

Youth Transitions Webinar Transcript– 5-10-14

Intro

Hi, and thanks for joining us for the Youth Transition Experiences webinar. Today we're going to be hearing from several young disabled students, who are going to be talking about their perspectives and experiences going through some important educational transitions. Although every transition experience is different, we're hoping that from these stories you can gain some perspective about what it's like to be a disabled student going through these transitions. We also hope that students who are looking forward to similar transitions can gain a little insight maybe feel a little bit more prepared. After the video you're going to have a chance to ask questions, so feel free to jot down any questions you might have watching the video. Thanks again for joining us, and enjoy.

Experiences

Tia: Middle to High School

Ok you guys, so, today I'm going to talk about my transition from middle to high school. So, currently, I'm a high school junior in my spring semester. So I've already had two, two and a half years of high school. And so far it's been really great overall. But there was definitely that transition period from middle to high school in many different aspects, whether it was the maneuvering from class to class, or the amount of homework, or how much writing I had to do for tests and quizzes. Even just little stuff, like how long I had to sit in a class for. All of this was brand new, and I definitely had to adjust to my new setting and my new school.

Ok, so, to start off, I'm just gonna talk a little bit about how the transition from middle to high school affected me, sort of, in the environment aspect, from like, how I had to get used to walking across a bigger campus with a lot more students. My high school is probably twice as big as my middle school. And the kids there are a lot taller, and a lot stronger. And I definitely had to learn how to watch out and maneuver myself through crowded hallways. And it wasn't like I was just going across the hall like in middle school. In high school, I have to use the elevator and then walk all the way across campus, and have to weave in and out of people that are twice my size, because, I'm not very tall. And so, for a little freshman walking around a huge high school, that was definitely a huge transition for me.

Another part of the transition was the level of homework and the amount of writing that I had to get used to. In middle school, everything was given to you. Notes were always hand-outs, teachers really guide you and told you "you have to write this down." So in high school, I had to really get used to that more independent, ok, I have to figure out my notes and trying to write stuff down, just really learning what would work best for me, in terms of taking notes on my laptop and having my one-on-one help me take notes sometimes. That was definitely a big part of my transition from middle to high school. Um, let's see, so, another part of the whole workload aspect was the fact that my classes were twice as long in high school. So I had to get used to sitting in a class for an hour and a half versus 45 minutes. So that was definitely a big transition, because, I mean, I just wasn't used to, sitting still for that long. So that was definitely something that I had to get used to when I got to high school. And not only that, but I

really had to learn how to manage my time better and to really work in how I was going to get all of my homework and all of my quizzes and my tests complete and whatnot. Because, something that I've had in high school is that your tests and quizzes are way, way longer than they ever were in middle school. And so I've had to really work one-on-one with teachers, to sort of figure out the best method for me to get all of my work done and still have it be graded fairly and just like any other student.

So yeah, uh let's see... Another thing about my transition from middle to high school was that people at my school don't use lockers. And so that was definitely a huge jump, from going from having a locker that was right by all of my classes where I could keep all of my book bag, and only carry around one binder, and to get a new binder before my next class in middle school. In high school, people carry around their gigantic book bags that are probably twice as heavy as they were in middle school. And nobody uses these nice new lockers that they provide at school. So that was definitely a huge change, for having to figure out how to manage all of my paperwork and my homework and fitting everything into one backpack and not having it weigh 500 pounds. That's just not reasonable for me. My backpack honestly today is still way too heavy for me. So, my parents would definitely argue that that's something I still really need to work on, 'cause it's just ridiculous what we're expected to have from class to class, and what we need to keep, and the amount of textbooks and the worksheets that are just given to us constantly to keep in a gigantic binder that probably weighs like 5 pounds per binder per class. So that was definitely a big part of my transition, at least for me.

And then, let's see. Another big transition that happened during high school was the fact that this year I don't have a one-on-one anymore. So I um, I still have an IEP, but I do not have a one-on-one anymore. And so going from having a one-on-one since kindergarten to not having one junior year, with all of my AP classes - that in itself was just a gigantic shift for me. Because my level of classes went way up, and my work level went way up, and then I have a lot more independence and I definitely am doing really well without a one-on-one, and I think my parents have really been supportive and have helped me figure out ways for me to be able to function and to carry all of my stuff without a one-on-one. But it definitely has been a huge part of my transition in high school. So, I really had to learn how to manage my stuff and how to, you know, leave class a little bit earlier to get to class on time and just little things that I didn't used to have to think about.

So yeah, so my transition from middle to high school, and from having a one-on-one to not having a one-on-one even just this past year have been two very big transitions for me. And just trying to figure out, you know, what's best for me and how I can best get all of my academic work done and still have fun and still enjoy school and to have it be a burden. And I definitely have had an overall positive experience I high school because I have had so much support from my teacher and my friends and definitely my parents. So I just, I really owe them a lot, because without them, and without my IEP team, that support system, I don't think that I would be able to not have a one-on-one without them believing that I could do it and working with me to try to achieve that ultimate goal of independence.

Veronica: High school to Community College

I graduated high school in 2010. I did not want to leave because I had been brainwashed into thinking that I could not succeed in college. At an IEP meeting in February 2009, I was told that after high school, I would work minimum wage job and live in a group home. There is nothing wrong with that path, but I

did not want it to be my path. I love learning and am a history buff, ironically I was in AP United States history at the time of that IEP. All this teacher saw was the fact that I had behavior problems along with Cerebral Palsy non-verbal learning disorder and OCD. That conversation was on my mind senior year.

Senior year was hard. I did everything in my power to remain in high school. I failed a special needs personal finance class. The same class in which the teacher made me the laughing stock of the class and called me “worthless”. I could not be part of a group and did not have solid friendships.

The summer after I graduated, I attend a special needs college class, but that proved to be too easy. I had registered for a local community college classes.

The first couple of weeks of the semester it was hard. I was only in two classes but I had trouble adjusting. I took two weeks off my first semester of college, but I decided to return. Once I committed myself to college, I excelled in college. I was able to get on the dean’s list and graduated three years later with my AA in social science. I graduated with honors.

Tyler: Community College to University

Hi, I’m Tyler Greene and I am a recent graduate of the University of Northern Iowa. I graduated last December in Sociology. And here’s my degree. Um, I’d like to go back in time for minute and just talk about how I got to where I am now. And you know, it all kind of started in high school, um, taking the right classes to make sure that I would be able to go to college. Because I always knew that I wanted to go to college. So, in high school, I wanted to make sure that I was prepared for college. But, I don’t think I started early enough. Um, we weren’t prepared for the college entrance exams, um, and, so, we decided that a good alternative to taking the entrance exams would be to go to community college and transfer to a four-year college. So, that’s it. And so, community college, I was there for 2 years, and it worked really well. And that’s kind of where we laid our basis for a lot of things that would go forward into the four-year college. And then, after a few years, I decided that I was ready to transfer. So, we made sure at the community college that all my classes were transferable and that I would get credit for everything so I wouldn’t have to take anything over again.

And then I was off to UNI. And, when I got there, we met with the Disability Coordinator, and we talked about using accommodations, and we made sure that I could get around campus, and that all the buildings were accessible. And I looked, you know, at my classrooms, made sure that they were accessible.

And uh, a couple of the accommodations that I used were note-takers, either by hand or on computer. Computer works best for me. Another thing I did was I emailed my professors ahead of time, before a class. And I just kind of said “my name is Tyler, I have a disability, here are some things that that we’re gonna work on, that we could work on together, here’s where there might be some challenges, let me know what you think”. Um, so that was one thing I did to prepare them for the first day of class and the rest of the semester. So, and I had a really good experience, the professors were very accommodating. I tested in separate locations, that was another one of my big, one of my big accommodations was that tests were at a separate time in a separate place. And Disability Services would get a reader/writer and that’s how I did testing. And then, I also had, if professors used PowerPoint, I would ask the professors to email me lecture notes.

If I had to say one thing that was the biggest struggle, I think it would be health and anxiety. I actually had decided to withdraw from one semester because of health and anxiety reasons. So we had to do that, but it was fine, and we did the semester over, I graduated in, one semester after I was scheduled to, and that was great. I didn't let that get in the way, you know. I moved on, and I continued my education and it was some tough times but it was something that I got through and was able to (inaudible), pick myself up and keep going.

Cara: High School to a University

My transition from high school to college was awful, and that is putting it mildly. Uh, I went away to school, a school that is 2 and a half hours from home, in a rural part of Pennsylvania, when I grew up on Long Island, a half hour away from Manhattan. So, it was a big change, it was a bit of a culture shock, and I was not adequately prepared at all. It didn't help that I had received no preparation in high school for college, no advice or words of wisdom on how it was going to be going to college with my particular set of disabilities. And everyone just sort of acted like "of course you'll go to college, of course it'll be no problem, you're going to do the same thing as everyone else in your class is going to do." But that wasn't the reality. I was mostly, more or less, independent in my ADLs, my activities of daily living, and that's like, you know, taking a shower, making yourself a meal, walking, you know. It was, I considered myself fairly independent. But considering yourself fairly independent, and then being thrust into a situation where you have no choice but to be independent, are two very, very, very different things.

I didn't know how to do my own laundry; my roommate had to teach me. I hadn't been on my own before, it was just, there were lids I couldn't open, it was just a bad, bad scene. And I became severely depressed. And from the moment my parents left me at college, I started crying, and didn't really stop crying for the entirety of my first semester. And it was realized later on that I have an anxiety disorder and depression, which were not recognized at the time. And I realized that change is a big trigger for me, so I had to work through that.

And after my first semester I got on medication, which allowed me to focus, and not cry as much, and go out and socialize, and eat in the dining hall, and come closer to a "normal college student". I was never going to be a normal college student, I have a fairly visible physical disability on top of my mental health stuff, so to be typical is not what I was going for, I was going for functioning, and the medication helped a lot.

But, living in a dorm, was an extremely eye-opening, shocking kind of experience for me. Because, like, at home, if I couldn't open something or I needed help with something, my parents were right there, I could just ask for help. At college there was nobody I could ask for help. The Disability Services Department doesn't really deal with that sort of thing. They made sure I got accessible housing and academic accommodations and that was about it.

I didn't have friends, really, until, probably second semester or even my second year of college. I didn't have that many friends. And it wasn't like my friends lived right there, a lot of my friends lived in different buildings. So it wasn't like I could just yell, like "hey can you help me?", so that was hard. And I had to learn, like, a lot of different ways of doing things. And the exhaustion was just paramount. Chronic fatigue is a part of my disability. I have cerebral palsy, and I use a lot more energy than the typical person. So having to go to class, pay attention in class, take notes, do all this academic stuff, and then on top of that, living in a dorm, managing my laundry, making sure I ate, making sure that my room

was clean-ish , and the bathroom was clean, and just doing domestic stuff that I didn't have to worry about when I was living at home, it took a huge toll on me. And I was just exhausted all the time. And it caused problems, on occasion, with my suitemate, who would say, you know, "Can you clean the bathroom this weekend?" and I'd go "I did it last weekend". And she goes "no you didn't" I say "yes I did". But to me, I did the best I could with my limitations. But to her, it looked like it hadn't been cleaned. So I really had to negotiate with my suitemates and figure out what was going to be best for both of us. Uh, my anxiety issues led to a lot of trouble when I had a roommate, so I decided to live on my own for the next year. But like I said, I still had to deal with a suitemate and we had to share a bathroom and that caused issues.

Kristin: High School to a University

When I was in my senior year in high school, I found out that I had received a full tuition waiver for any of the three state universities in Arizona. I was attending high school in Phoenix at the time, and of course it was really, really great news. But in a lot of ways it really definitely set the way my college transition would go. I had my choice from three universities, which was good, but not as many choices as some people have. And there was really only one of the three that I would go to, so it really determined where I would go to school. It also determined how many units I was going to take and a lot of other things, so I kind of went into college with already not a lot of flexibility

And I also kind of went in assuming that my disabilities would not play a role at all. I have a lot of mental health disabilities, but I had really, really good coping skills in high school they never seemed to inhibit me from succeeding, and I kind of expected that it would be the same in college. But college has been really, really hard.

I thought of myself as being pretty independent on getting around, and I was and still am. But when I got to campus, oh my gosh, it's huge. And I actually just completely lost my sense of direction when I moved from Phoenix to Tucson, for a while. Which I had never encountered that problem before. But I actually almost just wouldn't leave my dorm for the first few days, because I knew I would get lost. I just would go completely the opposite direction of wherever I needed to go, and I was really nervous that when classes would come I wouldn't be able to get there or get back from my classes. Living in the dorm was really great for that, because you got to meet several people before classes even started. So we would go out in groups and help each other find each other's classes and I kind of didn't let on that I had no idea where I was. And kind of just let other people help me figure it out, which was a big help. And thankfully about a week in I wasn't getting turned around quite so much. But that was not something I had anticipated happening at all and I did not anticipate how just huge the campus would be. So I went from high school where I could get to classes easily in five minutes to now sometimes a fifteen minute break between classes was pushing it, that was just completely new and something to get used to.

Back to being in the dorms, besides just people meeting each other and helping each other out around campus it was really – being in the dorms my freshman year was interesting, it was a big change but in a lot of ways it was one of the best things I did. Its surprisingly much harder to meet people at college. Which you, I don't know, I had always heard that oh it's this big social thing. Especially in classes, I found it really, really difficult to build friendships. I mean you might, like, talk to people in class and get to know them, but it seemed much harder to carry those friendships on outside of class then maybe it had been in high school. So being in the dorm and being around, especially, I lived in a smaller dorm. So we

got to be like really close to almost everyone in the dorm, which was just a huge, huge benefit. I was able to get a base of friends there.

Friendships were also really kind of different in college because, people kind of come and go a lot more. You make these really good friendships initially, and then just the various things people are going through in college and the various things they want to get out of the experience, you find that friendships maybe just don't hold up that much. And especially as the years pass and classes get harder and people have more work to do, it's really hard. You just don't have as much time to put into as you would like to. And especially going from having these friendships in the dorm where your friends are right down the hall, and then the next year moving out, and you might have to go several miles to go see your friends. Sometimes it just doesn't happen, and that's something that I just really wished that I put more time and effort in, going through my experience.

Academics are different, very different, especially your first year or two. Which is funny. It's like they get drastically different, and then a little bit more similar to what they were like, at least for me, in high school. It's really, really hard to get - especially at a large university, in very large general education classes - to get your teachers' attention and to get their support and all of those things. I mean I took this psychology class in this large auditorium with 500 people and obviously your instructor, there's no way they're ever going to know your name. And that was hard for me because I am very much oriented towards feedback and having a relationship with my instructors. And you're just not going to get it in some of those courses. And then after being in some of those really, really large classes where the teacher just doesn't even know your name, I guess I kind of assumed that all the instructors from then on would be disinterested in me or my needs or my interests. And I wish I had known that wasn't the case, especially when you do get to the smaller courses, because it would have been nice to push for a little bit more from my relationships with my instructors. Because I found that once I finally did, that they were very much available and very, very accommodating.

I also really, I mean, Phoenix and Tucson are not that different, and I expected the change in scene to not be a big thing for me. But I didn't realize, I think, how entrenched a lot of my coping mechanisms were in being home. I didn't realize how much driving in Phoenix calmed me down, and how much I enjoyed it, and once in a while I would just take off and drive to a spot in the desert and sit in my car, go for a walk. And Tucson's so much more gridlocked, and you just can't do that. There aren't those open spaces, and also there's much more traffic. So even just getting in my car was, whereas in Phoenix it was relaxing, in Tucson it became stressful. And I didn't realize how much that would mean to me, but it did. I also didn't realize how much not having a pet with me, I grew up with pets all my life and of course loved them, but didn't realize how much I actually really relied on them for my anxiety and my just my mental health and happiness.

Another thing that's interesting about college that I didn't expect - of course I knew that I would have a lot more responsibility and a lot more on my plate - I didn't expect how much more everything would take for me. My classes were already taking so much out of me, and you're in a new environment, you're having to learn new places to go, you're doing homework in a place that maybe at first you weren't thinking of as home, and it just drains you so much more than I expected. I've been exhausted all of college - I love it, but exhausted.

Another thing of course about everybody being from different places, coming from different places, I don't know, I guess I just kind of assumed that everybody had the same high school experience, and

they clearly, clearly didn't. And I think that was pretty significant when it came to social relationships because, you know, interactions that would have happened in high school that I would just kind of assume everybody was on the same page, but it just wasn't happening in college all the time - maybe sometimes it was smooth, but not always. And so it was interesting, because the social relationships weren't always as predictable as maybe they had been, which was never bad, and it was fun. I think people were understanding that we're kind of all coming from different places, but the communication that has to happen is sometimes a little bit different.

There's a lot of different stresses happening in college, obviously. I mean social relationships are hard. Money, money becomes really difficult, as if that's not incredibly obvious. But things are just very, very expensive and you clearly don't have a lot of money, I mean it's the stereotype of the college student. Money also gets hard I think because you a lot of times feel like you really need to spend it. Maybe, like, I mean for me, a lot of times I didn't have the money to go out, even if it was to just go out to dinner or whatever with friends. But because those friendships can be so hard to maintain and it can be hard to keep in touch, that sometimes you kind of feel obligated and ended up doing it even though you really didn't have the money.

And then I mean my situation as a disabled person had been relatively stable for a long time as far as my mental disabilities went, and I did not realize how much all of these stressors and all of this change in my lifewould have an impact on my disabilities. I expected to not need a lot of accommodations because I had not really used them a lot in the past, I just kind of pushed through it. And I tended to do that in college too, when a lot of times I probably shouldn't have. I probably should have realized that, you know, things are changing and maybe this isn't a situation that I should be doing this way anymore. But I don't think I really felt I could start asking for help in those ways. And I think it's something I should have kind of, I guess I was kind of in denial in a lot of ways, and probably should have admitted to myself. I probably would have had a much easier time going through college. Though I wasn't seeing specialist by the time that I left high school, I definitely have had to go back now just to keep myself healthy and to stay on top of it. And beyond the mental health, your health is just kind of at risk all the time in college. The dorms are horrible, especially mine. People would stay in my room, maybe over night for visiting, and leave sick, and I was sick all the time. Whether its mold or just how many people there were, I don't know. But I've been sick more in college than I've ever been. And the food, oh my gosh, it's just horrible on campus. And even now I'm living in an apartment and I'm making my own dinners, I still eat lunch on campus and it's just awful. Of course they claim that they have a lot of healthy options, but when you're eating it everyday, not so much.

But I mean despite all of the hardships and all of the stress, it's been a huge learning experience. I've developed some great really great networks, some really great friends. I've just developed incredibly as a person. I'm mean that's from my friendships, from my change of location, from my classes especially. I mean it's been hard. I can't wait for it to be over, because I'm very, very tired, but I am so incredibly glad that I did it, and I think that once it is over I'm really, really going to miss it, because it has been a really great experience.

Advice

Veronica

What would have helped me make a better transition to college life is having more adults believe me. Just because a person has bad behavior does not mean they cannot be successful. See the ability and help students find ways to compensate for their disability. Get all the staff on board with disabilities. Do not judge a book by its cover because the pages can surprise you. Instead of predicting a student's future. Honor the student's dreams. Everyone cannot become a doctor, but maybe they can work in a hospital or clinic. Think outside the box to help all students fulfill their dreams.

Tyler

So I think, um, I think that the biggest thing when you go to college when you're transferring to a four-year university would just be to communicate, communicate with professors and the Disability Coordinator and other support staff. Make sure that you can be successful. I would say make sure that you know what services are available and I would, yeah, it really worked out well for me, and I'm glad I did it, I had a lot of fun doing it.

Cara

Um, really if I was going to give advice to incoming freshman with disabilities, just figure out, how to manage things before hand, prepare yourself, and figure how to adapt things so that they're best for you. Like for instance, my laundry. I lived on the first floor, but I still couldn't, like, carry a laundry bag all the way down the hall. It was impossible, I would fall over. So, my mom, thank god, found this rolly- cart thing, in a convenience store, and bought it for me to use for my laundry and my hamper. So I'd throw all my dirty clothes in there. And then at the end of the week, when I ran out of clothes, I'd just roll it down to the laundry room and do my laundry. So that really worked for me. And there are some adaptive stuff that's like that, that may not be in the typical realm of adaptive equipment, but you gotta figure out what works for you. That's really, that's really the lesson.

And talk to other disabled people who've gone through it, I can't stress that enough. Other people who have similar impairments, who have gone to college, who have dormed, who know how to do these things, they'll be able to offer you advice. And it really, the experience was hard. It was really, really hard. I'm not going to deny that. But, I'm in my first year of graduate school now. I came out of college, on the other side, battered and bruised, but a better person for it. And I learned a lot of invaluable skills. It was rough, but I wouldn't trade my experience in college for the world.

Kristin

If I was going to give advice to someone transitioning from high school to a university, I would say one of the first things would be just be really open to new things. Take classes that maybe you, especially that wouldn't have been available to you in high school. There's a lot of events all the time: trainings speakers, all kinds of things. Go to them. It's hard to find the time to commit to it, but when you do, it's generally worth it. Be open too, in your friendships, obviously I said friendships were one of the hardest things for me. And I think that if you go into it expecting that, and maybe really, really push for it, it might go better for you. I wish I had known to do that myself.

Academically: research your classes, research your teachers. When you are in a class that's small, even if it's out of your comfort zone, speak up once or twice in class. Get yourself noticed by the instructor, because they can really make or break you. Instructors have a little bit more flexibility in college to help your grade out if they want to, and having instructors who know you and know that you're dedicated to

the class can really, really save you when it comes finals. If you take a class with an instructor you really like and you have the opportunity to take another class with them, do it. Because the more - I mean I cannot stress enough - the more you can build a relationship with instructors the more it's going to serve you in future classes and after you graduate. And going to office hours is another thing, I never did it, I would "Oh I'm doing fine in this class", even if you are, just go. Talk to your instructor about the class, about other things happening in your life, whatever, to get them to get to know you and to build those relationships and networks. Because later if you want advice on a class to take, or you're going to need a letter of recommendation, or you want to find an internship, I mean you're going to need those relationships. It's just crucially important. And if you maybe want to do an alternate assignment - I've asked to do alternate assignments even though I'm not registered with the Disability Resource Center, I've had instructors who are willing to do it because I took the time to build a relationship with them, and that was pretty significant for me.

Obviously find, like I've said, find coping mechanisms that are going to work for you and that are going to be available to you. And also just really keep track of your health. Even if you don't have time always to go exercise, or you don't have the money to buy healthier food, at least monitor it. Because it gets so easy to focus on classes or work or whatever else is happening, and before you realize it you're really sick, or in a really bad rut of depression, or anxiety, or whatever it is. And I think it's really better to know that that's happening ahead of time and to stay on top of it as much as you can as soon. As you notice something, try to do something about it, even if it's small. You have to get through four years of it, or more, and you need to be able to do that.

Oh and then socially: if you can live in the dorms at all, do it, at least your freshman year. I moved out after my freshman year, but at least that freshman year, if you can do it, do it. I mean most of the friends I've had in college I made at the dorms, or through friends I had had at the dorms. And be outgoing. It was way out of my comfort zone. I kind of leaned on my roommate a lot to introduce me to other people in the dorms. But I mean there are things you can do. I made sure I had a door stopper, and just being able to prop my dorm room open, and the first couple weeks just saying hi to whoever walked by kind of made a big impact. Because everyone else is looking to make friends too, and being the person who's will to reach out can hugely benefit you. So just keeping doors open, or whenever you have free time and you're just doing busy work, going down to the common areas and being available to talk to people who pass by is just huge and will pay off in the long run. And I mean some of those friendships, one of the friends that I met in the dorm is one of my best friends now and we're roommates. And I mean I don't think you could really get through college without some of those friendships. And hopefully after everything you go through together in college, I think a lot of them you walk away with friends for life, of course with everything else you get through the experience.