Students and Educational Coaches: Developing a Support Plan for College

by Maria Paiewonsky, Kristen Mecca, Tim Daniels, Carla Katz, Jim Nash, Ty Hanson, and Stelios Gragoudas

INTRODUCTION

Nationally, there is an increase in the number of high school students with intellectual disabilities (ID) going to college (Getzel & Wehman, 2005; Hart, Grigal, Sax, Martinez, & Will, 2006). For these students, the move to college is as exciting and intimidating as it is for any other new college student (Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Paiewonsky et al., 2010). On top of all the usual adjustments, however, some of these students need to get acclimated to working with a wide range of college supports and with assistance from educational coaches, peer tutors, or mentors (Adreon & Derocher, 2007; Getzel & McManus, 2006; Grigal & Hart, 2010; Hamill, 2003; Paiewonsky & Ostergard, 2010). This brief provides an overview of the supported education model and some of the challenges associated with using educational coaches in college. A description of how one Massachusetts student and his educational coach used a Student–Educational Coach Agreement to plan for the support that the student needed to successfully attend college is provided. Potential support areas, examples from their working partnership, the benefits of using such an agreement, and recommendations for replication are highlighted.

Student expectations in college settings

When students with disabilities enroll in college, they are expected to assume responsibility for themselves and their education just as their peers without disabilities are learning to do. Like everyone else, college students with disabilities are expected to choose, register for, attend, and participate in courses, communicate with instructors, use academic support services as needed, and access campus facilities and resources. In addition, these students are expected to decide if they want to disclose their disability and, if so, to seek support from disability services. In meetings with their disability services counselor, they must be prepared to discuss their learning challenges and strengths (Adreon & Durocher, 2007; Eisenmann & Mancini, 2010; Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009; Getzel, 2005; Izzo, Hertzfeld, Simmons-Reed, & Aaron, 2001; Madaus, 2010; Stodden & Jones, 2002).

> ## This brief provides an overview of the supported education model and some of the challenges associated with using educational coaches in college.

Learning to meet college expectations helps students to meet the ultimate goals of higher education. These include being prepared to join the workforce, assuming personal and social responsibility, and applying practical skills in decision-making, goal-setting, and problem-solving. These skills, identified by education, business, community, and policy leaders, are core learning outcomes that employers believe should be emphasized with students if they are going to succeed in a 21st-century global economy (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007).

Self-determination and self-advocacy

One of the major differences between high school and college is the need to demonstrate self-determination skills in a postsecondary education setting (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009; Thoma & Wehmeyer, 2005). With skills in self-determination that help them regulate choices

and actions to obtain what they want, students maximize their adjustment to learning environments (Wehmeyer et al., 2007). This adjustment, in turn, contributes to improved academic performance and postsecondary outcomes (Konrad, Fowler, Walker, Test, & Wood, 2007). However, due to accommodation differences between the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), many students with disabilities are under-prepared to use self-advocacy and self-determination skills in college. As a result, they do not have sufficient self-knowledge to discuss how their disability impacts their learning, or to know how to advocate for and use supports. These factors can lead to a higher risk of failure in college. For example, students may wait until too late in a semester to disclose their disability or to request help from course instructors or disability services, or they may leave college because they do not feel that they deserve to be there (Getzel & Thoma, 2008).

Models of supported education

To assist students in meeting college expectations and in developing self-determination and self-advocacy skills, some colleges have adopted supported education strategies that are designed to provide flexible wrap-around support services to students. Supported education began as a model to support students with psychiatric disabilities who benefitted from receiving core services in career planning, academic survival skills, and outreach services and resources (Mowbray, Collins, Bellamy, Megivern, Bybee, & Szilvagyi, 2005). The model is grounded in three principles:

    (1) increasing individual skills,

    (2) increasing support from the environment, and

    (3) maximizing the fit between the individual and environment.

As increasing numbers of students with varying disabilities have pursued postsecondary education, the personnel who provide supported education strategies on college campuses have evolved and now include:

- peer mentors who are either formally or informally trained (Weilkowitz & Baker, 2008)
- peer coaches (Casale-Gainnola & Kamens, 2006)
- study buddies (Hamill, 2003)
- e-mentors (Burgstahler & Crawford, 2007)
- educational coaches (Hart, Grigal, & Weir, 2010)

Descriptions of these supported models highlight the benefits of providing educational support to students. They also delineate specific roles and responsibilities that support staff fulfill, including offering encouragement, providing academic assistance, giving corrective feedback, and prompting organizational skill-building and social-skill awareness (Burgstahler & Crawford, 2007; Casale-Gainnola & Kamens, 2006; Hamill, 2003; Hart, Grigal, & Weir, 2010; Paiewonsky & Ostergard, 2010; Weilkowitz & Baker, 2008).

Challenges

Given the increasing number of students with ID who are enrolling in college (Hart et al., 2006) and the wide range of supported education models that have been developed for them, it is inevitable that these supports are implemented differently and, in some cases, inconsistently. As a result, there is evidence to suggest that support staff and students are confused about exactly when and how individuals with intellectual disabilities should be supported in college (Casale-Giannola & Kamens; 2006; Hamill, 2003; Paiewonsky, in press). This confusion may center on the level of support needed across the span of a day, a week, or the entire semester. In addition, college faculty may have varying views about the role of support staff in their classes. The following are examples that illustrate how these challenges impact students and their support staff:

Christine Chu, at Mass Bay Community College, has a suggestion for students: "First try doing work on your own before asking for help."

Confusion about roles and responsibilities: The study buddies in Hamill's 2003 study of one student with ID taking a college class reported feeling unsure how much help to offer the student. They were comfortable showing the student

how to apply study-skills strategies, such as writing class notes in outline form and using flash cards, but reported feeling confused about what the academic expectations were for her. They were also aware that some professors were relying on them to report whether or not the student understood the course material. The study buddies concluded that although they appreciated assisting the student, they sometimes also felt incompetent in their support role.

Intensity of support: Casale-Giannola and Kamens (2006) described the intense feelings of a peer coach who was concerned about how the student she was supporting would perform in a class presentation. In this case, the peer coach felt personally responsible for the student's academic success. In an effort to make the experience as successful as possible, the peer mentor believed she needed to provide extensive time and support to the student. The authors concluded that clear expectations of the student's college participation and the coach's role in meeting those expectations should have been determined before the semester began.

Adjusting support: As part of a participatory action research initiative, college students with ID from four different colleges were asked to document and critically assess their inclusive college experiences (Paiewonsky et al., 2010). One key finding of the students' research was that they appreciated the support they received from their educational coaches, especially in the beginning of

Grace Quiah, left, at Quinsigamond Community College, says that sometimes she needs help from her coach, Annie Thorell, but she also likes to learn things on her own.

the semester. However, as students adjusted to these new responsibilities, some of them discussed the fact that, even after they no longer needed the support, some educational coaches were giving them help. Reports on student experiences include examples of educational coaches who closely shadow the students in and out of class, who give them multiple reminders about assignments, and who speak for them instead of letting them speak for themselves (Paiewonsky, in press).

Faculty attitudes: Two examples highlight how faculty perceptions about students with ID may influence or challenge a support staff member working with a student. In the first example, Eisenmann and Mancini (2010) describe the reaction of a professor to two students with ID who asked to take his course. In order to be accepted, the professor imposed two stipulations on the students. One was that the students sit quietly in class and just listen to the lectures. The second was that the students understand that they should not submit assignments or exams, which would require additional work by the instructor. Since the students chose to take the course with these stipulations, educational coaches were required to help students meet these restrictions to passively participate in a college course. In the second example, Hamill (2003) described professors who were accepting of a student with ID participating in their courses, but who felt uncomfortable about their inability to provide the support that the students needed to understand the course content and to complete assignments. Both professors concluded that they relied on the study buddies to tell them how the student was doing in class because they did not have sufficient training on what to expect.

These studies indicate that support staff and students need clarification and guidance about supported education roles. This brief describes how a team, including a student and an educational coach, structured supports that aligned the student's self-determination and education goals. Recommendations for replication follow.

Piloting the Student–Educational Coach Agreement

A team of individuals at Holyoke Community College (HCC) agreed to use a new tool, the Student–Educational Coach Agreement, which is designed to help organize the educational coach's role at the college. This team included a college student, Tim Daniels; his educational coach, Kristen Mecca; Ty Hanson, a Holyoke Community College learning specialist; and Carla Katz, project coordinator for the Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment (ICE) initiative at HCC (ICE is a postsecondary education initiative across Massachusetts). In addition, Jim Nash from CareerWorks (a one-stop career center) and Maria Paiewonsky from Think College helped review the tool. Table 1 highlights how their monthly meetings were organized and facilitated by Maria Paiewonsky.

Table 1: Schedule to Develop the Student–Educational Coach Agreement

Spring 2010 semester meetings	Purpose	Next steps
February 2010	Meet with Tim and Kristen. Invite them to try out tool; make recommendations for improvement	Meet next month to see how tool worked; what changes need to be made
March 2010	Review chart; make adjustments to level of support Tim currently needs	Meet next month; plan to discuss specific support and accommodations Tim uses
April 2010	Review chart; readjust level of support that Tim currently needs	Add Social Connections and Taking Responsibility to schedule; share recommendations for using tool
May 2010	Develop list of recommendations	Draft article for Think College website; share with college students next semester

The Student–Educational Coach Agreement that Tim and Kristen used includes ten areas that students with ID may need some assistance with as they adjust to college (see Figure 1). The following is an explanation of how to address each area, as well as an example from the agreement between Tim and

Kristen. In each area, the student and coach determine what the student takes responsibility for doing on his or her own and what support the educational coach will provide, if any.

Transportation to and from campus: Many college students must learn to take public transportation to and from campus. Some students can do this independently while others need assistance. Some students use assistive technology, such as a planner and cell phone, to arrange their own transportation pick-ups and drop-offs. Educational coaches often assist students to arrange for and take public transportation, to get used to unexpected problems that may occur, and to know how to be safe when using public transportation.

> *Tim and Kristen's example: Tim has learned to use a public bus to get to and from college. It helped that Kristen, the educational coach, assisted him in using a daily planner to record the amount of time he needs to get to the bus stop. Tim uses a bus pass to pay for the rides and, once he arrives on campus in the morning, he meets Kristen at a pre-determined meeting place. In the late afternoon, Kristen can't be with Tim for his return commute, so they decided that she would call him on his cell phone to remind him to get to the campus bus stop on time. This also helped Tim to begin using technology as a natural support. This strategy works—except when Tim's cell phone battery runs down. Carla Katz, the project coordinator, suggested that Tim carry a phone charger, that he set the phone's alarm for when it was time to catch the bus, and that he set his phone to vibrate, since he is often at the campus library in the afternoons.*

Mobility around campus: One of the first things college students mention is how much bigger college seems than high school. One way to learn how to navigate the campus is to use a campus map to practice getting to classes and to the cafeteria, fitness center, library, student center, etc. Initially, an educational coach can help students learn to find all these places, then gradually fade support as the student learns how to navigate the campus on their own.

> *Tim and Kristen's example: Tim learned very quickly how to get around. Once Kristen showed him how to navigate the campus,*

he learned how to get to classes and to the cafeteria, fitness center, and library on his own. Tim put Kristen's phone number into his contacts list on his cell phone so he can call her if he runs into any problems. Kristen takes advantage of Tim having a cell phone to send him text messages if she needs to leave him a subtle reminder or other message. Since almost everyone on campus has a cell phone, the educational coach can assist the student without calling attention to this type of support.

Communication with course instructor(s): Students say that learning to talk to their professors can seem a little intimidating. Still, college professors expect students to speak for themselves when they need help understanding course information or an assignment. Students also need to discuss their accommodation plan, if they have one, with professors. Students and coaches may rehearse these conversations or write a list of the steps needed before students approach an instructor themselves. Students say this helps them build their confidence and remember everything that they want to say to their professor.

Tim and Kristen's example: Tim enjoyed his oral communications class, but knew he had to be prepared for his instructor's question and answer (Q&A) sessions in every class. Kristen helped Tim to prepare for these Q&A sessions by rehearsing possible questions and Tim's answers before each class. This helped Tim to be more active in class. They also agreed that Kristen would give Tim quiet reminders to make eye contact with the professor so he knew Tim

was paying attention in class. One reminder they agreed on entailed Kristen looking at Tim and then at the professor, and subtly pointing to her own eye.

Meetings with the disability services counselor / academic advisor: Before every semester begins, students meet their academic advisor to discuss classes that they want to take and to review the accommodations packet, which the students are encouraged to share with their professor. Often, the academic advisor uses this opportunity to encourage students to briefly check in every week about how the semester is going. Most students take advantage of this invitation. These meetings are especially helpful when students find their courses or the workload difficult. Sometimes, educational coaches also encourage students to take advantage of this check-in opportunity.

Tim and Kristen's example: Tim met with the academic advisor at the beginning of the semester and checked in about every two weeks to discuss how things were going. One challenge Tim had during the semester was developing a PowerPoint presentation for a class. He didn't have any experience using PowerPoint software. Kristen suggested he check in with Ty and Carla to find out where on campus he could get some instructions on using the software, which he did.

Using accommodations: Many students use accommodations in college to be as successful as possible. They may use low-tech tools of their own, such as a daily planner to help them remember their schedules and appointments, or high-tech tools provided by the college, such as screen readers that enable them to listen to written materials. Educational coaches often help students learn how to use these accommodations, especially if they haven't previously used specific tools or strategies.

Tim and Kristen's example: In addition to using a planner to keep track of his schedule and a cell phone to stay in contact with others and to ask for assistance, Tim used Kristen's notes to supplement his reading assignments. Over the course of the semester, Kristen and Tim discussed his using a digital

> **A good educational coach is always looking for ways to help students take responsibility for themselves and looking for opportunities to fade support as soon as possible.**

recorder in class the following semester to reduce Tim's dependence on her class notes.

Using academic support services: All colleges offer students some type of academic support, especially if students need help with note-taking, study skills, or organizational skills to successfully complete coursework. Academic support might be offered directly in class through the professor, at an academic support center on campus, or through college tutors. Educational coaches may recommend that students take advantage of these services, and may also help them make an appointment and follow up with the academic support.

> ***Tim and Kristen's example:*** *A tutor supported Tim in his oral communications class. This tutor made herself available to any student in the class who wanted help preparing for the required speeches. Kristen encouraged Tim to meet with the tutor after class and, as a result, he picked up a helpful tip about using note cards to practice speeches. Tim said it helped with his successful class presentation on how to make a blueberry smoothie.*

Free time between classes and at lunchtime: For students new to college life, the easy part of college is going to class. That routine is similar to high school. What takes some getting used to is the freedom college students have in between classes. Generally colleges offer students a number of free-time options, such as using the fitness facilities, hanging out in the student center, and getting involved with clubs. Some students head straight to the library to do homework or check email. Educational coaches sometimes work with students to explore some of the opportunities open to all students and to include activities of interest in their schedules.

> ***Tim and Kristen's example:*** *During Tim's first semester at college, Carla and Ty mentioned the all-college club fair to Tim and Kristen. At Holyoke Community College, this is a once-a-week period where students can attend any of the 65 student-run clubs. Kristen helped Tim attend a drama club meeting where he met new friends. She also reminded Tim to bring workout clothes so he could go to the fitness center and work out on the gym equipment.*

By his second semester, Kristen didn't need to remind Tim to do this anymore. He went to the gym on his own.

Evening and weekend campus activities: In addition to academics, colleges offer students a variety of athletic, cultural, and social opportunities. For many students, a lot of the enjoyment of college comes from participation in these events. It is often a chance to meet new people, learn new things, and have fun. Educational coaches often assist students to find out more about these activities and to brainstorm ways to participate in them. This usually requires some thinking about support and transportation for evening or weekend participation.

> ***Tim and Kristen's example:*** *Through his participation in the student drama club, Tim learned about tryouts for the fall theater production. He tried out and landed a role in the production. In order for Tim to participate in all the rehearsals, Kristen helped Tim communicate his rehearsal and transportation schedules to his family.*

Social connections: Participating in college courses and campus activities provides opportunities for students to develop new relationships with other college students. Some students find it very easy to transition into college and the social activities. Some students find it overwhelming to establish connections with new people or to determine what opportunities exist. Educational coaches look for chances for students to interact with others, and encourage them to take the first step in talking to classmates.

> ***Tim and Kristen's example:*** *Tim, Kristen, and Jim mentioned how much easier it was for Tim to connect with other college students when he was involved in the college play his first semester. Those connections faded away the next semester, when he was no longer involved in the production and didn't see those students around campus. Kristen and Jim brainstormed with Tim ways to make connections with other students, such as hanging out where students have hacky-sack pick-up games or listen to music. Through the drama club, Tim learned that the drama*

advisor was looking for backstage help for the fall theater production. Tim is thinking about doing this to get involved with the theater group again.

Taking responsibility for own schedule: College students have to learn to manage new schedules that are often much busier than the schedules they followed in high school. Learning to take responsibility for a schedule can take time and may require guidance from educational coaches. Educational coaches might need to remind students to get a planner of some kind, as well as to independently make, record, and keep appointments and to record homework and assignment deadlines.

> *Tim and Kristen's example: A goal for Tim is to eventually take full responsibility for his planner. By the second semester, he was recording several appointments, but his family and coach were adding to it as well, including written reminders about assignment due dates. Kristen was working with Tim to record more of his schedule independently.*

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the final meeting, Tim and the other team members reflected on the use of the Student–Educational Coach Agreement over the course of the semester. The group determined that there are a number of benefits to using the agreement and identified the following recommendations:

- Use a formal agreement between the student and the educational coach to help to prepare for this important partnership.

- Before the semester begins, the student and coach should meet with each professor to discuss how the coach will support the student to participate in his or her course.

- Meet regularly to evaluate the agreement. It gives both the student and educational coach a chance to reflect on their work together and to update areas where support needs have changed. Minimally, the agreement should be established before the beginning of the semester and reviewed and updated at least once during the semester.

- For students, using the agreement is a good way to break the ice with new educational coaches. It can be helpful in establishing a new working relationship.

- For educational coaches, the agreement can be helpful for understanding what is expected of them and what their role is.

- For educational coaches who support more than one student, the agreement is a good way to see how varied support can be since every student's needs at college are different.

- Help parents to understand the role of an educational coach in college. Parents may see their son or daughter developing new self-determination skills as a result of their working relationship with the coach.

- For students, learning to work with educational coaches is a crucial skill. This partnership is very different from working with teacher assistants in high school.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Educational coaches can play a pivotal role in assisting students to not only attend college but also to successfully manage themselves in this new environment. With thoughtful and thorough planning before the semester begins, students and coaches have an opportunity to form a working partnership focused on support that is flexible and adaptable over time. As students develop more awareness and familiarity with college routines and expectations, the student–coach partnership changes accordingly. Tim and Kristen's examples highlight how their roles and responsibilities evolved over the course of a semester and

Amanda Dubuc, left, at Holyoke Community College, says that her course in ceramics was a success, due in great part to the support she had from her instructor, her classmates, and her coach, Jan Steininger.

how those changes were addressed through ongoing communication and planning.

The use of a tool such as the Student–Educational Coach Agreement is one way to structure communication and planning between students and coaches. It is designed to help students and coaches avoid some of the challenges they may face on campus, as well as to chart their working relationship, mutually agreeing on responsibilities they each have and how to address anticipated and unexpected challenges. As a result, both parties meet the principles of supported education: students are developing individual skills to successfully attend college; coaches are working with students to increase their reliance on existing college supports and services and decrease their reliance on the coach. The ultimate result is to maximize the fit for students with intellectual disabilities going to college.

THE AUTHORS

Tim Daniels is a concurrently enrolled student at Holyoke Community College and the Northampton, MA public schools. In addition to maintaining a busy college and work schedule, Tim enjoys taking a variety of courses in theater arts, communication, fitness, and dance.

Kristen Mecca is an educational coach for Northampton, MA students who are concurrently enrolled at Holyoke Community College. She is currently completing her second year of coaching at the campus.

Four of the authors take a break from their work. From left are Kristen Mecca, educational coach; Tim Daniels, student; Jim Nash, CareerWorks; and Carla Katz, coordinator for college access initiative.

Carla Katz is the project coordinator of the Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment initiative at Holyoke Community College. She has been in this role for two and a half years.

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Jim Nash is the director of CareerWorks, a job development and support organization in Northampton, MA. Jim has been working with Tim to make connections between college and work goals.

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Maria Paiewonsky facilitates participatory action research with students with intellectual disabilities for Think College. Findings from this research are used to inform the development of Think College training and technical assistance materials.

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Student–Educational Coach Agreement

Student and Coach Names:_____

Semester/Date:_____

Supports	Student Responsibilities	Educational Coach Responsibilities
Transportation to & from campus		
Mobility around campus		
Communication with course instructor(s)		
Meetings with disability services counselor/academic advisor		
Accommodations		
Academic support services		
Free time between classes & at lunch		
Evening & weekend campus activities		
Social connections		
Individual schedule		

Figure 1: Tim and Kristen's Example
Student–Educational Coach Agreement, Spring Semester

Student and Coach Names:_____

Semester/Date:_____

Supports	Student Responsibilities	Educational Coach Responsibilities
Transportation to & from campus	Takes bus on own to college. Waits at bus stop. Uses bus pass. Refers to checklist in planner. Parents review schedule the night before.	Reminds student to record transportation schedule in planner. Calls or sends text message to student in late afternoon to remind him about bus schedule.
Mobility around campus	Independent. Has coach's cell number in case he needs help.	None. Sends text messages to student if needed.
Communication with course instructor(s)	Asks questions. Socializes with classmates.	Rehearses possible instructor questions and student answers before class. Gives subtle reminders to make eye contact with instructor during class.
Meetings with disability services counselor/academic advisor	Meets with advisor by himself. Answers all questions. Uses list to ask questions/seek assistance.	Reminds student to check in regularly with advisor. Helps student to write down any questions he has before meetings.
Accommodations	Takes notes in class. Takes his time and writes big.	Takes notes and compares notes with student. Plans with student to use digital recorder next semester.
Academic support services	Meets with academic tutor for public speaking class. Follows tip to use note cards to prepare speech. Earns half-letter grade that instructor gives for meeting with tutor!	Prompts student to check in with advisor to determine where he can learn how to use PowerPoint.
Free time between classes & at lunch	Independent. Uses iPod, talks with friends.	Checks in periodically.
Evening & weekend campus activities	Attends weekly drama club. Goes to gym on his own.	Encourages student to look into all-college club fair to learn about student clubs.
Social connections	Talks to drama teacher about volunteer opportunity as back-stage assistant.	Brainstorms with student how to get involved in less formal student activities on campus.
Individual schedule	Records some daily and weekly appointments in planner.	Prompts student to increase responsibility for recording and managing schedule.

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