meet the need of each student, after evaluation of individual students' characteristics and needs.

Behavioral Interventions

- 10) **Setting relevant and appropriate career goals.** In order to help stu-

dents set career goals, they are given weekly homework assignment to set academically related goals, and encouraged to keep a journal of daily activities for a week. Homework assignments should be specific about what it is to be done and generally for the purpose of extending the learning process began in the counselor's office (Brown & Brooks, 1991; Hay & Kinnear, 1998; Salend, Elhoweris, & vanGarderen, 2003). This is a means of tracking students' efforts to accomplish set goals. The emphasis here should be on identifying obstacles to goal accomplishments and helping students assess the extent to which their goals are realistic. At the end of the week, students meet with their counselors to examine if the goals were accomplished. If goals were not accomplished, this then becomes an opportunity to examine obstacles in this process. The materials derived from this meeting then become a powerful tool used to help students personalize the goal setting experience. Because the experience is relevant to their college needs is based on here and now situations, subsequent insights may be more easily extrapolated to tackling career related goals.

- 11) **Linking personal characteristics to job or career goals.** This may be accomplished by encouraging students to make a list of their strengths prior to embarking on work based experience. Once the identified strengths are in place, students are then encouraged to keep a journal of their work-related activities. At the end of the day, students are asked to identify work activities that complement each listed strength. The idea is to help students identify strengths and celebrate those, as well as make the connection between personal characteristics and job characteristics. By so doing, students learn how personal characteristics relate to their eventual duties in the work environment.
- 12) **Job Hunting.** Job hunting activities include teaching students how to sell their skills, participate in

- interviewing, write resumes, conduct self-assessment of skills and how to obtain information relevant to searches, such as salary data (Yates, 1987). Rife and Belcher (1993) found that workers who had the greatest degree of social support for their job-hunting activities spent more hours searching for jobs and generated more employer contacts. For students with learning disabilities, college work experience in the community may also be necessary to help overcome stereotypes (Jones, Ulicny, Czyzewski, & Plante, 1987).
- 13) **Job interviewing:** Many job applicants, especially first-timers, may also be unaware of how interviews are influenced by variables such as personal grooming; appropriateness of attire; eye contact; proper grammar and self-expression; poise; posture, and composure. The ability to explain what individual can bring to a job and what each expects in return is equally crucial (Atkins & Kent, 1988; Riggion & Throckmorton, 1987). Role playing and practice interviews are the most common techniques for sharpening these skills (Brown, 2003). Therefore, students are greatly helped to acquire these skills through these means and others, including simulated interviews in which students practice answering potential employers' questions.
- 14) **Development of appropriate work habits.** This includes behaviors such as on-time and regular attendance; appropriate interaction with persons in authority, and ability to follow directions. Helping students to identify what constitutes a desirable work ethic is the first step toward helping them develop one. This should be followed by helping them to identify areas they might need to develop these skills. The emphasis here is to show students that when they are able to be on time to classes, turn their assignments in on time, prepare for examination, receive feedback, and succeed in spite of their disabilities, they are developing important skills that are transferable to the work setting.
- 15) **Relevant work site experience/mentorship:** Short-term job trials, part-time work and internships are probably the best ways for a future worker to gain knowledge about an occupation (Brown, 2003). Students should be exposed to several opportunities to engage in work related experience such as internships, part-time work positions, co-ops and work-study programs. Allowing students with learning disabilities the opportunity to have face to face contact with workers is an approach to gathering information that is preferable to less direct methods because of the level of real-world applicability.
- An important but often overlooked aspect of work site experience is the role of mentors. Students should not just be provided with opportunities to work, but they should also be connected with a mentor. For students, mentors serve as experts in a given area and wear an aura of credibility that even the career counselor with many years of significant experience is unlikely to match (Brown, 2003). Mentors also serve to provide direction and motivation, instill values, promote professionalism, and help students develop leadership skills. Without their intervention, students may remain on the same career path, perhaps continuing a horizontal progression through their career and personal lives (Burgstahler & Cronheim, 1996).
- 16) **Assertiveness and self-advocacy skills.** Role playing with the counselor or within a group using vignettes of various work related problems is a recommended approach to help students develop effective self-advocacy and problem-solving skills. This provides students with the opportunity to receive feedback, validation of appropriate behavior, and the opportunity to practice newly developed skills in a safe and non-judgmental environment. A combination of didactic and experiential activities guide students in learning how to achieve increased levels of awareness of both their disabilities and other attributes, including strengths and skills (Satcher, 1995).
- 17) **Job advancement skills.** This is a necessary component of lifelong career planning that will result in self-sufficiency as well as contribute to job satisfaction. Savickas (1991) noted that it is essential to the career planning process that students have a future orientation that is optimistic. This includes building and activating a wide support system at work and home. Within the work environment, this is usually done through work-based experience where students are assigned to a specific mentor, whose role it is to provide students with the opportunity to ask questions clarify essential elements of their jobs and understand the nature of the job, including advancement prospects and paths for career growth.
- 18) **Accessing Accommodations:** At the post-secondary and employment levels, a dominant issue is learning availability of and how to of accessing supports (such as assistive technology), and who pays for what. This becomes a significant concern on job sites where employers will question the readiness or suitability of potential employees who request specialized equipment and or other supports. Counselors can assist in this area in several ways; providing students information on community resources (e.g. Vocational Rehabilitation, Assistive Technology Centers) that may help; expanding advocacy activities as mentioned above to include learning how to clearly and effectively articulate needs. An additional but critical issue lies in evaluating when to disclose a disability and request accommodations. Although both the Rehabilitation Act and Americans with Disabilities Act entitle persons with documented disabilities access to accommodations, the reality is that many potential employees (e.g., students or graduates) are wary of disclosing disabilities or requesting accommodations for fear that this may adversely affect their chances

of obtaining or keeping a job. Again, counselors can help by referring the student to community resources familiar with this issue (e.g., Vocational Rehabilitation, Workforce Development Centers) and by helping the student learn decision-making steps to help review considerations in making an informed choice as to whether (or when) to request accommodations.

In closing, employment success in the 21st century requires that students with disabilities possess career maturity and personal flexibility (Ochs & Roessler, 2004). Assisting students with learning disabilities to develop relevant skills will help prepare them to transition well from college into the world of work (Madeus et al., 2001). The preceding clusters of affective, cognitive and behavioral based career interventions are recommended on the premise that awareness is a necessary first tool for addressing these problems, with subsequent follow-up with activities to address each area of importance.

Certainly not all difficulties will be eliminated simply through awareness alone. However, this is a starting place in creating the confidence that students with learning disabilities will need to continue making necessary adjustments beyond the university environment. When students make a successful transition to the world of work, they are well on their way to sustaining the career confidence they have worked hard to attain while in college.

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