Five Keys to Success for an Effective Post-Secondary Education for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (ID)

The Advancing Students Toward Education and Employment Program (ASTEP)

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The North Dakota Center for Persons with Disabilities (NDCPD) at Minot State University (MSU), in collaboration with Dakota College at Bottineau (DCB) and MSU, has implemented a Post-Secondary Education (PSE) program called Advancing Students Toward Education and Employment (ASTEP). The goal of ASTEP is to provide the necessary supports for students with intellectual disabilities (ID) to attend college alongside their peers without disabilities.

There are five keys to success that are at the core of the ASTEP program. Over the years, the ASTEP program has found what works well, what needs to be changed, and what needs to be improved.

The first key to success is having students set personal goals each semester. Students set goals in each of the following domains: academics, employment, independent living/community, and social/recreation/leisure. Every semester, there are individualized Person Center Planning (PCP) meetings that involve the student, family, ASTEP support, Vocational Rehab (VR) support, and other community supports. During this meeting, goals are discussed in each adult life domain. These goals are discussed with the student, with input from family and other supports. The goals are set at the beginning of the semester and then each student meets with their program advisor at least bi-weekly to follow-up regarding how they are doing on their goals.

ASTEP staff have found student-led PCP meetings to be very successful. Students take ownership of the PCP by creating a presentation, using technology and creativity to highlight their previous semester’s successes and challenges. This is an important time for all personnel to provide input and offer new ways to support the student. It is also a time for the student and family to monitor growth from semester-to-semester and year-to-year.
The **second** key to success is focusing on total inclusion in implementing and maintaining a post-secondary education program for students with intellectual disabilities.

The ASTEP program, in partnership with MSU and DCB, has full inclusion in all classes that students take on campus. In addition, there is inclusion in employment, residence halls, and campus life. The students in ASTEP are not segregated to separate areas of campus or separate classes. There is no such thing as a “special ed” classroom. Students are enrolled in inclusive college classes with their peers without disabilities. Students learn and take part in homework and projects alongside their peers. At times, teaching people with disabilities in a regular classroom has been considered to have a negative outcome. However, Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2005 (as cited in Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014, p. 25) state the opposite, “there is evidence that the presence of students with disabilities in the regular classroom does not negatively affect the academic performance of students without disabilities.”

Overall, the MSU and DCB faculty had positive things to say about ASTEP students in their classes. Dr. Aili Smith, professor of theater at MSU, commented on inclusion of students from the ASTEP program in her classes. Dr. Smith teaches classes such as public speaking, introduction to theater, and movement. She said, “I believe ASTEP is a wonderful opportunity and offering on the MSU campus. It has opened my eyes to a different and unique way of teaching and learning” (A. Smith, personal communication, April 30, 2019).

Inclusion is extended to employment as well. ASTEP students work in the community, in offices, restaurants, hotels, department stores, and in multiple locations on campus. They work alongside other employees without disabilities. ASTEP focuses on getting students real community jobs for real pay, just like everyone else. Employers on campus and in the community are supportive of ASTEP students. An employer in the Registrar’s Office at MSU
commented on employing ASTEP students saying, “Employing ASTEP students is valuable because of the relationships we develop with the students” (R. Ringham, personal communication, April, 2017). Another employer at Cash Wise grocery store commented on the experience of employing several of the students from the ASTEP program saying, “We are so proud to be partnering with the ASTEP program. We are lucky to have students on our Cash Wise Team!” (T. Andre, personal communication, March 19, 2017).

Inclusion is promoted by having inclusive residence halls on campus. The students in the ASTEP program who live on campus are housed just like their peers who live in campus housing. ASTEP students who decide to live on campus can request a single room if they feel they need one because of their disability. If they do not request a single room, they can be assigned a roommate just like their college peers. ASTEP staff work closely with the Residence Life staff and communicate frequently if there are any issues. Because ASTEP students live inclusively on campus, this makes them just like any other college student who attends campus events, eats in the cafeteria, and so much more.

The third key to success has been utilizing college-age, peer mentors as support for students. This has been done successfully by hiring peer mentors who have a background, education, or experience in working with individuals with disabilities. Peer mentors receive annual training and attend regular meetings with ASTEP staff to discuss strategies for supporting students. Peer mentors provide feedback after each shift to ensure information regarding student progress is communicated to ASTEP staff. The feedback form includes the learning goals and expectations for each student so information can be used to help document student progress on their PCP goals. This electronic feedback form is sent to the ASTEP staff person who oversees
each domain. By doing this, the ASTEP staff know immediately if there is a concern or issue that needs to be addressed.

The **fourth** key to success is developing rapport and collaborating with ASTEP students, mentors, families, faculty, and employers. The rapport with these entities is extremely vital to the ASTEP program, helping to build campus and community partnerships. The positive relationship with families helps the ASTEP staff know how to meet the needs of students. The professional relationship that is built with the faculty helps ensure open lines of communication and further opportunities for classes in the future. Partnerships with campus and community employers helps to bring additional employment opportunities not only for future students but also for program graduates as they continue employment after graduation. The professional relationships and partnerships that ASTEP built with MSU, DCB and the Minot community over the past nine years will be a positive attribute to sustain the program for years to come.

The **fifth** key to success is teaching and encouraging dignity of risk with students and parents. According to Shouse (2019), dignity of risk is, “the right to take risks when engaging in life experiences, and the right to fail in those activities.” When parents send their child away to college, they send them acknowledging and understanding the dignity of risk. They are taking a risk in sending their child away. Parents cannot always protect their child and there’s a different perspective when your child has ID. Individuals with ID are a more vulnerable population, so they may have been even more protected throughout their life. The students in the ASTEP program do have a disability, but they are also college students who want to be self-determined. They want to stay up late, sleep in, hang out with friends, each junk food, and experience new things like other students. The ASTEP program works with the students to make sure they are safe and supported throughout their college experience; however, being a college student means
having the opportunity to make choices and be self-determined, and sometimes with that comes mistakes and poor choices. The role of ASTEP is to minimize poor choices and help students learn from their mistakes. ASTEP staff has been successful in this goal by maintaining open communication with families and being available to support students to learn about self-determination and making healthy choices.

Implementing a post-secondary transition program is no easy task and there are many challenges that arise. ASTEP staff prepare and know that new situations will require problem-solving and critical thinking. The most important lesson learned is to embrace the students. Support them. Cheer them on. Advise them. Help them achieve their goals. ASTEP allows students who otherwise may not have the opportunity to attend college to learn, grow and succeed to the best of their ability, so they can have a positive future living and working in their communities.
References
