

# Choosing Educational Goals: Self-Determined Navajo Students and Culturally Appropriate Transition

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IDEA 2004, in conjunction with NCLB 2001, mandates schools provide students with disabilities opportunities to increase skills required for a high school diploma, further education, and employment, in a culturally appropriate fashion. Enrollment in postsecondary education is seen as a step towards social advancement in American society, however, data indicate some groups are not advancing as much as others. A profile of undergraduates at all U.S. institutions of higher education depicts enrollment rates of 67% for Euro-American students, 17% for students with disabilities, 5% percent for Hispanic/Mexican-Americans, 12% for African-Americans, and a *disconcerting one-percent* for American Indians/Alaskan Natives (Horn, Peter & Rooney, 2000; U. S. Census Bureau, 2000). Employment rates for individuals with disabilities are discouraging. Unemployment rates for Navajos with disabilities in the Navajo Nation are 72%; likewise disability unemployment rates for ethnic groups outside the Navajo Nation and within the U. S. are 72% for African-Americans and 52% for Hispanics (Brown et al., 2001: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). These outcomes indicating individuals with disabilities have not

integrated fully into mainstream society demand that transition service programs in secondary schools implement more effective educational practices.

Student focused planning is vital to effective transition programming and IEP development (Martin, Van Dycke, Christensen, Greene, Gardner, & Lovett, 2005; Valenzuela, Martin, & Woods, 2005). In this paper student focused planning is the student developing a course-of-study facilitating transitions to a high school diploma, further education, and employment. Ideally, students develop a course-of-study in tune with postschool visions in a manner incorporating short and long term planning based on needs, strengths, preferences, and interests (Kohler and Field, 2005). Raising student awareness of the course-of-study and opportunities for further education and employment is a best practice of transition, a requirement of *ALL* students in New Mexico, and needs to be explored, discussed, and documented yearly from the age of 14 to graduation (D'Ottavio, 2004).

An instructional package, entitled *Choosing Education Goals* (Martin, Hughes, Huber Marshall, Jerman, & Maxson, 2000) teaches students to develop a course-of-study as a first step in attaining desired postsecondary or employment goals. *Choosing Education Goals (CEGs)* teaches students three sets of skills: (a) how to identify interests, skills, and limits, (b) how to identify educational and employment opportunities, and (3) how to develop educational plans based on identified interests, skills, limits, and opportunities. The purpose of this study was to determine if high school students with disabilities and those at-risk for school failure increased awareness of requirements for further education and employment, in a culturally appropriate method by using *CEGs*. Four primary questions guided this research:

1. Do students who receive instruction in the *CEGs* lessons increase awareness of postsecondary vocabulary?

2. Do students who receive instruction in the *CEGs* lessons increase knowledge of entry requirements for further education and employment (including program length, program degree, tuition, admission requirements, degree/certification/license)?
3. Do students who receive instruction in the *CEGs* lessons increase their ability to develop a course of study reflecting their postschool vision?
4. Do students who receive instruction in the *CEGs* lessons increase in self-determination?

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

Participants included 23 students with IEPs and 24 students at-risk for school failure without IEPs. The disability breakdown of participants includes 12 LD, 5 MR, 2 ED, 2 SLP, and 1 with multiple disabilities. The ethnic composition of the 47 participants included 36 Navajo, 1 American Indian/Hispanic, 1 American Indian/ Caucasian, 5 Hispanic (no subgroup indicated), and 3 Caucasian. The mean score on the Woodcock-Munoz Language Assessment for the sample was 28,  $SD = 23$  and all participants qualified for the free lunch program.

### ***Design***

We used a random assignment, pre/post intervention and delayed treatment control group design for the study. Typically, half of the students in the School-to-Work Program attend a classroom component while the other half engage in community-based vocational experiences and repeated between semesters. This program structure enabled us to fit our study into the schools School-to-Work program without causing any disruption in the instructional process.

## ***Intervention***

The *Choosing Education Goals* curriculum is a component of the *ChoiceMaker* Self-Determination Series. Embedded in the curriculum are lessons that generate opportunities for students to practice self-determination, identify their strengths, interests, and preferences. *CEGs* teaches students how to research, attain, and match educational requirements for further education and employment in a self-determined process.

## ***Dependent Variables***

The dependent variables in this study are the *CEGs* subtests and the AIR Self-Determination Scale. The three subtests of the *CEGs* lessons are: (a) post-secondary education definitions, (b) post-secondary options on a post-secondary matrix, and, (c) course of study that matches students' post-school vision. The AIR Self-Determination assessment was administered as a pretest and posttest to measure any changes in student levels of self-determination.

## ***Intervention Procedures***

Informed consent/assent was gained prior to any data collection. Students took the consent/assent forms home and returned signed copies. A school liaison was sent to the home to obtain consent forms from parents of students not returning the form. The Navajo liaison read the consent form to the parents if requested. Student assent forms were read to students documented as limited English proficient or as requested. All participants were administered the *CEGs* pretest, AIR Self-Determination Scale, and a Student demographic sheet. Students who scored an 85% or above on the *CEGs* pretest were not included in the study. The treatment group received the *CEGs* lessons for a period of five-weeks as the control group went into career experience positions. Both groups were administered the *CEGs* post-test and AIR Self-Determination Scale at the conclusion of the instructional period for the treatment group.

## ***Fidelity of Instruction***

Due to the distance between the university and high school, it was necessary to develop an on-site research team at the high school. The multicultural research team at the high school consisted of the special education coordinator, teacher (School-to-Work coordinator), vocational rehabilitation counselor (transition specialist), two office assistants, and a school liaison. The principal investigator and coordinator of the study met with the onsite research team via phone conference three times prior to the start of the study. During the phone conferences the onsite research team was provided information and training in the purpose of the study, review of the *CEGs* lesson package, and a review of the approved IRB application. The onsite research team was also provided information and training in how to (a) disseminate and collect consent/assent forms, (b) randomly assign students into treatment and control groups, (c) code the instruments of the study, and (d) conduct fidelity of instruction checks. Phone conferences were held once a week for the duration of the study between the offsite and onsite research teams to discuss the progress of the study and make adjustments if necessary.

## **Results**

### ***Choosing Education Goals: Postsecondary Vocabulary (PSV)***

A repeated measures ANOVA yielded significant results for student awareness of postsecondary vocabulary (PSV). Student awareness of PSV yielded a significant pre/post effect between groups: Wilks' Lambda = .78,  $F(1, 39)$ ,  $p = .000$ . Student awareness of PSVs within groups (intervention vs. control groups) yielded a significant effect: Wilks' Lambda = .87,  $F(1, 39)$ ,  $p = .023$ .

## ***Choosing Education Goals: Postsecondary Options (PSO) and Course-of-Study (COS)***

A repeated measures ANOVA found no significant differences in pre/post test awareness of PSOs or COS. Mean differences in PSOs indicate a large increase for the intervention group (pre to post control mean = 1.37, pre/post intervention mean = 3.23). Data analysis revealed an increase in mean differences in the COS of the pre/post test intervention group (mean = 47.13 to mean = 53.45).

## ***Choosing Education Goals: Self-Determination***

Student Self-Determination, as related to the subscale “How I Feel” of the AIR Self-Determination Scale, yielded a significant pre/post intervention effect: Wilks’ Lambda = .89,  $F(1, 40)$ ,  $p = .032$ .

## **Discussion and Future Research**

This study found students significantly increased their knowledge of post-secondary definitions and self-determination as measured by the subscale of the “How I Feel” of the AIR Self-Determination Scale by engaging in the *CEGs* lessons. We did not find significant differences in the ability of students to identify postsecondary options or develop a course of study. However, we did find that students did increase performances in their ability to identify postsecondary options and develop a course of study after the *CEGs* lessons.

We speculate that we did not get significant differences in our study for a couple of reasons entwined with the characteristics of the sample and duration of exposure to the *CEGs*. The sample, on the whole, was more than two deviations below the norm in the Woodcock-Munoz standardized test. We are deducing from the increase in scores that students can make

large gains. We predict larger gains with longer exposure, and a different instructional style, enough to yield statistical and practical significance across dependent variables.

Future research includes completing two more components of the current research. First we will continue to analyze and interpret the current data. We will establish whether there are significant differences in gains made across dependent variables by categories of gender, age, geographic location, and educational attainment and goals of parents/family members. Phase II of the study exposes the seniors in the treatment group to individualized instruction in the *CEGs* lessons. This portion of the study will provide us with a better picture of whether our prediction of students functioning two standard deviations below the norm can significantly increase their scores after the provision of longer exposure to the *CEGs* and individualized instruction.

## **Implications and Conclusion**

The implications for practice generated by this study includes encouraging secondary schools to utilize the *CEGs* lesson package to provide opportunities for students to develop skills to increase self-determination and awareness of further education and employment. The initial findings of this study indicate that opportunities for students with disabilities and those at-risk for school failure to make gains in self-determined behaviors, awareness of career and postsecondary options, and ability to develop a course-of-study are better presented in specific course. Many students with disabilities and those at-risk for school failure must be provided more exposure and various opportunities to align with their self-determined transitions to a high school diploma, further education and employment as mandated by current education legislation.

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