

GW HEATH Resource Center

Non-Degree Postsecondary Options For Individuals with Disabilities

By Mario Payne



HEATH Resource Center staff members field an increasing number of requests for information on nontraditional postsecondary options—or higher education options apart from academic programs at two-year or four-year colleges and universities—as well as requests for information on employment opportunities. This article, the first of a two-part series, highlights a broad range of postsecondary options, including:

- *various types of employment training (competitive employment, supported employment, and sheltered employment);*
- *federal programs such as Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), and the School-to-Work initiative; and*
- *Independent Living Centers (ILCs), adult education, and career education.*

See Part Two of this series, which describes specific programming options in greater detail. Should you know of a particular programming option we ought to include, please contact us at help@heath.gwu.edu or call us at (800) 544-3284

There is new emphasis in the United States on assisting students with disabilities as they transition from high school to post-school life. This emphasis has resulted in more services and programs to help individuals with disabilities become better educated, more employable, and

more independent as they leave high school and proceed to further education or training.

Students, parents, guardians, and service providers must be aware of the many transition options available to students with disabilities as they complete high school and contemplate further education or training. Many go on to receive some sort of academic degree. For others, however, a college degree is not the answer. What choices are available to students with disabilities who want to become independent and employed but who do not want to pursue an academic degree?

Employment

Students who decide to begin work immediately after completing high school may need additional assistance learning resume writing skills or interviewing techniques; they also may require instruction or guidance in performing a job they have been hired to do. A community college course, a vocational rehabilitation program, or an adult education center may be an appropriate place to learn these skills. However, transition planning must begin well in advance of high school completion. Recent amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) require that transition planning for students with disabilities begin when the student is no older than 14 years of age and that such plans be consistent with the student's course of study.

Competitive Employment

Competitive employment provides the worker with regular supervision without extensive follow-up.

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Workers with mild or moderate disabilities who enter competitive employment may require appropriate support services initially, but thereafter may become capable of performing the job independently. Support may be provided by workers on site or by a human services agency.

Types of competitive jobs vary. While some entry-level jobs require little or no experience and provide on-the-job-training, others may require vocational training and preparation, and still others require intensive academic preparation and experience. Examples of competitive jobs that do not require a college degree are: waiter, groundskeeper, office clerk, factory worker, food service operator, computer data entry clerk, building maintenance worker, and human service paraprofessional.

Students can train for competitive employment through internships, apprenticeships, or on-the-job training. They can receive this training through courses taken in their last years of high school, through community agencies, or through community college courses.

- An **internship** is a time-limited, paid or unpaid job. The intern can become familiar with different types of work and work environments. Transitional programs offered through community service agencies (e.g., Goodwill Industries, The Arc) or community colleges often provide internship opportunities to students.
- **Apprenticeship** programs offer individuals the opportunity to learn skills for specific occupations under the tutelage of experienced practitioners. Interested individuals can learn more about the range of available apprenticeship opportunities from local labor unions, school career centers, or at a public library. State Occupational Information Coordinating Committees (SOICCs), a network of state agencies concerned with job training, vocational and technical education, vocational rehabilitation, and higher education, may also have information regarding apprenticeship programs where

you live. Contact your SOICC through the National Occupational Information Coordinating Committee at NOICC, 2100 M Street NW, Suite 156, Washington, DC 20037; fax: (202) 653-2123. Additional information describing apprenticeship programs can also be obtained by contacting the Bureau of Apprenticeships and Training, U.S. Department of Labor, 200 Constitution Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20210; phone: (202) 219-5921.

- **On-the-job training (OJT)** is another way for students to gain job experience. OJT training is short term and enables the individual to work on the job site while learning job duties from a supervisor or coworker. The work may be paid or unpaid, and frequently, the worker becomes an employee of the company sponsoring the training. To learn more about OJT, contact your local Vocational Rehabilitation office or your state employment office.

Supported Employment

Supported employment is integrated work in competitive environments for individuals with severe disabilities who have never worked competitively, whose work history has been interrupted or intermittent because of their disability, or who need ongoing support services in order to perform work duties. Supported employment offers persons with disabilities an opportunity to earn competitive wages along with nondisabled coworkers at job sites in the community. Ongoing support distinguishes supported employment from competitive employment.

Supported employment uses a “place-train” approach rather than a “train-place” approach. The individual is placed on the job and then is provided with intense training in work skills and behavior. Although the student may need additional instruction in such job-related skills as transportation, on-site job coaches provide most training.

Currently, four popular models of supported employment exist: individual placement, enclave,

benchwork, and mobile crew. These models typically prepare adults for employment in areas such as clerical, grounds keeping, mailroom, food service, and warehouse work.

- In an **individual placement**, the worker receives intensive on-the-job coaching from a job coach until he or she is proficient in the job and the employer is satisfied with job performance. Once this occurs, the job coach provides less and less support on the job but still provides follow-along services to the client and employer.
- In an **enclave model**, workers are trained in a small group and are supervised together in an ordinary work setting.
- In the **benchwork model**, eight to 15 workers with disabilities perform contract work procured from computer firms and related industries. A small number of highly qualified supervisors provide intensive training and supervision and help workers learn appropriate work behavior.
- In the **mobile crew model**, individuals who need more support than others perform a variety of services as a team that moves from business to business.

Sheltered Employment

Sheltered employment settings are those in which workers, frequently those with more severe disabilities, work in a self-contained unit apart from employees without disabilities. Types of sheltered employment include adult day programs, work activity centers, and sheltered workshops.

- In **adult day programs**, individuals receive training to develop their daily living, social, recreational, and prevocational skills.
- In **work activity centers**, workers receive similar training but also learn basic vocational skills.
- In **sheltered workshops**, individuals perform tasks such as sewing, packaging, collating, or machine assembly and are paid based on the number of a given product they manufacture or assemble.

Contact your local Vocational Rehabilitation office or a local Center for Independent Living to learn more about sheltered employment programs.

FEDERAL PROGRAMS

Vocational Rehabilitation

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) is the federal program that helps eligible people with disabilities become employed. Each state has a central VR agency, and local offices can be found throughout each state. Eligibility for services is based on three criteria: the applicant must have a physical or mental disability; his or her disability must create a substantial barrier to employment; and there must be a reasonable expectation that with VR assistance, he or she will be able to work. Telephone numbers for your local VR agency can be found in a local telephone book under the state government listings.

Social Security Programs

The Social Security Administration oversees two programs: Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI).

- **Supplemental Security Income (SSI).** The SSI program is targeted to individuals who are blind or otherwise disabled and who are in financial need. An individual may be eligible for SSI if he or she has little or no income or financial resources (such as savings accounts), is considered medically disabled or blind, and does not work or earns less than a certain amount each year. The Social Security Administration considers the parents' income and resources when determining the eligibility of applicants under the age of 18.
- **Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI).** The SSDI program differs from SSI in that it considers the employment status of the applicant's parents. An individual is eligible to receive SSDI if he or she became disabled before age 22 and if at least one of his or her parents has paid into the Social Security system under

previous employment and now is disabled, retired, or deceased.

In the past, earnings from a job or other income substantially reduced the amount of SSI or SSDI that a person could receive. Recent legislation (Work Incentives Improvement Act of 1999) has incorporated incentives into SSI and SSDI programs so that people are encouraged to try to work and become independent. For additional information about SSI and SSDI programs, contact the Social Security Administration at (800) 772-1213 (V) or (800) 228-7185 (TTY); alternately, you may contact your local Social Security office or go to www.ssa.gov.

Work Incentives in SSI and SSDI

Many people with disabilities want to work or seek education beyond high school. It is important for recipients of disability benefits to understand that they still can receive benefits while they test their ability to work or participate in education or training programs.

SSI Program Work Incentives

There are a number of incentives to work under the SSI program. These include:

- **Section 1619a.** Provisions under Section 1619a of the Employment Opportunities for Disabled Americans Act allow people to continue to receive special SSI monthly cash payments even after their earned income exceeds the amount designated as the Substantial Gainful Activity (SGA) level (currently \$700 a month). The Social Security Administration uses a formula to determine the amount of SSI benefits an individual with a disability will continue to receive. In most cases, recipients remain eligible for Medicaid and state-funded attendant care benefits, as well.
- **Section 1619b.** Provisions under Section 1619b of the Employment Opportunities for Disabled Americans Act allow most individuals to keep Medicaid benefits after they stop receiving monthly SSI checks. The law requires that a person's medical

condition be reviewed within 12 months of entering the 1619 status to ensure the person still has a disability. A person must apply for these benefits before his or her regular SSI benefits actually stop.

- **Impairment-related Work Expenses (IRWEs).** IRWEs are the costs for services or materials that a person needs to be able to work. Social Security deducts these costs from an individual's SGA when calculating how much money that person should receive in his or her monthly check. Services and materials can be deducted as IRWEs only if the person pays for the costs himself and receives no reimbursement for them. The services or materials must be necessary as a result of a person's disability; they cannot be costs that a person without a disability would have if she or he were to hold the same type of job. Examples of IRWEs include the cost of wheelchairs, pacemakers, respirators, braces, artificial limbs, and work-related equipment such as one-handed typewriters, electronic visual aids, and braille devices. Other expenses, such as attendant care needed to prepare for or to go to and from work, or a job coach, may also be deductible.
- **Plan for Achieving Self Support (PASS).** PASS is a work incentive program that enables a person with a disability to receive earned and unearned income and to set some or all of these funds aside for up to 48 months. The purpose of the program is to help individuals obtain the resources needed to pursue a specific work goal, such as education, vocational training, starting a business, or purchase of work-related equipment. The PASS program is a means of encouraging and empowering individuals to become financially self-supporting. A PASS program must be prepared in writing and must include a realistic work goal, a date for achieving the goal, a clear savings/spending plan, and a method for keeping track of the funds that

are set aside. Social Security must approve an individual's PASS program. While it is preferable to initiate a PASS prior to receiving transitional or supported employment services, a PASS program can also be established after a person has begun to work. The income and resources set aside under such a plan are excluded from the SSI income and resource tests. SSI payments themselves cannot be set aside in a PASS, and individuals must have some resources or income other than the SSI check to establish a PASS.

SSDI Program Work Incentives

The SSDI program also contains work incentives. As with SSI work incentives, impairment-related work expenses can be deducted from the earnings on which Substantial Gainful Activity (SGA) is calculated. Other work incentives include a trial work period and an extended period of eligibility.

- The **trial work period** allows individuals with disabilities to test their ability to work while continuing to receive SSDI benefits. The trial work period is nine months, which need not be consecutive. During or after this time, if an individual demonstrates the ability to earn above the SGA limit, despite his or her disability, he or she may no longer be considered a person with a disability by the Social Security Administration. Benefits would be discontinued three months later.
- The **extended period of eligibility** is an additional work incentive tied to the nine-month trial period. This incentive exists to ensure that the individual with a disability has sufficient time to develop financial and occupational stability in order to maintain independence. Individuals' SSDI benefits may be reinstated if their earnings fall below the SGA level at any time during the extended period, normally 36 months.

Recipients of SSI or SSDI funds who work or attend a postsecondary training or education program, or who are planning to, should contact the Social Security Administration for additional

information about work incentives and the possible impact these may have on awarded benefits.

EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Adult Education

Adult education provides education below the college level to anyone age 16 years or older who is not being served by the public education system. Examples of adult education classes are GED preparation programs, English as a Second Language (ESL) courses, or vocational and business courses. Your local school system can provide further information regarding scheduling of classes and funding options.

Career Education

Career schools and community colleges offer people the opportunity to continue their education and receive a certificate of achievement. Career or proprietary schools offer job-specific training in courses lasting from two weeks to two years or more. Community colleges have low-cost tuition, offer a wide range of programs (including occupational and vocational), and exist in many communities. Consult your local public library or the yellow pages (look under "schools") for names of local career education training programs. Or contact the Career College Association for a free copy of the **Directory of Accredited Career Schools**. Career College Association, 750 First Street NE, Suite 900, Washington, DC 20002. Phone: (202) 336-6700. Or visit www.career.org.

Vocational-Technical Schools, Technical Institutes, and Trade Schools

These schools prepare students for specific trades or occupations. Students receive training to develop specific skills or to enhance skills they already possess. Most of these schools have an open enrollment policy, though some require a GED or equivalent certificate or equivalent work experience for admission. Contact your local education agency for further information.

Students interested in career education programs, community colleges, or vocational-technical schools, should contact each program or school's financial aid officer to discuss federal and private

funding options. A booklet called **Funding Your Education** is available at no cost from the U.S. Department of Education by writing to Federal Student Aid Programs, Box 84, Washington, DC 20044, or calling (800) 433-3243 (V) or (800) 730-8913 (TTY). The booklet is also available at the following web address:

www.ed.gov/prog_info/SFA/FYE/.

Students can also obtain a copy of the HEATH Resource Center publication *Creating Options: A Resource on Financial Aid for Students With Disabilities* by calling the Center at (800) 544-3284 (V/TTY) or by clicking on the link above to view a PDF version.



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