Multidisciplinary Teams

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The complex nature of intellectual disabilities means that multiple professionals must work together to promote quality transition services and successful post-school outcomes. The composition of these teams may vary based on the complexity of a student's disability or disabilities, the student's age, and the context in which services are provided. Schools, community agencies, healthcare providers, and nonprofits can work together to provide quality supports and services for individuals, but there are innate challenges. This chapter explores how to achieve productive collaboration by incorporating specific strategies and developing necessary capacities for promoting and facilitating adult professional teaming.

Overview

Young adults with intellectual disabilities too often experience low post-school outcomes such as: (a) poor graduation rates from high school, (b) low employment rates after high school, and (c) low participation in post-secondary education. These outcomes often lead to lower quality of life and an increasing number of youths receiving Social Security or other welfare program benefits or being incarcerated (Johnson, Thurlow, & Stout, 2007; National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, 2004; Newman, Wagner, Cameto, Knokey, & Shaver, 2010; Taylor, Krane, & Orkis, 2010). One critical strategy for improving these outcomes is increased collaboration and teaming between professionals to facilitate seamless supports and services tailored to each individual.

For over two decades, the field has repeatedly acknowledged that interagency collaboration plays a critical role in positive post-school outcomes (Carter et al., 2009; Kohler & Field, 2003; Morningstar, Kleinhammer-Tramill, & Lattin, 1999; Noonan, Morningstar, & Gaumer Erickson, 2008; Noonan, Morningstar, & Lattin, 2008; Test et al., 2009). These critical linkages are significant factors in promoting higher employment and post-secondary educational outcomes, especially for students with intellectual disabilities (Bullis, Davis, Bull, & Johnson, 1995; Hasazi, Furney, & DeStefano, 1999; Rabren, Dunn, & Chambers, 2002; Repetto, Webb, Garvan, & Washington, 2002).

While collaboration between agencies supporting adults with disabilities is important, it is vital to establish linkages between agencies, the K-12 education system, and other relevant agencies early on, while students are receiving K-12 services and supports. Interagency collaboration

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is critical to transition planning and related supports in middle and high school; additionally, it facilitates better linkages to adult agencies and higher outcomes for young adults with disabilities (Hasazi et al., 1999; Kohler & Field, 2003; Rabren et al., 2002; Repetto et al., 2002). In other words, for optimal success, we must start early in planning and providing important transition services, and educators should not be working in isolation from adult agencies who may later be providing critical supports.

In addition to promoting better post-school outcomes, much can be gained from increased collaboration between entities such as K-12 education, vocational rehabilitation, workforce investment, employment agencies, developmental disability organizations, social services, chambers of commerce, nonprofits, and others. Collaboration can lead to less duplication of resources, improved professional development, and a cross-flow of information (Blalock, 1996; Wehman, 1998). As we partner to meet the needs of young adults with disabilities in-school and post-school, we often learn that there are gaps in resources and supports which can be filled if understood and targeted. We also learn about other agency services, challenges, and overall goals, and piece together more meaningful supports specific to each individual.

While there is clearly much to be gained, working with other professionals to coordinate services and supports can be challenging. There are numerous barriers to interagency collaboration, including: (a) poor/inaccurate perceptions of outside agencies by school staff, students, and parents (and vice versa) and (b) nonexistent/ineffective procedures for collaboration between school and agency staff throughout the referral, eligibility, determination, and transition planning process (Agran, Cain, & Cavin, 2002; Benz, Johnson, Mikkelsen, & Lindstrom, 1995; Li, 2004). Additional research (Certo, Pumpian, Fisher, Storey, & Smalley, 1997) noted that there are other limitations inherent to the public school systems (i.e., locus of service delivery and staffing patterns) and the adult service sector (i.e., discrepancies between entitlement vs. eligibility and differing supports and services).

More specifically, barriers to interagency collaboration include: (a) lack of shared information on students across agencies; (b) lack of follow-up data on program recipients that could be used to improve transition services; (c) lack of attention to IEP post-secondary goals; (d) lack of systematic transition planning with adult agencies; (e) ineffectual interagency agreements; and (f) difficulties in projecting post-secondary needs and services (Johnson, Stodden, Emanuel, Luecking, & Mack, 2002; Noyes & Sax, 2004). In one study that examined collaboration among adult service providers, the most challenging barriers to overcome were the difficulty in merging professional culture differences and the loss of professional identities among agencies (Timmons, Cohen, & Fesko, 2004). In a review of multiple projects providing mental health services to youths with emotional disabilities, some of the challenges identified were blame and distrust among child-serving agencies, inflexibility, and fear of change (Hodges, Nesman, & Hernandez, 1999). Furthermore, the report concluded that to be effective, collaboration must occur at multiple administrative levels within an agency and across multiple agencies.

To summarize, early research on collaboration and transition succeeded in identifying the critical nature of building the relationships and linkages, as well as identifying barriers to effective professional collaboration in complex systems. Providing quality transition supports in middle and high schools to support positive post-school outcomes requires involvement and commitment from multiple agencies, the family, and the student, throughout both planning and implementation (Kleinhammer-Tramill, Rosenkoetter, & Tramill, 1994; Noyes & Sax, 2004). The ultimate goal of collaboration is to ensure a seamless transition from one agency to the next, thereby providing needed services with minimum disruptions (Halpern, 1994). To accomplish this, educators and agency professionals must successfully engage in collaboration.

Strategies for Collaboration

Interagency collaboration by nature is dynamic; it develops slowly over time as a group as well as between individual members representing agencies. Agencies, such as businesses, healthcare providers, social services, and educators begin to take specific steps toward productive partnerships (Johnson, Zorn, Tam, Lamontagne, & Johnson, 2003). Each agency participates within its own system, and at its own pace, yet continually develops toward providing better services in collaboration with others (Kleinhammer-Tramill et al., 1994; Timmons et al., 2004).

Collaboration as a concept may seem elusive, but research has lent clarity to the definition and construct of collaboration (including characteristics of collaborative activities). Abramson and Rosenthal (1995) defined collaboration as "a fluid process through which a group of diverse, autonomous actors (organizations or individuals) undertakes a joint initiative, solves shared problems, or otherwise achieves common goals." Research indicates that while collaboration is a complex concept, it can be broken down into a theoretical model that contains five variable dimensions: (a) governance, (b) administration, (c) organizational autonomy, (d) mutuality, and (e) norms (Thomson & Perry, 2006; Thomson, Perry, & Miller, 2007). These five dimensions can be assessed by the group, with targeted areas for improved collaboration through activities such as creating group norms and improved communication systems, adding relevant decision-makers as team members, and ensuring an equal balance of power among voices and participating agencies. Their work illustrates that many factors influence and support collaboration, which is an inherently complex concept.

Unsurprisingly, collaborative relationships take time to develop. Achieving optimal levels of interagency collaboration requires members to determine how to work together and to communicate effectively. Purposeful collaborative activities can be characterized as: (a) establishing mutual relationships and goals, (b) jointly developing structures and sharing responsibility, (c) sharing authority and crediting everyone with success, and (d) sharing resources and rewards (Mattessich, 2003; O'Looney, 1993; Parent Advocacy Coalition for Educational Rights, 1994; Walsh, Brabeck, & Howard, 1999). Specific behaviors and mechanisms have been shown to increase collaboration over time (Mancini, Marek, Byrne, & Huebner, 2004).

Researchers in a variety of fields have argued that collaboration develops in distinct stages of between three and seven steps (deFur, 1997; Dunst & Bruder, 2002; Frey, Lohmeier, Lee, & Tollefson, 2006; Gajda, 2004; Hogue, 1993; Peterson, 1991). Frey et al.'s (2006) model includes five clear stages: (a) networking, (b) cooperation, (c) coordination, (d) coalition, and (e) collaboration. Networking is characterized by awareness of the organization, loosely defined roles, and low levels of communication for the purposes of referral only. Cooperation, the second stage, is characterized by providing information to each other, somewhat defined roles, formal communication, and independent decision-making. Coordination, the third stage, is exemplified by sharing information and resources, defined roles, frequent communication, and some shared decision-making. The fourth stage is coalition, which consists of shared ideas, shared resources, frequent prioritized communication, and shared decision-making. Finally, the highest stage is collaboration, exemplified by members belonging to one system, frequent communication with mutual trust, and consensus reached on all decisions.

In 2003, Johnson et al. identified seven interrelated factors related to successful interagency collaboration, which are: (a) commitment, (b) communication, (c) strong leadership from key decision-makers, (d) understanding the culture of other agencies, (e) engaging in serious preplanning, (f) providing adequate resources for collaboration, and (g) minimizing turf issues. These factors were evident in professional partnerships, as adults felt it was part of their charge to learn other systems, build relationships with other agency staff, and gain support of their bosses (e.g., dedicated time, ability to contribute to joint activities, some level of decision-making) to participate. Professionals who collaborated gained

an awareness of the culture of other agencies, such as pressures, organization structures, and priorities. That awareness and understanding led to more joint planning and less competition and hesitancy to partner on activities that supported youth and adults with disabilities.

A significant focus of collaboration research has been identifying what quality collaboration in transition looks like, as well as common characteristics of the educators and communities involved. The research led to the identification and description of the standard or goal for collaboration: when agencies collaborate, they function as one entity and are actively engaged in problem-solving, information sharing, and merging of resources (Cashman, 1995; deFur, 1997). When educators and agency professionals can function as one entity, individual members of the transition team are able to make better decisions, as the collective wisdom of the group provides many alternative solutions and ways to address needs (deFur, 1997). This benefits not only the agencies and the student but also families. These collaborative efforts result in families gaining role clarity and greater understanding of the differences between K-12 and adult services and supports, as well as the strengths and limitations of various service provider offerings.

Additionally, these collaborative efforts cannot happen once, or be time-limited. Successful interagency collaboration needs to be sustained, systematized, and characterized by: (a) key positions jointly funded by education and adult services, (b) monthly interagency planning meetings, (c) cross-agency training opportunities, and (d) the use of a variety of practices for collaboration and team-building (Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000; Hasazi et al., 1999). Mechanisms such as ongoing teaming, joint training, and merged funding are important elements to keep collaboration efforts going over time to truly meet the vision of operating as one entity with strong collaboration.

Researchers have examined and identified specific strategies for increasing collaboration (Spath, Werrbach, & Pine, 2008). One strategy is the concept of "linking agents" (Crandall, 1977; Hamilton et al., 2002; Havelock & Havelock, 1971). A linking agent is a person who fulfills one or more of the four key roles to facilitate collaboration: (a) catalysts, who empower others to bring about change; (b) solutionists, who build awareness of the new ideas; (c) facilitators, who support the processes and procedures that effect change; and (d) linkers, who link to resources and help others receive the support, information, and expertise they need for long-term, sustainable change. The highly knowledgeable linking agent functions as the "go between" for numerous entities and agencies to bridge the implementation gap and facilitate change (Monahan & Scheirer, 1988).

In 2008, Noonan, Morningstar, and Gaumer Erickson identified eleven key strategies that high-performing districts implemented at the local-level related to interagency collaboration. The strategies are: flexible scheduling and staffing, follow-up after transition, administrative support, variety of funding sources, state-supported technical assistance, ability to build relationships, agency meetings with students and families, training students and families, joint training of school and agency staff, meetings with agency staff and transition councils, and dissemination of information to a broad audience. Research results indicated the clear need for a systematic approach to local community readiness and commitment of key stakeholders (i.e., special educators, transition coordinators, administrators, families, and agency staff). Many of the identified strategies required joint efforts of school administrators and staff, community agencies, and families—meaning that the task of increasing collaboration could not fall solely on one entity.

In 2014, Dr. Noonan and the Council for Exceptional Children published the book *Transition Teaming: 26 Strategies for Interagency Collaboration* (Noonan, 2014). The book provides secondary special educators and their adult agency counterparts with concrete strategies for building collaborative relationships. Part of the book focuses on strategies that individual educators can use immediately, such as reflection, increased awareness of partners, relationship-building activities, and outreach. Through these

daily mechanisms, individuals expand their personal efforts toward collaboration. In the book, each personal strategy is identified and then described with specific activities and examples in detail. Strategies and activities include:

Strategy 1: Gain an understanding of how coworkers' jobs are related to transition.

- Interview school personnel to better understand charge.

Strategy 2: Increase awareness and knowledge of adult agency services.

- Develop or expand a list of community resources.
- Join community organizations and committees.

Strategy 3: Gain administrator buy-in.

- Present at a school board meeting.
- Update administration regularly via email or meetings.

Strategy 4: Communicate information about transition to coworkers.

- Present to coworkers.
- Provide information in a communal space.

Strategy 5: Communicate information about transition to local community.

- Develop an "elevator speech."
- Write an article for the local newspaper.
- Present to community organizations.

Strategy 6: Communicate information about transition to families.

- Disseminate information to families.
- Facilitate meetings with agencies, students, and families.
- Tour local agencies.

Strategy 7: Coordinate with coworkers to provide transition services.

- Assess your school's college and career readiness practices.
- Identify school assessment practices that support transition.

Strategy 8: Coordinate with community agencies to provide transition services.

- Connect your students to community agencies.
- Plan a collaborative project.

Strategy 9: Participate in professional development related to transition.

- Attend regional or state transition conferences.
- Join national organizations and attend national conferences.

Strategy 10: Participate in professional development sponsored by community agencies.

- Attend trainings provided by community entities.

In later chapters, *Transition Teaming: 26 Strategies for Interagency Collaboration* details a step-by-step process to form a functioning, action-oriented transition team. In the early 1990s, community transition teams (CTTs) emerged as a model of facilitating interagency collaboration, with the key function of creating linkages between education and adult services through teaming (Blalock & Benz, 1999). Community transition teams (also referred to as transition councils) are typified as being composed of local, community-level representatives of schools; disability-related agencies and community organizations; families and students; and other stakeholders who join together to improve local transition services for youths with disabilities. The theory behind this model is that community transition teams will be able to help students and families secure resources to accomplish their transition plan by improving the capacity of schools and communities to deliver better services (Benz, Lindstrom, & Halpern, 1995). Because community transition teams focus on services at the local level, they are better able to: (a) share resources, (b) hold informational fairs, and (c) influence local policies and procedures (deFur, 1999). Team membership often includes representatives of the local schools, students and/or former students, family members,

One-Stop centers, vocational rehabilitation, developmental disability organizations, independent living centers, post-secondary training organizations, and local businesses (Halpern, Benz, & Lindstrom, 1992). Community transition teams work to create community cohesiveness and increase community capacity by avoiding service duplication and targeting emerging community transition needs (Clark & McDonnell, 1994). As Benz, Lindstrom, and Halpern (1995) reflected, systems change depends on the critical components of: (a) active participation of diverse stakeholders, (b) viewing change as a process and not as an event, and (c) local community partnerships that are supported by a larger structure that sustains and validates efforts.

Community transition teams work to identify needs, plan and implement new programs, and evaluate team efforts in order to modify and improve services for youths with disabilities. Structured teaming with the ongoing use of data to drive decision-making sustains transition teaming (Noonan, 2014). Through strategies 11–26, individuals expand their interpersonal efforts toward collaboration. In the book, each teaming strategy is identified and described with specific activities and examples in detail. Strategies and activities include:

Strategy 11: Develop a community transition team.

- Discuss your community's and students' needs.
- Generate a list of potential team members.
- Plan the first meeting.

Strategy 12: Identify a shared vision.

- Identify individual visions.
- Identify a team vision.

Strategy 13: Conduct community transition team meetings.

- Establish meeting norms.
- Use agendas and minutes.

Strategy 14: Organize your community transition team.

Strategy 15: Conduct community resource mapping.

Strategy 16: Host a community conversation.

Strategy 17: Determine team structure—critical representation, team organization.

Strategy 18: Engage in action-oriented teaming—annual planning, action planning, short-term projects.

- Create a detailed action plan spanning a specific period of time.
- Brainstorm specific activities that will lead to a commonly desired outcome.
- Provide sufficient, relevant details and include follow-up steps.

Strategy 19: Come to consensus.

- Adopt techniques for quick voting, weighted voting.

Strategy 20: Assess shared leadership.

Strategy 21: Use Data as a community transition team.

Strategy 22: Use data that is already available to your community transition team.

- Review post-school outcome and academic data.
- Discuss community data, such as employment data.

Strategy 23: Engage in data collection and information gathering.

- Utilize surveys to improve transition curriculum.
- Research to expand opportunities or services.
- Create your own survey.

Strategy 24: Plan for sustainability.

- Identify sustainability strengths and barriers.
- Launch a sustainability survey and develop sustainability goals.
- Apply for funding.
- Create brochures, articles, and products that preserve the history.

Strategy 25: Develop bylaws.

Strategy 26: Develop formal Interagency Agreements.

- Create Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs).

To further facilitate community transition teaming, Noonan and Gaumer Erickson (2013) developed a fidelity tool, where teams discussed

several indicators and determined if each was in place. If it was not in place, teams brainstormed action items to promote better teaming. Indicators include:

1. Community transition team is established and includes critical representation based on community needs (e.g., school personnel, Centers for Independent Living, Department of Mental Health and Vocational Rehabilitation counselors, family members, employers).
2. Community transition team is representative of community and reflects community needs.
3. Community transition team has established a team name and used the Mini-Maps process to develop a shared vision with the expanded team.
4. Community transition team meets monthly at a minimum.
5. Community transition team has identified community and transition areas of need and prioritized five major goals. Entire team is knowledgeable of these goals.
6. Based on team goals, community transition team jointly developed an action plan that outlines activities, persons responsible, and timeline for reaching goals. Action plan is reviewed and updated at every meeting.
7. Team norms or ground rules have been established and agreed upon.
8. Meeting structure (i.e., agenda and timing) has been established and agreed upon.
9. An organizational system for tracking meeting notes, materials, and data has been established and is maintained.
10. A system of assigned or rotated roles (e.g., facilitator, note-keeper, time-keeper) is defined to assure high quality and effective meeting time.
11. Community transition team members have equal voice when planning team activities.
12. Process for reaching a team decision (i.e., consensus or majority vote) has been defined and adopted.
13. Building administration—that is, principal or district level administrator—attends community transition team meeting at least three times a year (e.g., fall, winter, spring) and receives agenda and minutes for every meeting.
14. Community transition team collaboratively reflects on areas of local need identified through data (e.g., Indicator 13 compliance data, drop-out data, graduation rates, outcomes, etc.).
15. Community transition team systematically uses data to drive decision-making.
16. Community transition team systematically shares information with appropriate district-wide staff and administrators.
17. Community transition team systematically shares transition information with community and families.
18. Community transition team systematically communicates with surrounding districts about team initiatives.
19. Transition-related professional development events are included on CTT meeting agendas for dissemination and discussion.
20. At least annually, community transition team revisits and updates an action plan that addresses the prioritized needs identified through data analysis.
21. District leadership is familiar with the contents of the action plan.
22. Community transition team membership is reviewed at least annually and new members are recruited.
23. A process is in place to welcome new members to team.
24. Bylaws have been developed by the community transition team.
25. Sustainability plan has been developed by CTT and is revisited at least annually.

On an ongoing basis, community transition teams can discuss the list of indicators in order to identify strengths as well as areas for improvement. The higher the degree to which teams address the indicators, the more likely they are to sustain membership and maintain a high level of functioning.

Competencies to Support Collaboration

Although specific strategies for interagency collaboration have been identified, professionals from both education and support agencies are not always provided foundational training on the behaviors necessary to develop collaborative working relationships or productive teams. Knott and Asselin (1999) surveyed secondary special education regarding the most important aspects of their jobs, and found that while teachers rated interagency collaboration as important, they did not know how to accomplish this task. Teachers also indicated that pre-service and in-service training needed to focus less on philosophical, historical, and legal foundations of transition and more on communication and interagency collaboration. Some felt that training should move beyond, "What is transition planning?" to "How do I accomplish planning that will lead to successful transitions?" (Knott & Asselin, 1999, p.3). Li (2004) surveyed 1000 secondary special educators and transition coordinators and found that educators as a whole recognized the importance of interagency collaboration (4.35 on 5.0 scale). This study also found that if the respondents were adequately trained in and committed to transition, they had higher perceptions of interagency collaboration and more transition involvement. Therefore, two major barriers to interagency collaboration are a lack of training in transition and a lack of commitment to transition activities (Li, 2004).

Collaboration must begin with adults using clear, purposeful behaviors to build relationships with each other. In its essence, "collaboration is a way of thinking and relating, a philosophy, a paradigm shift, an attitude change. It requires a set of behaviors, beliefs, attitudes, and values. The result is a sense of shared ownership, shared responsibility, shared success" (Bishop, Wolf, & Arango, 1993).

When educators and adult agency staff agree that building partnerships with others is part of their personal charge, they expand their efforts to identify and implement strategies to increase collaboration. These concepts and strategies can be embedded to improve transition outcomes for students. To increase collaboration between entities, professionals should focus efforts at the individual level on a daily basis. As we work to collaborate, the benefits are immense, as students with intellectual disabilities will have better access to higher quality services. Professionals will benefit from improved staff relationships and the cross-fertilization of ideas. This shared responsibility may bring expenses at times, but it also comes with decreased duplication of efforts. Despite the potential gains, many educators find themselves unable to implement collaboration strategies due to limitations in necessary inter- and intrapersonal competencies. To address this need, professionals can work to develop these competencies by learning the basics, practicing, taking risks, and working to increase self-awareness throughout the process. Six approaches can support educators and disability professionals in a self-improvement process, including:

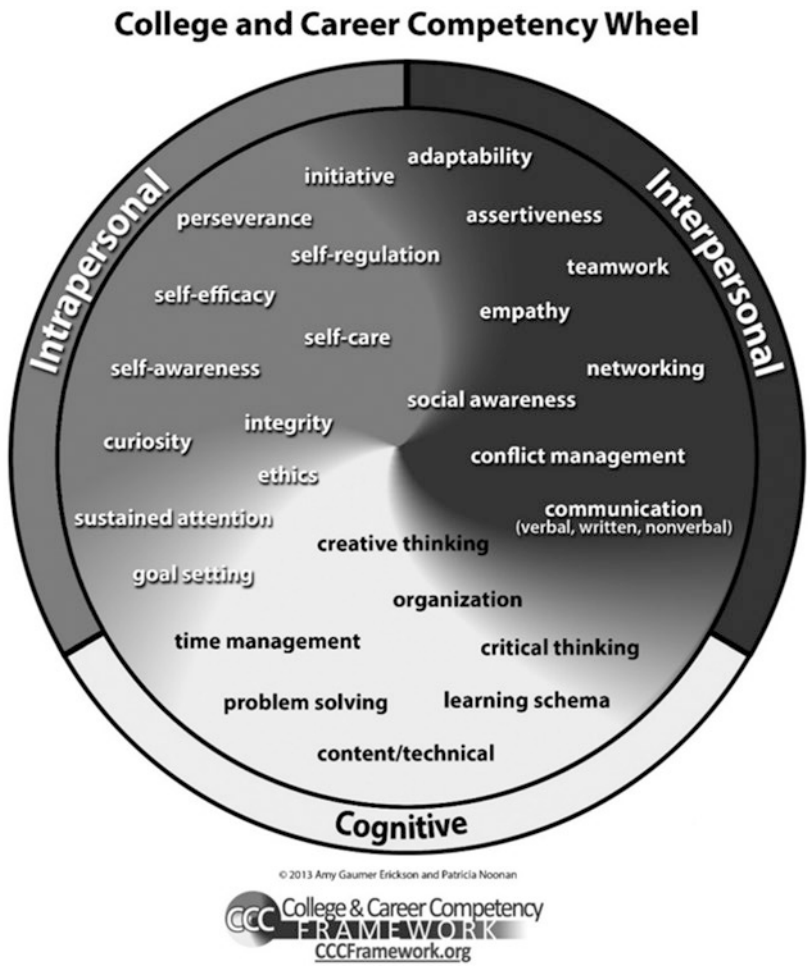
1. Speak a common language.
2. Learn services and agencies outside your own.
3. Partner with others to accommodate and meet their charge.
4. Employ action-oriented behaviors.
5. Work through past and current issues.
6. Believe that your collaboration abilities will improve.

Speak a Common Language

To speak a common language among professionals, we must begin describing students' intra- and interpersonal strengths in a consistent, easy-to-understand way to allow better communication between educators, adult agency staff, students, parents, nonprofits, and employers. As Noonan and Gaumer Erickson note in their 2018 book *The Skills that Matter: Teaching Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Competencies in Any Classroom,* college and career competencies can provide us a language to communicate with each other more meaningfully. Their work includes the *College and Career Competency Wheel*, which identifies 26 competencies critical to in-school and post-school success, categorized into three domains: intrapersonal (focusing on students' internal, reflective capacities), interpersonal (focusing on capacities related to cooperation and interaction with others), and cognitive (focusing on effectively processing and using information).

The 26 competencies can be considered social/emotional competencies, as well as critical employability skills for success in career paths and post-school education and training. Each of the 26 competencies has a foundation of evidence that they can be taught to adolescents, have demonstrable behaviors associated with them, and if developed, impact in-school and post-school achievement (see http://CCCFramework.org for Teacher Guides that summarize the research and provide details on instructional practices and assessments).

The *College and Career Competency Wheel* can be used to describe critical competencies for students' post-school success, but also to articulate an overall vision or purpose of a group. The competency wheel promotes a common language with students, teachers, employers, community members, law enforcement, etc. We can embed these competencies into our instruction and this will positively impact students with disabilities, gifted students, those at risk, and those on track, regardless of the student's career path. Additionally, professionals from adult services, nonprofits, and even families can understand and support the development of the competencies. As professionals from numerous disciplines examine and embrace the vision of better-prepared students, they are better able to work together, share resources, and advocate for policy changes to create more socially and emotionally engaged, career-equipped, lifelong learners. This common charge promotes collaborative behaviors from all sides.



Learn Services and Agencies Outside Your Own

In order to learn and work with services and agencies outside of your own, it is important to build relationships with other invested partnering agencies. To first learn and then truly partner with other entities, consider focusing on your networking abilities.

Networking includes these essential components:

- Create ties among individuals.
- Utilize ties for support to overcome barriers and achieve goals.
- Support others to overcome barriers and achieve goals (Gaumer Erickson & Noonan, 2013).

Consider the degree to which you currently network with agencies such as vocational rehabilitation, parent organizations, workforce centers, and nonprofits. You may be aware of a person working within an entity, and you may even have exchanged contact information or discussed a student. These are good steps in beginning to network and build relationships, but genuine networking requires more. To fulfill the components of networking, we not only create the connections or ties, but also use them for support to overcome barriers and achieve goals, such as coordinating services for a student in need. And more importantly, we use our connections to support other professionals to overcome barriers and achieve goals, even when it might not directly benefit our role or our students. In other words, we use our ties to make connections between oth-

ers so that they build mutually beneficial relationships with others. In this way, we are not simply capturing contact information for later use, but instead are building and participating in a true professional network.

Partner with Others to Accommodate and Meet Their Charge Also

So often when we strive to collaborate with others, we make the mistake of primarily focusing on identifying and communicating our needs. While asking for help is important, we want to do so in a way that strives to build relationships with others based on authentic mutual understanding. Focusing on understanding and improving our assertiveness and empathy can help us build quality professional relationships for effective collaboration.

Assertiveness supports both making connections with others and keeping these relationships strong, and includes these essential components:

- Even when it's difficult, express my wants, needs, and thoughts.
- Even when it's difficult, respect what others want, need, and think (Gaumer Erickson & Noonan, 2013).

Before we can effectively express our wants, needs, and thoughts, we must first be aware of and understand them. To be truly assertive, in addition to articulating our points, we must respect others' points of view. Too often, professionals can operate in ways that are too passive or too aggressive, such as not genuinely engaging in discussion or dominating conversations and agendas. Assertiveness can benefit both adults who are too passive and those who are too aggressive by enhancing their ability to communicate more effectively. In groups, we have all experienced a dominating group member who directs decision-making without adequately listening to diverse perspectives. It is likely that these groups or teams are not functioning at high levels, and may not be effective in achieving goals or completing activities. As we self-assess our assertiveness, we may find that this is an area for growth through techniques like active listening, creating and using assertive statements, and ongoing reflection.

In addition to assertiveness, empathy supports the building and maintaining of relationships. To practice empathy as adults, we:

- Make efforts to understand others: their contexts, feelings, and behaviors.
- Communicate our understanding of someone's personal situation (Gaumer Erickson & Noonan, 2013).

While this can take time and require structures such as one-on-one time, private meeting space, and active listening techniques, striving to understand others is critical to working together effectively. Adult agencies are supported by different funding streams which often have supporting legislation, regulation, procedures, and processes. Different work cultures, pressures, timelines, and priorities influence the work of peer professionals. In working to build understanding and communicate that understanding, you will increase awareness of opportunities for mutual benefit and critical connections.

Employ Action-Oriented Behaviors

When working with others, it is often necessary to identify clear tasks or goals that you will work on and divide the work across the team. In emerging relationships, these early experiences accomplishing action-oriented tasks are critical ways to build trust and understanding. At times, adults and team members fail to accomplish important goals or long-term tasks. Often, the reason behind the failure is not a lack of desire to do the work, but a breakdown somewhere in the process. While a clear overall goal may be identified, adults at times lack the self-regulation necessary to accomplish each individual activity or task involved. This might include difficulty getting back on track when things do not go as planned. Self-regulation and teamwork can support our efforts to produce quality work in a timely fashion.

Self-regulation consists of four essential components:

- Plan for and articulate what you want to accomplish
- Immediately monitor progress and interference regarding your goal.
- Control change by implementing specific strategies when things are not going as planned.
- Reflect on what worked and what you can do better next time (Gaumer Erickson & Noonan, 2013).

Many of us have experienced working to accomplish a task, but then failing due to unforeseen events. Adults can practice self-regulation by identifying a clear goal or task, creating a detailed plan, and monitoring the plan for not only progress, but also challenges that might be preventing progress. If something is preventing progress, a critical piece of self-regulation (and one that many people have difficulty with) is taking action to address the barrier by identifying and using specific strategies to continue moving forward. Finally, it is necessary to reflect throughout the process. When we use self-regulation in this way, we are better able to meet deadlines as intended and achieve our overarching goals.

Basic teamwork components can support the success of individual team members as well as the overall functioning of the team. Teamwork consists of these essential components:

- Work effectively with others to achieve a common goal.
- Do your fair share of any team assignments.
- Share your ideas or express your opinions while being open to others' ideas, opinions, and perspectives.
- Respect your fellow team members even when you do not agree with them (Gaumer Erickson & Noonan, 2013).

Have you been on a team where members failed to address one or more of these components? Many of us have, and it is often a difficult teaming environment. Consider your strengths and areas for improvement for working on a team. As each team member works on personal behaviors and components, the team as a whole accomplishes more work of better quality, and membership is sustained.

Work Through Past and Current Issues

Many adult relationships suffer from the inability to address conflict, with people predominantly choosing avoidance as a response. While avoidance can be a good response in some conflict situations, more sophisticated responses of cooperation and collaboration yield better results and stronger relationships.

To manage conflict, consider these three essential components:

- Understand your natural response to conflict.
- Understand the context of the conflict, including the perspectives of all involved.
- Apply a conflict management approach that is appropriate to the situation (Gaumer Erickson & Noonan, 2013).

Understanding how we typically respond to conflict and learning new strategies for constructively addressing conflict supports our ability to work effectively with others. Conflict is a normal occurrence that happens often, but our natural response may include less desirable approaches, such as competition and avoidance. Building our self-awareness and employing strategies to better understand the context and perspectives involved can help us in trying alternate, more effective approaches to conflict.

Believe that Your Collaboration Abilities Will Improve

Sometimes we struggle to understand that just because we are not good at something at first, it does not mean that we cannot learn it or improve with effort. Self-efficacy refers to perceptions an individual has about his or her capabilities to

perform at an expected level and achieve goals or milestones.

The main components of self-efficacy are:

- Self-efficacy increases with the belief that ability can grow with effort.
- Believe in your ability to meet specific goals and/or expectations (Gaumer Erickson & Noonan, 2013).

As we embrace collaborative opportunities, our outcomes may not initially be as successful as hoped. Mistakes are easily made in new partnerships as we struggle to understand context and perspectives of others. We must realize that our abilities to work with other professionals grow as we continue our efforts. With each small success in challenging tasks, our self-efficacy as collaborators grows.

Summary

While the task of increasing collaboration on a personal level through teaming strategies and/or personal competency development may seem overwhelming, focusing on small parts is a good approach. Even minor behaviors could add meaning to your work with students and young adults—positively impacting students' post-school achievement. Throughout this work, it is important to take risks. As we leave our comfort zone and expand how we conceive our work and how we support students, we will sometimes fail, but we will know that although we have not mastered that strategy yet, our abilities are growing as we take risks. Finally, as educators, we are often so thoroughly focused on providing supports to students that we rarely spend any time acknowledging our personal or team successes. Make time to acknowledge your own achievements, as well as those of your partners. This both sustains and expands the effort and allows us to be a part of a larger community all working toward improved post-school outcomes.

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