June 2022

Conceptualization and Operationalization of College Readiness for Students with Learning Disabilities: A Grounded Theory Study with Transition Stakeholders

Jordan A. Abbott

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CONCEPTUALIZATION AND OPERATIONALIZATION OF COLLEGE READINESS FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY WITH TRANSITION STAKEHOLDERS

A Dissertation Presented

by

JORDAN A. ABBOTT

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2022

College of Education
CONCEPTUALIZATION AND OPERATIONALIZATION OF COLLEGE READINESS FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY WITH TRANSITION STAKEHOLDERS

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Ezekiel Kimball
Associate Dean of Academic Affairs
College of Education
DEDICATION

To Edwin, Luis, José, Stephen (in memoriam), and John (in memoriam), my students who were in fact my teachers and the inspiration to work toward something better than what we gave you.

To my mother, Dr. Abbie Abbott, a life-long educator and my role model and unquestioning cheerleader.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Alexandra Lauterbach, for guiding me with positivity, high standards, and thoughtful insight at each phase of this process. Your interest in my ideas, your respect for my skills as a student and an educator, and your commitment to special education kept me moving when I might otherwise have gotten stuck. Your care and friendship and the consistency of our weekly meetings carried me through to the end. Thank you also to my committee members, Dr. Ezekiel Kimball and Dr. Michael Krezmien, for lending your wisdom and experience to improve my learning and this dissertation, and placing your confidence in me. Thank you to my doctoral student mentors, Andrea Larmon, Christina Bosch, Kym Meyer, and Genie Bettencourt, for fielding all sorts of questions and sharing many of the challenges and breakthroughs; and to my program colleagues, Lisa Amato, Ellen Ho, and Tiffany Menard, for boosting my confidence when you suggested I might have answers to your questions.

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Finally, I am deeply indebted to the participants in my study for giving their time and energy to talk about their experiences and ideas, especially at the point when a pandemic was first descending on all of us and adding seemingly insurmountable challenges and relentless unpredictability to the already overwhelming realm of public education. My participants’ willingness to contribute to the research process and commitment to improving educational services and outcomes for students with disabilities inspired and encouraged me, and powered my project. Any contribution this study makes to the field is credited to them.
ABSTRACT

CONCEPTUALIZATION AND OPERATIONALIZATION OF COLLEGE READINESS FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY WITH TRANSITION STAKEHOLDERS

MAY 2022

JORDAN A. ABBOTT, B.A., YALE UNIVERSITY

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The poor success rates of students with learning disabilities transitioning to postsecondary education signal that special education transition services, as currently delivered, are failing to prepare students adequately for the demands and expectations they face in college. To date, transition research has provided limited guidance for IEP team members and other stakeholders charged with preparing students with learning disabilities for success in higher education. Furthermore, existing literature is nearly silent on the process of postsecondary education transition service decision-making, and team member understanding of college readiness. I use constructivist grounded theory and semi-structured interviews to explore the question, “How do IEP team members and related stakeholders conceptualize and operationalize college readiness for students with learning disabilities whose postsecondary goals include college?” My sample consists of representatives from each role on a high school IEP team for a student with a learning disability, and professors and disability services staff from a local community college. Findings reveal that stakeholders’ conceptions of what it means to be ready for college are largely aligned, but they describe student preparation that is neither explicit,
formalized, nor coordinated. System limitations produce gaps between conceptions of readiness and student preparation, and between respective efforts at preparation across stakeholders. The implications of this study include increased focus on transition-related professional development, and administrative support for service coordination within secondary settings and between secondary and postsecondary settings. Recommendations also call for stakeholders to examine system limitations, including those stemming from special education policies that undermine operationalization of readiness.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

After more than four decades of mandated inclusion of individuals with disabilities in public education, and with the support of additional antidiscrimination legislation, participation and inclusion are increasingly the norm rather than the exception for people with disabilities. This is true in all realms of life, from preschool through postsecondary education and in the workplace and community settings. Nonetheless, postsecondary outcomes for people with disabilities continue to lag behind those of people without disabilities in the areas of postsecondary education, employment, and independent living (Kraus, Lauer, Coleman, & Houtenville, 2018; Newman et al., 2011; Shogren & Ward, 2018). This suggests that the inclusion of people with disabilities occurs on a superficial level, while they continue to be excluded from the full rewards and benefits of educational, employment, and community living activities. This reality persists despite the efforts of advocates and policy makers and the resulting developments in legislation that extend special education’s responsibility to post-school outcomes.

Postsecondary Education Outcomes and Students with Learning Disabilities

While many individuals with disabilities transition directly from secondary school to work, an increasing number pursue postsecondary education (United States Government Accountability Office, 2009). Postsecondary education has significant implications for people with and without disabilities. It creates additional social opportunities, leads to higher income and greater job satisfaction, and improves quality of life (Coles, 2013; Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2005; Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016). However, students with disabilities are less likely to experience these benefits,
because outcomes in postsecondary education, as in other postsecondary measures, are poorer for them than for their peers without disabilities. Students with disabilities are less likely to enroll in postsecondary education than students in the general population (Newman et al., 2011), and when they do enroll, they are less likely to stay enrolled and to earn a four-year degree (Horn & Berktold, 1999; Taylor, Krane, & Orkis, 2010; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005).

Students with different types of disabilities pursue postsecondary education at different rates, and experience different postsecondary education outcomes (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2012; Newman et al., 2011). Students with learning disabilities are highly likely to have postsecondary education goals while in high school: more than 80% of students with learning disabilities who have transition plans have a postsecondary education goal (2-year or 4-year college or vocational training; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005). Approximately 60% of students with learning disabilities enroll in some type of postsecondary education within six years of leaving high school (Cameto, Knokey, & Sanford, 2011). Meanwhile, research indicates that postsecondary education completion rates for students with learning disabilities are low (41%; Newman et al., 2011). These statistics demonstrate how dramatically the rates descend from aspiration to completion for students with learning disabilities, with only about 30% of those with postsecondary education goals completing a postsecondary degree.

**Outcomes Accountability and the History of the Transition Mandate**

The first federal special education law, Public Law 94-142, was passed in 1975 as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. The stated Purpose of the act had four
components, the first of which was to provide a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to all handicapped children, designed to meet their unique needs. The other components included protecting student and parent rights, assisting states in providing special education, and assessing the effectiveness of special education. The act required an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for each eligible student, which was to include 1) the student’s present levels of performance, 2) goals, 3) services, and 4) a plan for evaluation of progress. The language of the statute did not include the terms “transition,” “postsecondary,” or “adult;” nor did it reference student progress.

Amendments to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act were passed in 1983 and 1986. These amendments added funding through grants and contracts for transition services and for research and development of transition programs (see Rusch, Kohler, & Hughes, 1992; and Snauwaert, 1992 for a detailed discussion). Neither amendment included a definition of transition services, and neither included transition services in the definition of an IEP. The 1986 Act included language in the funding portion that authorized grants and contracts to “strengthen and coordinate” special education services to assist youth in the transition to postsecondary activities (§ 626[a][1]), and “stimulate the improvement” of skills needed for the transition to post-school life (§ 626[a][3]). It also authorized projects to develop curriculum that would improve such skills (see Snauwaert, 1992). This was the first hint at special education instruction related to preparation for adult life.

**Transition Services**

In 1990, when federal special education law went through a major overhaul, including changing the name of the legislation to the Individuals with Disabilities
Education Act (IDEA) and changing all uses of the term “handicapped children” to “children with disabilities,” transition services became a mandate for the first time (Snauwaert, 1992). The 1990 amendment continued and expanded funding for projects related to transition, including model programs; development of postsecondary, vocational, technical, and continuing education programs; and research, such as demographic and longitudinal studies. More distinctly, however, the 1990 Act added a definition of transition services, and added to the definition of IEP “a statement of the needed transition services” (§ 101[e][1][D]), to be included in the IEP by the time the student was 16 years old, and to be reviewed annually.

In 1990, transition services were defined as “a coordinated set of activities for a student, designed within an outcome-oriented process, which promotes movement from school to post-school activities” (§ 101[d]). They were to be based on student needs, taking into account the student’s preferences and interests, and they were to include “instruction, community experiences, the development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives, and, when appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills” (§ 101[d]). Though broadly defined, transition services bestowed responsibility on school districts to provide education with a focus beyond the high school curriculum.

**Accountability for Postsecondary Outcomes**

What we know today as IDEA involves many changes and additions that were enacted in the 2004 amendments known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (PL 108–446). This legislative development was significant for secondary transition as well (see Prince, Plotner, & Yell, 2014). IDEA 2004 added two crucial aspects to the transition services component of the IEP: 1) the IEP must include
postsecondary goals, and 2) those goals must be based on age appropriate transition assessments. Moreover, the transition services added to the IEP definition in 1990 were now tied directly to the newly-required postsecondary goals. The 2004 IEP definition states that the IEP includes “the transition services (including courses of study) needed to assist the child in reaching [the appropriate measurable postsecondary] goals” (§ 614[d][1][A][i][VIII][bb]).

These additions marked a shift in how IEPs for students of transition planning age are developed (Yell, Shriner, & Katsiyannis, 2006); they also signaled the increased accountability on the part of schools for long-term outcomes. It is not enough now, as it may have seemed in 1975, when millions of children were being denied any participation in public education, to enable students with disabilities to attend school. Nor is it enough to provide specialized instruction and related services that enable them to progress in the general curriculum. The ultimate goal—or purpose—of special education is to prepare students for participation in the life that awaits them after they complete their K-12 education. This shift in accountability is reflected in the evolution of the Purpose section of the law over the course of the amendments to federal special education legislation. In our current version of IDEA (2004), the Purpose includes language specific to post-school outcomes. To the original 1975 Purpose statement, to provide FAPE designed to meet students’ unique needs, lawmakers have added: “and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living” (§ 601[d][1][A]).

Recent evidence of expanded accountability comes directly from the federal Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), which launched a new accountability framework in 2014 referred to as “Results-Driven Accountability” (Office of Special
Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2014). Whereas previous oversight had focused on compliance and the procedural obligations of States, the new framework focuses on results and student outcomes, including post-school outcomes, and measures of these aspects are used in OSEP’s annual determinations for each state. Such policy changes indicate recognition of the need to address trailing outcomes for people with disabilities, and substantiate claims that the need is a pressing one. Unfortunately, the effects of these changes remain to be seen.

As this history describes, the evolution of federal special education legislation has followed a path of increasing accountability on the part of school systems for outcomes for students with disabilities, not just inclusion (Hardman & Nagle, 2004; Yell, Drasgow, Bradley, & Justesen, 2004; Yell, Rogers, & Rogers, 1998; Yell, Shriner, & Katsiyannis, 2006). The addition of the transition services mandate extended that accountability to post-school outcomes specifically: how prepared a student is for adult life. Secondary transition services are the crucial link between public K-12 education and adult living—the mechanism through which schools assume responsibility for what becomes of their students with disabilities after graduation or aging out at 22.

Postsecondary Education Transition Services and Students with Learning Disabilities

The numbers presented above indicate that students with learning disabilities, by and large, are not meeting their postsecondary education goals. Transition services are mandated in federal special education law explicitly to assist students with disabilities in reaching their postsecondary goals, so these rates translate into a discouraging assessment of the effectiveness of postsecondary education-focused transition services. This is
particularly troubling, given the scale of the problem: students with learning disabilities constitute 34% of students age 3-21 served under IDEA (U.S. Department of Education, 2018), making them the largest group of students in special education, and the vast majority of these students have postsecondary education goals (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005).

Looking to the research base on transition services and postsecondary outcomes, it becomes clear that the nature and content of services that effectively prepare students with disabilities for postsecondary education are not well understood. Comprehensive reviews and syntheses in leading transition and education research journals (e.g., Haber et al., 2016; Mazzotti et al., 2016; Test, Mazzotti, et al., 2009) demonstrate that only a handful of predictors of positive postsecondary education outcomes stand up to rigorous analysis, and no conclusions about transition services and postsecondary outcomes can be drawn from experimental studies (Test, Fowler, et al., 2009). Research on postsecondary education transition services specific to students with learning disabilities is even more limited in scope and rigor. Furthermore, very little research employs postsecondary education success or completion—as opposed to postsecondary enrollment—as the outcome variable (Yu, Novak, Lavery, Vostal, & Matuga, 2018). In short, research on transition services and postsecondary education preparedness offers little to guide educators in designing and delivering effective services.

**College Readiness**

College readiness is an area of scholarship that looks at the skills students need to succeed in postsecondary education. College readiness scholarship is familiar to those in the field of higher education, and focuses on populations who are underrepresented or
vulnerable to low rates of enrollment and completion (Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012; Tierney & Sablan, 2014). This scholarship has rarely been applied to students with disabilities (cf. Hildreth, Dixon, Frerichs, & Heflin, 1994; Milsom & Dietz, 2009; Temple, Roy, Gonder, & Whisenhunt, 2015), although several recent studies address college and career readiness, a related education reform concept tied to the Common Core State Standards, for students with disabilities (e.g., Lombardi, Freeman, & Rifenbark, 2018; Morningstar, Lombardi, Fowler, & Test, 2017). In a position statement of the Division on Career Development and Transition, Morningstar, Bassett, Kochhar-Bryant, Cashman, and Wehmeyer (2012) stress the importance of aligning transition efforts and secondary reform efforts, referring to adoption of college and career readiness standards as the reform. They assert that “in truth, the seeming divide between transition services in special education and secondary school reform is less dramatic than might be presumed. Secondary school reform models often emphasize what are considered to be effective transition interventions” (Morningstar, Bassett, Kochhar-Bryant, Cashman, & Wehmeyer, 2012, p. 136). Despite the exclusion of students with disabilities from the college readiness models (Morningstar, Lombardi, Fowler, & Test, 2017), these models have significant overlap with secondary transition frameworks, such as the Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0 (Kohler, Gothberg, Fowler, & Coyle, 2016).

College readiness has been defined as “the degree to which previous educational and personal experiences have equipped [students] for the expectations and demands they will encounter in college” (Conley, 2008, p. 3). Thanks to transition legislation, students served under IDEA have an entitlement not extended to other populations of students. Namely, if they express preference for and interest in postsecondary education, they must
be provided with transition services designed to assist them in becoming college ready. Transition policy mandates that special education students receive transition services based on their preferences and interests (IDEA, 2004), entitling students with postsecondary education goals to college-preparatory services.

Beyond specifying that transition services are to be based on postsecondary goals, legislation and policy leave very open-ended what constitutes appropriate services to prepare students with postsecondary education goals for postsecondary education. It is up to each individual IEP team to make the determination. Therefore, ideas and opinions of IEP team members regarding the academic and non-academic skills a student will need to succeed in postsecondary education are likely to drive the design of transition services. Yet we know little about team members’ views. To understand the problem of postsecondary-education focused transition services for students with learning disabilities, we need to start by exploring the ideas and opinions that underlie service decisions.

**Purpose of the Study**

Currently, neither the special education transition literature nor the higher education college readiness literature addresses how the stakeholders in the transition to college for students with learning disabilities conceptualize college readiness, or how these conceptions influence service delivery and preparation. In this study, I explore the conceptions of college readiness among IEP team members and related transition stakeholders in an effort to illuminate transition service priorities for these students. The study’s purpose is to advance our understanding of how stakeholders think about college readiness, how they form their college-readiness conceptions, and the relationship
between college-readiness conceptions and transition services, so we can begin to address
the failure of special education transition services to deliver on the mandate to prepare
students with postsecondary education goals for college success.

Stakeholders include IEP team members who decide on and deliver transition
services, as well as college instructors and college disability services providers who
interact with students as their college readiness comes into play. This grounded theory
study (Charmaz, 2014) uses interviews with a sample consisting of the stakeholders in the
college readiness of a student with a learning disability transitioning from high school to
community college: the student, the parent, a special education teacher, a general
education teacher, a college counselor, community college introductory level English and
math instructors, and a community college disability services staff member. The study
investigates college readiness conceptions among secondary education providers who
prepare students; college instructors and disability services providers who receive
students; parents, who moderate the process; and students, who experience the transition
and the outcome.

**Research Questions**

The overarching research question for this study is this: How do IEP team
members/stakeholders conceptualize and operationalize college readiness for students
with learning disabilities whose postsecondary goals include college?

The following questions guide the study with additional specificity.

Question 1: How do IEP team members/stakeholders describe what it means to be
college ready?
Question 2: How do IEP team members/stakeholders describe the process of preparing students with learning disabilities for college?

Question 3: How do IEP team members/stakeholders describe the sources of their knowledge and understanding of college readiness and college preparation?

Question 4: How do IEP team members/stakeholders understand transition services in the context of college readiness for students with learning disabilities?

IEP team members and related transition stakeholders involved in the preparation of students with learning disabilities for postsecondary education lack clear guidance from research and policy about how to design and deliver effective transition services. As teams work to prepare students, what they have to draw on are their own conceptions of college readiness, which may involve outdated, inadequate, or conflicting assumptions about the expectations and demands of postsecondary education or about the students’ needs. With answers to the research questions in this study, additional research as well as policy and practice can target factors that affect postsecondary education transition services, and initiate changes to improve post-school outcomes for this population of students.

**Definition of Terms**

**Students with Learning Disabilities:** Students with learning disabilities are students in a K-12 educational system or in postsecondary education who meet the criteria for specific learning disability as defined by IDEA (2004) or who have been diagnosed with a learning disability or found eligible for special education based on evidence of a learning disability. According to IDEA, a specific learning disability is:
A disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. … Specific learning disability does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of intellectual disability, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.

**Transition:** Transition refers to the anticipation of postsecondary activities and the planning and preparation based on those anticipated activities that is required as a component of special education. Transition entails *transition services*, which are defined as:

A coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that … is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child’s movement from school to post-school activities, including post-secondary education … [and] includes instruction, related services, [and] community experiences (IDEA, 2004).

**Postsecondary Education:** In this study, postsecondary education refers to education provided by a 2-year or 4-year college or university, in either a degree-bearing or non-degree bearing program, typically—though not exclusively—following completion of high school with either a diploma or a certificate of completion.

**College Readiness:** College readiness is the quality and degree of a student’s preparation to meet the demands of college coursework and the non-academic demands that accompany attendance at a 2-year or 4-year college or university. David Conley, a leader in the field of college readiness, provides a concise definition: “The degree to which previous educational and personal experiences have equipped [students] for the expectations and demands they will encounter in college” (Conley, 2008, p. 3). Conley also offers a definition that he attributes to 18 years of related research. This refined definition reads:
A student who is ready for college and career can qualify for and succeed in entry-level, credit bearing college courses leading to a baccalaureate or certificate, or career pathway-oriented training programs without the need for remedial or developmental coursework (Conley, 2012, p. 1).

**Stakeholders:** In the context of this study, stakeholders are defined as those individuals in distinct personal and/or professional roles with a vested interest in the successful preparation of students with learning disabilities for postsecondary education. Stakeholders may include students, parents, guardians, special education providers, teachers, school counselors, college instructors, and college disability services providers.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of IDEA is to prepare students for further education, and the transition mandates in place since 1990 dictate that schools provide “services…needed to assist the child in reaching [their postsecondary goals],” (IDEA, 2004, § 614[d][1][A][i][VIII][bb]). Nonetheless, the success rates for students with learning disabilities in postsecondary education are low (41%; Newman et al., 2011), suggesting a mismatch between the preparation these students receive and the demands of postsecondary education. Secondary transition researchers hoping to support transition improvements have substantiated a small number of predictors of postsecondary education outcomes, but little is known about the degree to which these predictors are considered when decisions are made about college preparatory transition services. In fact, the literature has almost completely overlooked the topic of how IEP team members and related transition stakeholders determine the college preparation needs of students with learning disabilities. I begin this chapter by synthesizing reviews of transition practices and predictors to set the context for a comprehensive review of the research on stakeholders’ conceptions of college readiness, I then present the findings from that comprehensive review, and in a final section of the chapter I discuss the outcome of overlaying results from the most relevant study on a college readiness model.

Evidence-Based Practices and Predictors

The secondary transition research literature has been building since the 1980s, when federally-funded demonstration programs and other projects reflecting transition as a national priority began, prompting evaluations and studies (Cobb & Alwell, 2009).
Numerous studies involving a range of quantitative as well as qualitative methods have examined transition-related variables and phenomena across disability and other demographic categories, secondary school factors, and postsecondary outcomes. Though transition legislation identifies further education, employment, and independent living as the postsecondary outcomes of interest, the primary focus of transition services has historically been on employment (Halpern, 1993), and the transition research literature reflects this emphasis. Test, Fowler, et al. (2009) examined the evidence base for secondary transition practices by conducting a comprehensive and rigorous review of the experimental literature published between 1984 and 2008. Most of the practices they found to be evidence-based relate to employment and life skills. None relate specifically to transition to postsecondary education.

Although the correlational research base in secondary transition includes more studies pertaining to postsecondary education, interpretation of results is hindered by concerns about the rigor of the studies. Test, Mazzotti, et al. (2009) conducted a review of correlational research in secondary transition, and identified 16 predictor categories, 11 of which had significant correlations with engagement in postsecondary education. However, only four postsecondary education predictors met the criteria for a moderate level of evidence. Furthermore, in a subsequent meta-analysis of in-school predictors of postsecondary outcomes, Haber et al. (2016) examined the predictors identified by Test, Mazzotti, et al. and found that when more sophisticated analyses are used, criteria for levels of evidence for the predictors are no longer satisfied. With the more precise estimates provided by the meta-analytic approach (e.g., weighting by sample size, and using actual effect sizes in analysis as opposed to “vote counting” the number of studies.
showing significant effects; Haber et al., 2016, p. 126), predictors identified by Test, Mazzotti, et al. as evidence-based showed unreliable effects (Haber et al., 2016).

Mazzotti et al. (2016) updated the correlational research review following the release of the National Longitudinal Transition Study–2 (NLTS2) data set and the publication of several studies based on these data. Using a similar method for reporting effect size as in the original review, they identified three additional predictor categories correlated with postsecondary education, only one of which had a moderate level of evidence.

**Substantiated Predictors**

Test, Mazzotti, et al. (2009) concluded that four postsecondary education predictors had a moderate level of evidence: Inclusion in General Education, Paid Employment/Work Experience, Transition Program, and Vocational Education. In their meta-analysis, Haber et al. (2016) were unable to confirm an association between postsecondary education outcomes and Paid Employment/Work Experience or Vocational Education. Only Inclusion in General Education and Transition Program were associated with postsecondary education outcomes, with effects in the small to moderate range. In their review of NLTS2 studies, subsequent to the Haber et al. meta-analysis, Mazzotti et al. (2016) identified one additional predictor category correlated with postsecondary education with a moderate level of evidence: Youth Autonomy/Decision Making.

**Students with Learning Disabilities**

In addition to the challenge of research providing only a few robust predictors of postsecondary education outcomes, our understanding of effective transition services for
college-bound students with learning disabilities is thwarted by the fact that much of the research base relies on samples where disability types are aggregated into the single category of students with disabilities. Given the diversity of disability types, interpreting results based on samples representing a range of disabilities is problematic (Kimball, Wells, Ostiguy, Manly, & Lauterbach, 2016). Test, Fowler, et al. (2009), Test, Mazzotti, et al. (2009), Haber et al. (2016), and Mazzotti et al. (2016) looked at students with disabilities across types of disability and across postschool outcomes. In their discussions and suggestions for further research, these authors join others in asserting the importance of disaggregating data by type of disability to support the identification of predictors of positive outcomes for specific disabilities (Mazzotti et al., 2016; Mazzotti, Rowe, Cameto, Test, & Morningstar, 2013; Test, Mazzotti, et al., 2009).

I was only able to identify one published article reviewing literature specific to students with learning disabilities and postsecondary education transition programs. This article (Kosine, 2007) outlines transition program models and summarizes research and evaluation related to the models. Using guidelines developed by the National Panel for Evidence-Based School Counseling to evaluate the studies, Kosine concluded that “only a small number of programs have been researched and/or evaluated and, due to methodology issues, few definitive conclusions can be drawn from the results” (Kosine, 2007, p. 95). Based on the review, Kosine emphasizes the importance of comprehensive and coordinated services, particularly coordination between school counselors and special educators to facilitate effective college transition planning.

It appears that students with learning disabilities transitioning to college have largely been left to fend for themselves, while the focus of transition programs and
research has been on employment (Halpern, 1993), and predominantly on well-deserving populations of students with more significant disabilities (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Weidenthal & Kochhar-Bryant, 2007). What little relevant and adequately rigorous literature there is steers us toward the following evidence-based transition services for postsecondary education: inclusion in general education, transition program, youth autonomy/decision making, and special education/guidance counselor coordination. Only special education/guidance counselor coordination is drawn from a review focused on students with learning disabilities.

Faced with troubling postsecondary education outcomes for students with learning disabilities, we have to conclude that (a) the established practices and predictors are not adequate to guide the field, (b) the field is not applying what the research has established, or (c) both of these conditions are true. Given that by subject, with the exception of social studies, less than half of students with learning disabilities are in general education (Joshi & Bouck, 2017), despite participation in general education being an established predictor (Haber et al., 2016; Test, Mazzotti, et al., 2009), application of the research appears to be limited. Even when applying the research, with transition program defined as openly as “comprehensive transition planning and education that creates individualized opportunities, services, and supports to help students achieve their post-school goals” (Rowe et al., 2015, p. 123), a lot is left to the discretion of the IEP Team and transition service providers in determining what the planning and education will entail. Research studies have not yet examined what IEP teams use as the basis for designing transition services for these students.
Comprehensive Review: Transition and College Readiness

Transition services, like all IEP services, are by definition individualized. That a student with a learning disability has a goal of postsecondary education does not in itself determine precisely what transition services should be implemented. According to IDEA, IEP Teams determine appropriate transition services based on “the individual child’s needs, taking into account the child’s strengths, preferences, and interests” (IDEA, 2004). In other words, transition services are intended to address the gap between the student’s skills and knowledge and the skills and knowledge that will be required in the desired postschool environment. Therefore, transition services for a student with a postsecondary education goal will be informed not only by what has been shown to be effective, but by what the team identifies as the gap, which in turn is based on the team’s conception of the skills and knowledge that will be required in the desired postschool environment—i.e., college. Some refer to these skills and knowledge as college readiness.

The question that arises, then, is how do IEP teams determine the skills a student with a learning disability will need to be successful in college, in order to determine appropriate transition services? Using terminology from the literature, the question becomes: “How do IEP team members conceptualize college readiness?” To begin by exploring these questions within existing literature, I conducted an exhaustive search for studies at the intersection of special education transition and college readiness, college preparation, or college expectations. Distinct from practices and predictors, the focus of this review was the process related to postsecondary education transition service decision-making, and team member understanding of college readiness.
Search Method

I began by selecting search terms that would capture any literature addressing the skills students need to succeed in postsecondary education, within a special education transition context. The search parameters were the following: must contain “college ready” OR “college readiness” OR “prepar* for college” OR “ready for college” OR “college expectations,” AND must contain “special education teacher*” OR “transition coordinator*” OR “transition specialist*” OR “transition facilitator*” OR “transition teacher*” OR “special education team*” OR “IEP team*” OR IEP* OR “transition plan*.” The wildcard character (*) specified that all possible endings of truncated search words would be included. I executed a Discovery Search with no limiters (e.g., date, scholarly peer reviewed articles), so that I could gauge the full extent of related publications. This produced 57 unique results. All results were in English. Databases providing at least two articles to the search results included: ERIC, PsycINFO, Academic Search Premier, Supplemental Index, OAIster, Associated Press Images Collection, and JSTOR Journals.

Subsequently, because my intent was to locate all the literature relevant to how special education team members and transition stakeholders identify the skills students need to succeed in postsecondary education, I conducted an additional search including terms for stakeholders who were not named in the initial search. Though the OR operator with the terms “IEP*” and “transition plan*” created a broadly inclusive initial search, the search only named special education professionals (e.g., “special education teacher,” “transition specialist”). In the second search, I set the following parameters: must contain "college ready" OR "college readiness" OR "prepar* for college" OR "ready for college"
OR "college expectations;" must contain "special education" OR “IEP*”; must contain “transition;” and must contain “parent” OR “guardian” OR “student” OR “teacher” OR “counselor” OR "disability services" OR “instructor” OR “professor.” This second search produced 41 unique results, 24 of which had not been identified through the initial search. All results were in English. Databases providing at least two articles to the search results included: ERIC, PsycINFO, Academic Search Premier, and Complementary Index.

I reviewed each of the 81 total nonduplicated results, either through the abstract or the full-text publication. To be included in my review, the publication had to present original research, and it had to address IEP team member or related stakeholder conceptions or identification of skills or characteristics needed for postsecondary education. I populated a spreadsheet with the article title, publication date, topic, notes, and inclusion designation or exclusion reason.

To identify studies meeting the inclusion criteria and not identified through the database search, I reviewed the reference lists of each of the studies that met inclusion criteria, and searched for other publications by the authors of the studies. I also conducted journal-specific searches using the key words “college ready,” “college readiness,” “prepar* for college,” “ready for college,” and “college expectations.” I searched special education journals including *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals, Exceptional Children, Exceptionality, Journal of Research in Special Education, Journal of Special Education, Remedial and Special Education,* and *Teacher Education and Special Education.*
**Search Results**

Eight of the 81 database search results met the criteria for inclusion, including one policy report, three dissertations, and four peer-reviewed articles. One dissertation and one peer-reviewed article represent the same study. The exclusion reasons assigned to the remaining studies were (a) irrelevant (e.g., IEP = Intensive English Programs, preparedness of college graduates to work with autistic students; 8 results), (b) book review (1 result), (c) not about special education or students with disabilities (15 results), (d) employment focused/not postsecondary-education related (6 results), and (e) doesn't look at stakeholder conceptions/identification of needed skills (43 results). The final category (e) included results that were not empirical studies. The reference list and journal searches produced two additional peer-reviewed articles that initially appeared to meet inclusion criteria. After careful consideration, only one of these was included, bringing the total number of studies meeting inclusion criteria to nine. The other potential article (Morningstar, Lombardi, Fowler, & Test, 2017) was excluded because it addressed the perspectives of State Education Agency (SEA) representatives rather than IEP team members and stakeholders in a student’s transition. Though SEA representatives in the study are stakeholders in transition on the state level, they are not involved in IEP team decision-making or transition service planning.

**Types of Studies**

The nine results that satisfied inclusion criteria consisted of a policy report on state teacher preparation and licensure requirements (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2014), a qualitative dissertation on high school counselors’ perceptions of postsecondary transition services (Hudson, 2011), a dissertation using the Delphi method
to identify college readiness and school counseling priorities for students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD; Krell, 2011), a dissertation using the Delphi method to examine parent perspectives on preparing students with intellectual disabilities for inclusive postsecondary education (Sheen, 2017), and five peer-reviewed articles. One of the articles was the published version of the dissertation on school counseling and ASD (Krell & Pérusse, 2012). A second peer-reviewed study used the Delphi method to identify college-readiness factors for students with learning disabilities (Milsom & Dietz, 2009). The three remaining studies involved survey research. One study surveyed parents and educators about the effectiveness of Individualized Learning Plans (Skaff, Kemp, Sternesky McGovern, & Fantacone, 2016), one surveyed educators about CCR knowledge and program effectiveness (Harvey, Timmerman, & Vazquez, 2019), and one surveyed postsecondary disability service coordinators about transition service satisfaction (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002).

**Study Descriptions and Critiques**

The small number of publications meeting the inclusion criteria and the diversity of research questions, methods, and formats represented in these publications lend themselves to discussion of individual studies and identification of their relevance to the review focus, rather than a more synthesizing approach. I describe each of the studies, identify its contribution to the topic of stakeholder conceptions or identification of skills or characteristics needed for postsecondary education, and evaluate methodological rigor.

**Policy Report**

The National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) publishes a *State Teacher Policy Yearbook* reporting on each state’s performance in relation to policy goals for
teacher effectiveness. The 2014 *Yearbook* addressed alignment between state teacher preparation and licensure requirements and college- and career-readiness standards. The “National Summary” (NCTQ, 2014) compiles the findings from NCTQ’s examination of “the extent to which states have aligned their requirements for teacher preparation and licensure with the skills needed to prepare students for college and careers” (NCTQ, 2014, p. i).

**Findings.** According to the National Summary, none of the states had adequate policies to ensure teachers are well prepared to lead their students toward the levels of achievement expected by college- and career-readiness standards, despite the standards having been in place for five years. Specifically, the report states that special education teacher preparation needs are neglected, with increases in academic standards for students having “little to no impact on requirements for teachers who educate special education students” (NCTQ, 2014, p. ii).

One metric used in this study is grade-level-specific certification. Thirty-five states offer a K-12 special education certification, meaning that teachers do not have to specialize in subject or grade level material or pedagogy as general education teachers do (NCTQ, 2014). This has serious implications for postsecondary education transition service delivery, since a special education teacher licensed to teach kindergarten could use the same license to teach high school, without having developed professional knowledge and expertise in criteria for college readiness. It suggests that the correlation between inclusion in general education and postsecondary education outcomes (Haber et al., 2016; Test, Mazzotti, et al., 2009) could be linked to teacher preparation standards.
**Relevance.** The premise for the analysis in the *2014 State Teacher Policy Yearbook* (NCTQ, 2014) is college- and career-readiness standards. It is important to distinguish this from college readiness as it has been discussed in this and the previous chapter. As noted in Chapter 1, adoption of college and career readiness standards, also referred to as the Common Core State Standards, has been part of the secondary reform efforts of the past decade. These changes have implications for all students, including students with disabilities, but the concept of establishing standards for all students that better reflect the demands of the 21st century is distinct from the concept of college readiness as a criterion for transition services. The focus of this review and the proposed research is transition services that prepare students with disabilities to be successful in postsecondary education specifically, based on postsecondary goals included in an Individualized Education Program. College and career readiness refers to the more generalized efforts to raise the bar for achievement through state education standards. The study is relevant in that it addresses qualifications of teachers to prepare students for the academic demands of postsecondary education. The study does not address teacher preparation in the areas of nonacademic skill instruction that are also essential for postsecondary success. This research is only tenuously aligned with the focus on stakeholder conceptions of skills needed for postsecondary education, and the study does not help to clarify how special education teachers, as members of the group of stakeholders in transition, identify necessary skills for their students.

**Methodological Concerns.** This policy report does not include the methods used for data collection or analysis, and therefore methods could not be evaluated.
Qualitative Research

Hudson (2011) conducted interviews with seven counselors from the two high schools in a county in Tennessee about their transition services work with students with learning disabilities. The research questions focused on perceptions of transition services, and transition-related activities.

Findings. Counselors reported one of their main contributions was completing transition assessments, which they administered to all students. These were used to identify student interests, postsecondary goals, and the plan of study. Counselors discussed the importance of collaboration between the counselor and special education teacher to ensure consistency (a) between results of transition assessments and postsecondary goals in the IEP, and (b) between the student's four-year plan and the course of study in their IEP. Counselors identified their availability to contribute their expertise to transition services as an area of concern. Participants concurred that school counselors need additional training in how to support students in developing self-advocacy skills. Among the recommendations in Hudson (2011) are that high school administrators consider the benefits of counselors attending IEP meetings; that counselors have scheduled time to work with students on “career counseling, academic advisement, college admission requirements, how to contact the college Office of Disability, and when or how to apply for scholarships” (p. 85); that counselors and special education teachers have designated collaboration time for transition; and that school counselors receive training that includes the difference between IDEA and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and why students need to know their rights.
**Relevance.** Hudson (2011) states: "The participants discussed that they want to make sure that students were in the right academic program to meet their needs and learning the skills to help them accomplish their goals” (p. 81). Yet the study does not address what these skills are, or how they are determined. The implicit assumption is that as long as a student is enrolled in the right program of study, they will be “learning the skills to help them accomplish their goals.” This reduces transition services to having appropriate classes, and suggests that following the right course of study will result in adequate preparation. Other research, discussed in Chapter 1, suggests that students are not adequately prepared, and are not accomplishing their goals.

According to Hudson (2011), school counselors are knowledgeable about the course of study, college entrance requirements, and what college admissions officers are looking for. There is no mention of college success or completion, and no discussion of counselor knowledge of what is needed after the admissions process. This is representative of a shortsightedness in how secondary educators are approaching transition. The exception to this is self-advocacy, which is implied as a skill needed for success once the transition occurs. Other than self-advocacy skills, no specific college-readiness skills are identified.

**Methodological Concerns.** Hudson (2011) used a compilation of qualitative research approaches, and describes methodology, citing various authors, without making it clear which elements of the methodology were applied. For example, Hudson discusses the importance of triangulation for establishing validity, but does not specify if or how the data in the study were triangulated. Hudson refers to validity and reliability interchangeably with trustworthiness, seeming to conflate quantitative and qualitative
methods. Similarly, Hudson refers to epistemological and ontological stances when citing methodologists, but does not use these terms or identify the epistemological or ontological views that guide the study. Hudson also makes reference to a theoretical framework when describing the coding process, but does not present the theoretical framework for the study explicitly at any point in the dissertation.

Hudson (2011) describes using “systematic coding procedures” (p. 46) and developing themes and categories as part of data analysis. The method section does not provide any examples of the formulation of themes or categories, simply referencing “creat[ing] categories in support of research questions” (p. 52). Despite these and other methodological shortcomings, this study makes an important contribution to the literature as an exploratory study bringing to light the perspectives of school counselors regarding their role in transition services for students with learning disabilities.

**Delphi Studies**

Three of the eight distinct studies satisfying inclusion criteria used the Delphi method. Each of these studies gathered opinions on college readiness factors, one focusing on students with ASD, one on students with intellectual disability, and one on students with learning disabilities. Each of the studies involved three rounds. In the first round, participants generated lists of items. The authors condensed items to avoid redundancy or expanded them “to clarify key concepts” (Sheen, 2017, p. 58), producing a shorter list. In round two, participants rated their agreement with the edited items using a Likert-type scale. In round three, participants were provided with the median rating and interquartile range for each item and asked to rate each item again, considering the statistical information. As opposed to a ranking process that asks participants to prioritize
Krell (2011) and Krell and Pérusse (2012) gathered input from an expert panel on college readiness characteristics, the role of school counselors, and supportive college environments for students with ASD. Fifty percent of invited individuals agreed to participate, and they represented the following roles: “directors of postsecondary support programs for students with ASD, directors of postsecondary disability services, representatives from national autism organizations, university/college faculty, private consultants, and transition coordinators” (p. 32).

Milsom and Dietz (2009) drew on special education, higher education, and counseling experts to define college readiness specifically for students with learning disabilities. The authors identified 65 professionals based on publication records, leadership in relevant professional organizations, and direct work with students with learning disabilities in the transition to college.

Sheen (2017) explored parent perspectives on the competencies students with intellectual disabilities need for successful inclusive postsecondary education experiences. Sheen’s participants were parents or guardians of students with intellectual disability who had completed at least one semester of one of 44 federally funded Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSIDs).

**Findings.** Krell’s (2011) study resulted in 54 final college readiness items and 29 counseling items. Arranged according to level of consensus, the top two college readiness characteristics are “knowledge of disability” and “ability to access resources,” followed
by “desire to go to college” (Krell, 2011, p. 56). Organizational skills, knowledge of college logistics, and self-advocacy also reached a high level of consensus. Krell (2011) suggests potential categories for the characteristics, consisting of “academic skills, skills to work effectively with others, knowledge of self, college knowledge, college knowledge for students with disabilities, and autonomy skills” (p. 59). Some characteristics are directly related to students with ASD (e.g., “ability to recognize and restrict repetitive behavior in social settings” [p. 57]), while many apply to students with disabilities generally.

The counseling tasks with the highest consensus are “encourage student involvement in the transition planning process” and “ensure the IEP is realistic and moves the student toward independence” (Krell, 2011, p. 68). Additional tasks involve sharing information, coordinating activities, professional development, and direct counseling activities (e.g., “help students understand their disability,” p. 68). Each of these could also be relevant to students with other disabilities, such as learning disabilities. Krell and Pérusse (2012) identify five “activity categories” for the counseling tasks, which they label “early-initiated, collaborative transition process; collaboration; information outreach; professional development; and individualized counseling” (p. 35).

Participants in Milsom and Dietz (2009) contributed a total of 570 college readiness items in round one, which were reduced to a final list of 60 factors on which consensus was reached. Twelve items had a median rating of 7 (highest possible rating), and the remaining items had a median rating of 6 (Milsom & Dietz, 2009). The items with the highest median rating and lowest variability were “confidence; belief they can succeed,” “knowledge of how to self-advocate (i.e., how to access help at college),”
“willingness to self-advocate,” and “persistence/perseverance” (p. 316). The remaining items with the highest median rating include study and time management skills; self-determination, self-regulation, and self-knowledge; “knowledge of whether the available college accommodations fit their individual needs,” “knowledge that college is different than high school,” and “resilience” (p. 316). The authors categorize the 60 factors as “personal characteristics, academic skills and strategies, support systems, and knowledge areas related to self and college” (Milsom & Dietz, 2009, p. 319).

Sheen’s (2017) study produced 33 competencies for students with intellectual disability in inclusive postsecondary education programs. Seven items achieved the highest level of consensus. These are: “able to follow instructions/directions,” “able to ask for help,” “able to manage medications independently,” “demonstrates basic hygiene skills,” “accepts responsibility for their actions,” “demonstrates resilience,” and “is kind to self and others” (Sheen, 2017, p. 70). Sheen describes many of the items having “both a ‘knowing how to’ element and a ‘willingness to do component’” (p. 75), involving both knowledge and personal skills (Sheen, 2017).

**Relevance.** Each of the Delphi studies explores conceptions of college readiness for students with disabilities. Krell’s (2011) results provide support for the importance of disability awareness, independence, self-advocacy skills, and non-academic student skills. Likewise, in Milsom and Dietz (2009), none of the 12 items with the highest ratings involve academic knowledge or skills, which suggests that experts prioritize the knowledge and skills students will need in order to apply the academic skills they have in a college setting over academic skills themselves. Sheen (2017) describes results as “go[ing] beyond the typical academic achievement standards that are indicative of
college readiness for students without disabilities” (p. 75), and sees the results as an indication of “the need to assess the readiness of students with ID for PSE by examining the strengths, knowledge, personal skills, and attributes these students have in other life areas” (p. 75). The large number of items on which participants reached consensus demonstrates how difficult it is to summarize the qualities that constitute college readiness for students with disabilities, and how extensive the necessary competencies are.

Oddly, though the focus in Krell (2011) is on school counseling, the expert panel did not include school counselors. Other IEP team members and related transition stakeholders (e.g., disability services directors, transition coordinators) are represented, making the conceptions of college readiness directly applicable to the focus of this review. However, the study does not clarify how practicing counselors identify the service priorities for students, or to what extent those priorities are aligned with the actual demands of postsecondary education. Similarly, participants in Milsom and Dietz (2009) include professionals who are transition stakeholders and whose roles are often represented on IEP teams; however, the study provides conceptions of college readiness that are expressed outside an IEP team or transition planning context. The study does not address how stakeholders identify the service priorities for students while transition planning is taking place. Sheen (2017) focuses on parent input, which is too often overlooked. Parents are mandatory and important members of IEP teams, and invested stakeholders in transition outcomes. Again, the study asks parents of students who were already transitioning to postsecondary education about preparation needs; it does not address how parents of students who are receiving transition services in high school
identify what their children will need to be prepared for postsecondary education in the future. In other words, it does not address the gap in the literature around team member conceptions of college readiness that underlie transition service decisions.

**Methodological Concerns.** As Krell (2011) explains, using the Delphi method in these studies allowed participants to offer their input anonymously, while still participating in a process designed to achieve consensus. What a Delphi study cannot offer is direct evidence that any particular recommended practice produces desired results. The college readiness characteristics identified through these studies are the recommendations of participants working in coordination with one another, responding to and evaluating one another’s recommendations, all of which are presumed to be based on experience and/or scholarship. None of the items, however, is subjected to any direct measurement, either causal or correlational, or derived through a process of rich description. In other words, the Delphi method provides the equivalent of a synthesis of conclusions from a series of expert-written opinion pieces, rather than results of a rigorous quantitative or qualitative study.

An additional concern is with the accuracy of the distillation of the original responses into the items that move on to round two. The examples provided by Krell (2011), for example, suggest that a fair amount of specificity was lost in this process (e.g., “trying a few courses as a ‘fifth year’ program if the student is on an IEP, with the assistance of a tutor or a life coach” was collapsed under “suggest alternate pathways to starting college,” p. 33). Though a high number of the items resulting from the condensing process achieved final consensus (in Krell’s study, for example, 79% and 85%, respectively), suggesting broad agreement, participants were not provided with the
removed items in order to evaluate their importance. It is possible that some specific elements contained in these items are crucial and not represented in more generalized items.

Finally, Delphi results are based on input from a fairly small group of participants, without the rich and deep data that are produced by other types of qualitative studies, which might also have small samples. In Sheen (2017) and Milsom and Dietz (2009), participants represented different areas of the respective field, but only a few representatives from each area contributed. In both Sheen and Milsom and Dietz there was attrition from round one to round three. Milsom and Dietz claim that their final group was demographically similar to the original sample; however, the final group did not include a special educator. As discussed above, Delphi studies provide some insight from the combined input of diverse experts in a field, but their results represent opinions and perceptions and are not tied to direct evidence, nor do they elaborate with exploratory or explanatory detail. The results of these Delphi studies reflect factors that groups of experts identified as crucial to college readiness. The studies do not inform us about how well the factors would stand up to rigorous analysis of correlational or causal relationships with actual postsecondary education outcomes. Nor do they tell us how the participants reached these conclusions.

**Survey Studies**

Three studies that met inclusion criteria involved survey methods. Each of the studies is distinct in terms of research questions, sample and sample size, and statistical analysis.
Individualized Learning Plans (ILPs). As mentioned previously, the national goal of achieving college and career readiness for high school graduates has some overlap with special education transition mandates. In some states, reform efforts have included creation of a process quite similar to transition planning; a process often implemented for all students, regardless of special education status. According to Skaff, Kemp, Sternesky McGovern, and Fantacone (2016), Individualized Learning Plans (ILPs) are “an approach to assist students in successfully transitioning by helping them explore postsecondary options, identify goals for college and/or a career, and develop the skills needed to achieve their goals through course alignment and extracurricular activities” (p. 68). The ILP process typically includes self- and career exploration, documentation of goals and plans, and skill building (Skaff et al., 2016). Much like special education transition plans, ILPs are developed collaboratively by school staff, parents, and students.

Skaff et al. (2016) used a survey and focus groups to address research questions about the perceptions of parents and educators regarding students with and without disabilities and their ILPs. They conducted their study with nine high schools in three states that were identified because of their successful implementation of state ILP policies. A total of 1,117 parents (17% response rate) and 484 educators (79% response rate) completed the survey, and 96 parents and 74 educators participated in focus groups.

Findings. Skaff et al. (2016) found that parents of students with disabilities were less likely to agree that their child was being prepared for transition to postsecondary life than parents of students without disabilities. Educators expressed significantly more confidence that students without disabilities were being prepared for postsecondary
education and careers than students with disabilities. Both groups suggested that the ILP process was not adequately “tailor[ed]...to meet the specialized needs of students with disabilities” (p. 73). Among the most frequently-identified areas for improvement were providing leadership opportunities for students with disabilities, and providing opportunities for parental involvement in the ILP process.

Relevance. Scaff et al. (2016) contribute an important exploratory look at ILPs in relation to the transition needs of students with disabilities, inviting the voices of educators and, as is less common, parents. Both are members of IEP teams, and their beliefs about what is needed for ILPs to be effective for students with disabilities is relevant to this review. Unfortunately, only a small group of parents of students with disabilities responded to the survey. The voices that are completely absent are those of the students themselves, who were not part of the study design.

The priority of leadership experience suggests that educators and parents understand that skills derived from leadership opportunities will be important in postsecondary endeavors. This is a contribution of this specific study, not raised elsewhere. Scaff et al. make the connection between leadership development and “self-determination and self-advocacy skills” (p. 76), though only to note that other research has linked these skills to postsecondary outcomes and strengthening leadership skills could also strengthen these skills. Otherwise, the article does not discuss skills needed for postsecondary education success, despite the stated purpose of the study being “to gather information from educators and parents on their perceptions of the effectiveness of [ILPs] in assisting students with disabilities in gaining the experiences needed to develop college and career readiness skills” (p. 68). Identification of these skills may be beyond the scope
of the article, but the article is part of a consistent pattern in the literature where skills that are the ultimate target of the research are implied rather than explicitly identified.

**Methodological Concerns.** The Scaff et al. (2016) article was published in the top special education transition journal. However, it lacks the rigor that would typically be expected in this forum. The study “relied on mixed qualitative and quantitative methods” (p. 69), consisting of a quantitative survey and qualitative focus groups. The analysis presented in the article, however, is predominantly qualitative, with the survey results only appearing descriptively. For example, we are told that 83% of parents of youth without disabilities agreed their child was receiving adequate preparation, while only 74% of parents of youth with disabilities agreed, but there is no further statistical analysis. Given the size of the survey sample (1,117 parent and 484 educator responses), it seems analyses could have been conducted. The authors report that the parent response rate was low (17%), but the educator response rate was outstanding (79%). Only seven percent of the parent sample were parents of students with disabilities, and only nine percent of the educator sample were special education teachers. These small subgroup sizes could preclude group comparison analyses. One third of the parent focus group participants were parents of students with disabilities, giving an important advantage to the qualitative analysis. At the very least, the authors should provide their reasons for not performing or reporting statistical analyses.

**College and Career Readiness (CCR) Knowledge and Effectiveness.** Harvey, Timmerman, and VazQuez (2019) surveyed administrators, guidance counselors, general education teachers, and special educators regarding “their beliefs about teaching and learning, knowledge of CCR, and the effectiveness of CCR programs” (p. 265). The
sample of 458 represented 34 secondary schools in Indiana. Response rates ranged from 23% (general education teachers) to 37% (special education teachers), with a 25% response rate overall. Analyses involved descriptive statistics, as well as nonparametric tests (Kruskal-Wallis H tests, reported as chi-square values).

**Findings.** The authors report internal consistency reliability ranging from .78 to .97 for the four components of the survey (e.g., Teaching and Learning Belief Statements, Knowledge of CCR Programs). Results show significant differences in beliefs, with administrators and guidance counselors having higher agreement with statements such as “instruction supports CCR” (Harvey et al., 2019, p. 269) and knowledge of CCR programs than general and special educators. Special educators had the lowest agreement that CCR initiatives were offered in their school setting, and the lowest agreement that the CCR programs were “highly effective in achieving the goal of CCR for my high school students” (p. 271).

**Relevance.** As we have seen consistently across the literature, the study’s examination of perceptions related to CCR does not explore the skills that underlie the construct, though the survey questions rely on participants’ sense of those skills: how else could they answer whether efforts in their school are supporting students to be ready? Nor do the study findings uncover the process by which participants determine what skills students need to be ready, either for college or careers.

**Methodological Concerns.** Without knowing what the various participant groups regard as college or career ready skills, interpreting the survey results is problematic, especially in terms of analyzing differences between groups. If administrators and special educators, for example, do not have the same understanding of what it means to be
college and career ready at the skill level, their responses to questions about CCR program effectiveness should not be compared. The authors are making a problematic assumption that all respondents have the same understanding of college and career ready skills, when in fact guidance counselors may be thinking of “curriculum and diploma requirements” (p. 275) while special education teachers may be thinking of study skills, organizational skills, and self-advocacy skills. To leave this construct unspecified limits the interpretation of the study results.

**College Service Coordinator Evaluation of Transition Services.** Janiga and Costenbader (2002) surveyed college service coordinators in New York State about their perspectives of transition plans of students with learning disabilities. The survey was brief (a demographic section, then seven Likert-type items and three open-ended items). Seventy-four coordinators responded, representing a 41% response rate.

**Findings.** A satisfaction score of 2.8 on a scale of 1-5 was computed for the sample. Only two items met the criterion for a relative transition service strength: “most students seeking services have had a current assessment,” and “generally, students who seek our services have enrolled in programs in which they are interested and have a high probability of success” (p. 468). The item with the lowest rating was: “the students with learning disabilities whom we serve were adequately prepared in junior and senior high school to advocate for themselves in college” (p. 468).

Suggestions for improvement to transition services were divided into categories and a percentage of respondents identifying each area of need was calculated. The highest percentage (67%) was reported for “improve students’ self-advocacy skills,” followed by “increase students’ understanding of their disability and their specific needs” (39%; p.
Other suggestions shared by between eight and 32% of respondents involved skill development (study and time management skills; reading and writing skills; higher level math skills), student independence, education about legal differences between high school and college, establishing realistic expectations, and career orientation. A number of responses to the final open-ended item, inviting comments on topics not otherwise addressed, involved the suggestion that “better communication be established between high school and college service providers” (p. 467).

Relevance. As stakeholders and possible IEP team participants, postsecondary service coordinators are highly relevant to transition planning and service design, and their sense of how well students are prepared as well as what skills are missing is relevant to the goals of this literature review. Janiga and Costenbader’s (2002) study emphasizes self-advocacy as a skill postsecondary service coordinators have identified as crucial and underdeveloped. How they identified its importance or that of the other skills mentioned in their responses (e.g., study skills) is beyond the scope of the article. In their discussion section, however, the authors state: “Team members might consult local college personnel to clarify the skills that students with LD need at the postsecondary level” (p. 468). Echoed by the survey participants, who suggested better communication between high school and postsecondary providers, this statement asserts that currently there is a gap in understanding about college-readiness skills. To move the transition field forward in the area of postsecondary education and students with learning disabilities, the gap needs to be addressed by exploring conceptions of college readiness among transition stakeholders. To date, most of the literature has overlooked this question, and studies examining stakeholders’ perceptions, including Janiga and Costenbader, have not looked
at how stakeholders determine the skills that constitute college readiness, or how similar or different their conceptions are.

**Methodological Concerns.** The survey is brief, only including seven rating scale items. All of these items rely on respondents’ interpretation of the transition services provided in another setting (high school)—the study does not include information to determine what was attempted but not successful, versus what was not provided. One of the seven items is problematic in that it suggests that documentation of accommodations in an IEP translates to eligibility for those accommodations in college, when in fact postsecondary institutions have no obligation to provide IEP accommodations. This indication of multiple understandings of the accommodations process supports how difficult it is to measure and interpret the practices that surround transition services, especially when relying on brief and primarily quantitative measures.

The perspective of service coordinators at postsecondary institutions has the potential to provide valuable insights, informing transition service providers about how their efforts manifest in the target environment. However, quantitative, descriptive survey studies like this one tell a limited story. With no correlational data, for example tying differences in transition services to postsecondary provider satisfaction; and no qualitative, explanatory data, for example detailing the incidents and behaviors that raise concerns for respondents about students’ self-advocacy skills; it is difficult to derive meaningful implications from the results. Little more can be said than that postsecondary service coordinators believe more needs to be done to prepare students for postsecondary education.
Summary and Implications

Based on state licensure requirements, special education teachers may be especially underprepared to lead their students toward the levels of achievement expected by college- and career-readiness standards (NCTQ, 2014) and to deliver curricula and instruction that would be appropriate and sufficiently rigorous to prepare their students for postsecondary education. Yet these professionals are key players in transition planning and service delivery. Contributions of school counselors to the transition process include completing transition assessments with students with disabilities, helping to align student coursework with postsecondary goals, information outreach, and making connections to outside resources; however, counselors report limited availability to contribute their expertise to transition services (Hudson, 2011). Parents, who are key IEP team members, identify postsecondary education preparation needs including crucial non-academic needs (Sheen, 2017), at least with the benefit of experience, after their children have participated in inclusive postsecondary education programs. Research indicates that ILPs, like transition services, often fail to meet the individual needs of students with disabilities, and educators and parents feel that leadership opportunities in secondary school are crucial for these students (Skaff et al., 2016).

Despite the fact that the literature search targeted studies at the intersection of transition and college readiness, most of the articles do not discuss skills needed for postsecondary education success. Across the eight studies, college-readiness skills and characteristics do emerge, more indirectly than directly. The most prominent of these is self-advocacy, raised in multiple studies (Hudson, 2011; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Krell & Pérusse, 2012; Milsom & Dietz, 2009; Scaff et al., 2016; Sheen, 2017). Others
are non-academic skills (e.g., organization skills; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Krell & Pérusse, 2012), independence (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Krell & Pérusse, 2012; Sheen, 2017), and disability awareness (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Krell & Pérusse, 2012). An implicit assumption is that having students enrolled in the right program of study will be adequate to prepare them for postsecondary education. Researchers recommend that collaboration between counselors and special education teachers be improved (Hudson, 2011; Krell & Pérusse, 2012; Scaff et al., 2016), that communication between service providers at the high school and college levels be improved (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002), and that school counselors receive additional transition-related training (Hudson, 2011; Skaff et al., 2016).

The studies involve a number of methodological weaknesses. The policy study (NCTQ, 2014) does not include details about the methods used and the rigor cannot be evaluated. Three of the studies (Krell, 2011; Milsom & Dietz, 2009; Sheen, 2017) use the Delphi method, which is helpful in summarizing expert opinions, but it provides neither quantitative rigor through statistical analysis nor qualitative rigor through thick and rich description. The interview study that is included in the review (Hudson, 2011) offers the benefits of qualitative research, presenting detailed input from school counselors about their role in transition services. However, the study only included interviews with seven counselors. A larger sample or additional data collection, such as through observations and field notes, or document review, would have resulted in a more rigorous study and more meaningful results.

The remaining studies involve surveys. Harvey et al. (2019) surveyed educators about CCR program availability and effectiveness, but the researchers do not appear to
have operationalized CCR for their respondents in a way that would make their findings broadly interpretable. In the study with the largest survey sample (Scaff et al., 2016), statistical analyses of survey results are missing, and parents of students with disabilities made up a small portion of the parent survey respondents. Similarly, Janiga and Costenbader (2002) provide descriptive statistics without additional analysis. Their survey is quite brief, and the low prevalence of students with disabilities reported by their college service coordinator participants suggests opinions are based on experience with a limited subgroup of students.

In summary, the research that has been conducted relating to IEP team members’ conceptions of college readiness is limited in quantity, quality, and in its direct relevance to the research questions of interest here. Transition stakeholders’ conceptions of college readiness can be partially inferred from some study results, but much more needs to be learned to reach an understanding that can inform practice. Finally, additional research is needed to explore the influences and processes that contribute to conceptions of college readiness, and to explore conceptions across stakeholders, to ensure a common focus is guiding the team in its efforts. It is crucial that the voices of students, which are completely missing from the existing literature, be included.

**College Readiness Factors**

Milsom and Dietz (2009) identified four categories for the college readiness factors that emerged from their Delphi study. The categories, “personal characteristics, academic skills and strategies, support systems, and knowledge areas related to self and college” (p. 319), are strikingly similar to the “Four Keys” in Conley’s college readiness model: Key Cognitive Strategies, Key Content Knowledge, Key Learning Skills and
Techniques, and Key Transition Knowledge and Skills (Conley & French, 2014). One distinction is that the factors identified specifically for a population of students with learning disabilities include a category for “support systems,” which is not featured in the general college readiness model, though “help-seeking” is identified under Key Learning Skills and Techniques, and “self-advocacy” appears under Key Transition Knowledge and Skills.

**Analysis of Model Alignment**

The suggestion of alignment between the Delphi study results (Milsom & Dietz, 2009) and Conley’s college readiness model prompted a more detailed comparison to identify similarities and differences and determine the actual degree of alignment in representations from two typically disconnected realms. As discussed in Chapter 1, higher education college readiness scholarship and special education secondary transition scholarship have remained, for the most part, in their respective silos. Where college readiness is broadened into CCR as a concept within secondary reform, more overlap emerges in the literature. One example of this is the study by Morningstar, Lombardi, Fowler, and Test (2017), who developed a CCR framework for students with disabilities based on psychology, education, and transition literature, and fine-tuned it with input from state-level CCR and secondary transition experts participating in focus groups. Their framework is not specific to students with learning disabilities, but is intended to be inclusive of all students with disabilities. The larger issue is that it does not differentiate between college readiness and career readiness. The benefit of a comparison between the results of Milsom and Dietz’s (2009) Delphi study and Conley’s well-known college
readiness model is that it helps to focus what is otherwise an overwhelmingly expansive topic on a specific population and a specific outcome.

Method

The Conley model consists of four major “key” categories into which the components—strategies, knowledge, skills, and/or techniques—are divided; fifteen subcategories; and 41 individual components. According to Conley and French (2014), “all are actionable; in other words, they can be taught and learned and are not personality traits or general cognitive abilities” (p. 1019). I reviewed each item in the Delphi study and looked for a match in the Conley model, either at the specific component level (e.g., “time management”), or to a subcategory (e.g., “Learning Techniques”). I used the discussions in Conley (2012) and Conley and French (2014), which elaborate on the Keys and subcategories, to help determine whether or not a match was appropriate when the term in the model did not align exactly with the item from the Delphi study. I assigned each item from the Delphi study up to two labels for the Key(s) it fit under, unless I determined that there was no Key appropriate for categorizing the item. I also labeled whether or not the item was directly represented by a component in the Conley model. Some items I determined fit under a subcategory, but could not be matched at the component level. When this phase of analysis was complete, I went over each item a second time, this time matching it visually to the Conley model. This process allowed me to clarify and adjust some of my original categorizations, and identify matches I had overlooked (e.g., “knowledge of personal strengths and weaknesses” with “self-awareness”).
Comparison

As Figure 1 shows, Key Learning Skills & Techniques has the most overlap with the Delphi study factors. Seventeen out of sixty-two factors map onto this category, either matched with specific components or the subcategories, Ownership of Learning and Learning Techniques. Of the four “Keys” in Conley’s model, this is also the one with the greatest number of components. Learning skills and techniques, such as “persistence,” “motivation,” and “help-seeking;” and “time management” and “test-taking skills” (Conley & French, 2014; Milsom & Dietz, 2009) are clearly well-established factors in successful transition to college, recognized equally within special education and general college-readiness scholarship. Key Transition Knowledge and Skills also aligns well with factors from the Delphi study. Only the subcategory Financial (i.e., “tuition” and “financial aid”) does not have any matched factors. Though there is a financial item on the list from the Delphi study (“adequate financial resources”), it cannot be taught or learned, and therefore is outside the parameters of Conley’s model.

By contrast, only two factors from the Delphi study map onto Key Cognitive Strategies, indicating that this category consists of components largely absent from the factors experts regard as crucial to college readiness for students with learning disabilities. Notably, this category includes skills necessary for research, analysis, and other common demands of college-level academic courses. Components such as “hypothesize,” “evaluate,” and “monitor” do not appear among the factors in the Delphi study results, though cognitive strategies may be precisely what distinguishes students who are prepared to meet college expectations from those who are unprepared. Basic academic skills are specified in the Delphi factors, mapping onto Key Content
Figure 1


KEY COGNITIVE STRATEGIES

Think

27. Critical thinking and problem-solving skills

PRELIMINARY

Formulation

Hypothesis

Strategic

Research

Identify

Collect

INTERPRETATION

Analyze

Evaluate

COMMUNICATION

Organize

Construct

28. Communication skills

KEY CONTENT KNOWLEDGE

Know

14. Basic math skills

15. Writing skills

23. Reading skills

42. Good general academic preparation

ATTITUDES TOWARD LEARNING CONTENT

24. Having a sense of purpose

VALUES

25. Importance of learning

26. Importance of helping others

EFFORT

27. Effort in learning

28. Effort in helping others

KEY LEARNING SKILLS & TECHNIQUES

Act

OWNERSHIP OF LEARNING

1. Confidence, belief they can succeed

7. Self-determination skills (i.e., ability to develop action plans to achieve goals)

8. Self-discipline/self-regulation

18. Flexibility/adaptability

37. Ability to set goals

4. Persistence/perseverance

Self-awareness

9. Knowledge of personal strengths and weaknesses

6. Knowledge of personal learning style

Motivation

48. Highly motivated

Help-seeking

3. Willingness to self-advocate

32. Self-advocacy skills

LEARNING TECHNIQUES

5. Study skills

Time management

Text taking skills

Note taking skills

Memorization/recall

Strategic reading

Collaborative learning

52. Collaboration

Technology

26. Computer-technology skills

KEY TRANSITION KNOWLEDGE & SKILLS

Go

CONTEXTUAL Aparitions

57. Having goals for the future

11. Knowledge that college is different than high school

45. Awareness of college academic expectations and standards

PROCEDURAL Aparitions

Institution choice

Admission processes

FINANCIAL Aparitions

Financial aid

Postsecondary norms

16. Awareness of social expectations at college

PERSONAL Aparitions

Self-advocacy in an institutional context

2. Knowledge of how to self-advocate (i.e., how to access help at college)
Knowledge, but the other components of content knowledge identified by Conley and French (2014), such as “linking ideas” and “organizing concepts,” as well as the content knowledge needed to meet what are now referred to as “college and career readiness standards” adopted by most states, are not mentioned.

Conley’s model of college readiness reflects an understanding that a combination of academic and non-academic skills, strategies, and knowledge are essential to preparedness. The size of the Key Learning Skills & Techniques category is indicative of the established prominence of factors that enable students to use and demonstrate their knowledge, alongside factors related to that knowledge itself. Ownership of Learning, including components such as self-awareness and progress monitoring, and Learning Techniques, including note-taking skills and strategic reading, are detached from content knowledge, yet without them, content knowledge becomes almost irrelevant. Nonetheless, Conley’s model dedicates two of its four Key categories to content knowledge and the cognitive strategies that underlie academic endeavors. These factors are solid pillars of preparedness. And here is where the largest gap is revealed when comparing factors identified for students with learning disabilities to the components in Conley’s model. To experts defining college readiness for students with learning disabilities, cognitive strategies do not rise to a level of importance to make more than a minor appearance.

Directing the comparison the opposite way, there are a number of factors identified for students with learning disabilities that do not appear in Conley’s model. After I completed the analysis described above, a total of 31 items from the Delphi study remained without a corresponding component in Conley’s model. Despite the lack of a
component match, I categorized 11 of these items under **Key Learning Skills & Techniques** in the analysis (e.g., Resilience, High self-esteem), and I categorized four under **Key Transition Knowledge and Skills** (e.g., Social skills, Knowledge of legal rights under the ADA) according to structural similarities with the factors Conley placed in these categories. Table 1 lists these items. Sixteen additional items did not have a corresponding category in Conley, but could be identified as External Resources (e.g., Family support, Transportation); Disability-Specific (e.g., Knowledge of whether the available college accommodations fit their individual needs) or Other Strategies, Knowledge, Skills, and Techniques (e.g., Daily living skills, Independence from parents). Table 2 lists these items.
Table 1


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item #</th>
<th>Milsom &amp; Dietz item</th>
<th>Item #</th>
<th>Milsom &amp; Dietz item</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Resilience(^a)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Social skills(^b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>High self-esteem(^b)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Knowledge of legal rights under the ADA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Optimistic attitude(^b)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Knowledge of available supports from the college (e.g., through disability services or other campus offices)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Being proactive and/or planful(^b)</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Knowledge that desired college major is a good match to their skills/abilities/interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Organizational skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Coping skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Accepts responsibility for actions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>Strong work ethic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>Independence—not easily influenced by others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>Belief that there is learning in failure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62</td>
<td>Internal locus of control</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) In highest-rated group in Milsom & Dietz (2009)

\(^b\) In second-highest rated group in Milsom & Dietz (2009)

Table 2

*Items from Milsom & Dietz (2009) with No Corresponding Category in Conley & French’s (2014) College Readiness Model*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item #</th>
<th>Milsom &amp; Dietz item</th>
<th>Proposed category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Family support(^b)</td>
<td>External resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adequate financial resources</td>
<td>External resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>External resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>Support of friends</td>
<td>External resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55</td>
<td>Mentors</td>
<td>External resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56</td>
<td>Counseling support</td>
<td>External resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Knowledge of whether the available college accommodations fit their individual needs(^a)</td>
<td>Disability-specific</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Ability to use assistive technology if relevant to disability</td>
<td>Disability-specific</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Will have access to necessary supports at college (e.g., laptops, assistive technology software, books on tape)</td>
<td>Disability-specific</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>Awareness that disability is but one aspect of their identity</td>
<td>Disability-specific</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61</td>
<td>Knowledge of disability (e.g., their diagnosis, how their disability affects them)</td>
<td>Disability-specific</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Daily living skills</td>
<td>Other strategies, knowledge, skills, techniques</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>Open-minded</td>
<td>Other strategies, knowledge, skills, techniques</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>Independence from parents</td>
<td>Other strategies, knowledge, skills, techniques</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58</td>
<td>Safety awareness</td>
<td>Other strategies, knowledge, skills, techniques</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59</td>
<td>Self-acceptance</td>
<td>Other strategies, knowledge, skills, techniques</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) In highest-rated group in Milsom & Dietz (2009)

\(^b\) In second-highest rated group in Milsom & Dietz (2009)
Mapping the items from the Delphi study on Conley’s model of college readiness demonstrates that (a) there is significant overlap, (b) some important factors of college readiness are overlooked by experts considering college readiness for students with learning disabilities, and (c) a substantial portion of the items identified for students with learning disabilities go beyond general college readiness. Ultimately, although there is extensive overlap, the comparison reveals that when college readiness and secondary transition considerations intersect, the result is a vast array of factors to be attended to for students with learning disabilities to be prepared for postsecondary education.

**Conclusion**

The review of the relevant transition literature showed that research has provided little in the way of conclusive direction regarding services for students with learning disabilities with postsecondary education goals. Research-supported predictors are limited to 1) inclusion in general education, 2) participation in a transition program, 3) youth autonomy/decision making, and 4) special education/guidance counselor coordination. Whether IEP team members and transition stakeholders refer to literature in deciding on transition services is unclear. A comprehensive literature review scrutinizing the research on college readiness and the transition process failed to uncover how team members determine appropriate transition services or the skills their students need to be successful. One of the few studies that addressed conceptions of college readiness among transition stakeholders revealed that when considering students with learning disabilities, the list of skills, characteristics, and knowledge is vast. Comparison of this list to a widely-used model of college readiness indicates that despite how extensive it is, it leaves
out most of the essential area of cognitive strategies, meaning that an even longer list is called for.

The task of addressing these factors in transition service design and implementation is enormous. One crucial initial step in helping the field tackle this challenge is gaining an understanding of how targeted the planning process is. To do this, it is necessary to explore the conceptions of college readiness across IEP team members to determine how familiar these stakeholders are with the array of factors, and to explore how their conceptions may support or undermine effective service design and delivery. Given the numbers of students with learning disabilities transitioning from secondary to postsecondary education, and the difficulties they are encountering as evidenced by low completion rates, research and resulting practice improvements in transition services for students with learning disabilities can have far-reaching and vital effects.
CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN

The purpose of this study is to explore conceptions of college readiness among IEP team members and related transition stakeholders for a student with a learning disability as a first step in addressing the failure of special education transition services to prepare students with postsecondary education goals for college success. My aim is to advance our understanding of conceptions of college readiness among secondary education providers, college instructors and disability services providers, parents, and students. These research questions guide the study: 1) How do IEP team members/stakeholders describe what it means to be college ready?, 2) How do IEP team members/stakeholders describe the process of preparing students with learning disabilities for college?, 3) How do IEP team members/stakeholders describe the sources of their knowledge and understanding of college readiness and college preparation?, and 4) How do IEP team members/stakeholders understand transition services in the context of college readiness for students with learning disabilities? Ultimately, the study is designed to address the question, How do IEP team members/stakeholders conceptualize and operationalize college readiness for students with learning disabilities whose postsecondary goals include college?

Research Perspective

When the intent of a researcher is to embark on an exploratory journey through relatively uncharted territory, qualitative research methods are the appropriate methods to use. Qualitative research is typically employed when the purpose is exploring, explaining, or describing phenomena (Koch & Gitchel, 2011, p. 155). “Often qualitative studies are
undertaken because there is a lack of theory, or existing theory fails to adequately explain a phenomenon” (Merriam, 1998, p. 7). College readiness for students with learning disabilities is a phenomenon that is complex and not well understood; therefore, the topic calls for studies that draw on the “richness and holism” of qualitative data, with their “strong potential for revealing complexity” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10).

Specifically, qualitative research is used to “explore attitudes, opinions, and beliefs of a number of parties involved in special education” (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005, p. 196), as well as to explore perceptions and interactions (McDuffie & Scruggs, 2008).

In addition to being exploratory and descriptive, qualitative research “stresses the importance of…participants’ frames of reference” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 54).

With this study, I seek to understand how stakeholders conceive of college readiness: what each participant’s frame of reference is when making decisions related to the preparation for college of a student with a learning disability. The goal of the study is to inform transition services by capturing the broader context behind IEP team decisions about transition service design and delivery.

Furthermore, in this study I am seeking a better understanding of the phenomena surrounding the inadequate preparation of students with learning disabilities to meet the demands of postsecondary education. As highlighted in Chapter 2, federal law mandates that special education services assist students with postsecondary goals, yet students with learning disabilities with clear postsecondary education goals are not achieving success at acceptable rates. The qualitative approach supports “research that seeks to explore where and why policy and local knowledge and practice are at odds” (Marshall & Rossman,
2006, p. 53). In this way, qualitative methods support me in addressing my research questions and achieving the purpose of the study.

The qualitative research paradigm, which is sometimes referred to as naturalistic or interpretive research, can draw on constructivism as an epistemology. This view, “that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds” (Merriam, 1998, p. 6), is fitting for this study, in which I strive to uncover the meaning IEP team members and other stakeholders construct around college readiness as they participate in a student’s preparation and transition. Constructivism is also the epistemology that aligns with my intentions to build an understanding of the phenomenon of college readiness for students with learning disabilities through interaction with relevant stakeholders.

**Inquiry Approach**

Because there is no available research addressing conceptions of college readiness across IEP team members and related transition stakeholders, a meaningful study broaching the topic must take an in-depth look at the situation to identify knowledge, beliefs, processes, and mechanisms that contribute to the current reality. The IEP team, as a group with shared responsibility for transition services and outcomes, is the focus of the study. The team consists of stakeholders with different roles and different levels of interest in the student outcomes, who contribute as a whole system to the service design and delivery and ultimate effectiveness of the implementation of the legal transition mandates.

Faced with the problem that postsecondary education transition services for students with learning disabilities are not adequately preparing students to succeed, grounded theory presents a method that can illuminate the phenomenon and usher the
field in the direction of a solution. Grounded theory studies are valued “for informing policy and practice” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 15), an aim I have for this study. As Strauss and Corbin (1990) articulate, “formulating theoretical interpretations of data grounded in reality provides a powerful means both for understanding the world ‘out there’ and for developing action strategies that will allow for some measure of control over it” (p. 9). Decades of legislation entitling students with learning disabilities to preparation to meet their postsecondary goals has failed to bring about acceptable college success rates. Practice needs to be improved and policy needs to be informed to remedy this shortcoming, and a grounded theory study can provide the level of examination needed for understanding and change.

Just as transition planning and services are jointly constructed by the IEP team and related transition stakeholders, in this study I explore conceptions of college readiness across each of the stakeholder roles by “construct[ing]…data through…interactions” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 3) and then following grounded theory methods of analysis and meaning making.

**Sample Selection**

Purposeful sampling is a type of nonprobability sampling in which selection is focused on choosing the sample that will lend the most to the understanding the researcher seeks. The sample is strategically selected to serve the purpose of the study. Because the purpose of this study is to explore transition stakeholders’ constructed knowledge related to college readiness, IEP team members and related transition stakeholders make up the sample. An IEP team comprises the decision-makers, agents, and beneficiaries in the process of planning and delivering transition services. This
sample illuminates the phenomenon of transition service planning and delivery, including how and why team members choose the priorities they choose for developing students’ college readiness.

My aim in this study is to begin to uncover the constructed knowledge of college readiness as it plays out in transition services for a student with a learning disability and postsecondary education goals. The IEP process, with its decision-making and documenting and service-guiding functions, serves as a conceptual anchor in the study. Participants making up an IEP team are conceptually linked and therefore suited as informants and co-constructors of understanding of the phenomenon of interest. Participant selection focused on securing one or more representatives of each role on an IEP team for a student with a learning disability and postsecondary education goal.

IEP teams include legally mandated participants, but they can include a number of additional members, and membership can fluctuate depending on the circumstances or the purpose of the IEP team meeting. IEP team members may or may not work directly with the student. The subject of this study is the special education system that operates around the student in the process of providing transition services and preparation for postsecondary education. This system in fact entails not just official IEP team members, but stakeholders in the transition to postsecondary education for a student with a learning disability, such as the guidance counselor or college counselor (if not part of the IEP team), and entry-level college course instructors. The sample was limited to individuals who have direct contact with and responsibility for students, without anyone between them and the student to whom they delegate responsibility. Special education administrators, high school principals, college department heads, and college
administrators are all stakeholders, but they all have someone to whom they delegate responsibility for the student, and therefore they were not part of the sample as it was defined in this study.

The final study sample consisted of a student, the student’s parent, secondary educators from the student’s high school, and community college representatives from a community college within the student’s geographical area. Protecting confidentiality of participants precludes identifying whether or not they served on the student’s IEP team.

I relied on professional and personal contacts within a local school system and my home community to identify participants. Because this study received IRB approval after the COVID-19 pandemic had led to national school closures, participant recruitment depended on individual outreach to potential participants through email. Two participants were individuals with whom I had prior personal contact within my community, though we had not been in touch for a couple of years. One of these participants was instrumental in identifying two additional participants who met my inclusion criteria. One participant is a personal contact with whom I am in somewhat regular touch, and this participant connected me to a colleague who also agreed to participate. The two remaining participants responded to email invitations I sent to addresses I obtained from their educational institutions/places of employment.

The student in the sample had a learning disability and was receiving special education services. She had a documented goal of attending a 2-year or 4-year college following high school graduation, and was between her eleventh and twelfth grade years. The parent was the student’s mother. Secondary educators from the student’s high school consisted of a general education teacher, a special education teacher, and a guidance
counselor. Community college participants consisted of a math professor, an English professor, and a representative from the disability services office.

**Data Collection**

Data collection consisted of interviews with the individuals identified above. Interviews were conducted using Zoom video conferencing, and were approximately one to one and a half hours in duration. I provided consent forms to participants via email in advance of scheduled interviews, and reviewed key points and answered any questions at the start of each interview. Participants provided oral consent before I began their interviews. All interviews were audio recorded. I subsequently transcribed the interviews with the assistance of a voice-to-text application.

The interviews were semi-structured, following a protocol I developed from my research questions that included a list of questions and prompts. “Less structured formats assume that individual respondents define the world in unique ways” (Merriam, 1998, p. 74), and this assumption is in line with the epistemological and theoretical basis of the study. I adapted the interview protocol for the specific role of the interviewee (e.g., student, guidance counselor), and follow-up questions and conversation were based on participant responses and varied substantially from one participant to another, according to each participant’s expression of their lived experience.

**Data Analysis**

The data I analyzed consisted of the transcripts I created from the interviews with IEP team members and transition stakeholders. I used software including Word, Excel, and NVivo to track, manage, and organize my data, and support my analysis. For example, I used Word to create and organize note and memo documents, and to help
visualize and analyze my codes and categories. I used Excel spreadsheets to compare and sort codes. I used NVivo to organize interview transcript files, and to assist with coding and analyzing the transcripts.

“Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data...[and] involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 202). Furthermore, according to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), “all qualitative data analysis is inductive and comparative in the service of developing common themes or patterns or categories that cut across the data” (p. 297). To make sense out of my data, I employed grounded theory strategies. These allowed me to carry my analysis to a deeper level and ensured that I derived maximum meaning from my data.

As discussed above, my research fits within the paradigm of constructivism, and Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014) was particularly well suited to my endeavor. Charmaz (2014) confirms constructivist assumptions that are part of Constructivist Grounded Theory, including “multiple realities,” “mutual construction of data through interaction,” and that “the observer’s values, priorities, positions, and actions affect views” (p. 236, emphasis in original). Because of the role of constructivism in my epistemology, I drew specifically on Charmaz (2014) and Constructivist Grounded Theory, while also leaning on other qualitative methodologists, including other grounded theorists, for the strategies that were part of my approach.

**Constant Comparison**

Constant comparison is an analytic procedure used in grounded theory that facilitates interpreting data by helping the researcher to identify and categorize concepts
in order to derive meaning in a qualitative study. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) describe the technique this way:

The researcher begins with a particular incident from an interview, field notes, or document and compares it with another incident in the same set of data or in another set. These comparisons lead to tentative categories that are then compared to each other and to other instances. Comparisons are constantly made within and between levels of conceptualization until a theory can be formulated. (p. 228)

I used constant comparison at each stage of the coding process to both expand and focus the analysis, which helped to ensure a thorough and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon as intended by the study design. Strauss and Corbin (1990) state that “the making of comparisons [is] essential to identifying and categorizing concepts” (p. 84). By comparing one incident or unit with another, “similar phenomena can be given the same name. Otherwise, we would wind up with too many names and very confused!” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 63).

Though at stages of my analysis I did have “too many names,” constant comparison allowed me to clarify similarities and confirm differences, thus deriving more accurate labels and narrowing my code list. I continued to use constant comparison through the writing up of my findings, comparing a synthesized expression of data to the original data, and comparing the syntheses to one another. For example, when I wrote the System Limitations section of my findings, I went back to the data that I had coded with codes I later categorized as System Limitations to compare those data to my understanding of System Limitations. I also compared the way I was describing System Limitations to the way I was describing Falling Short of Coordination, and the similarities and differences deepened my understanding and expression of each of these categories.
Coding and Theory Construction

According to Merriam (1998), “even while collecting data, the researcher is already beginning to analyze it, that is, noting something in an observation or a document or an interview to follow up on in subsequent data collection” (p. 139). It is common in grounded theory approaches that analysis occurs simultaneously or alternately with data collection, and drives further data collection (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This was the case for me, as early interviews raised new questions for subsequent interviews. Though I did not launch a thorough coding process until I had completed all the interviews, I was analyzing the data as I collected it, including writing memos about ideas the interviews sparked, and reflecting on how an interpretation of an element of an interview evolved with later interviews. In the words of Charmaz (2014), “simultaneous data collection and analysis can help you go further and deeper into the research problem” (p. 118), and I took advantage of this opportunity.

My analysis continued with the process of transcribing my interviews, which allowed me to review the interview data word by word and start to make observations and collect insights (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I was exacting in my transcription, documenting every false start and self-correction or self-interruption at first, in an attempt to capture not only what my participants said but also how they said it. I listened to portions of the interviews multiple times while confirming the accuracy of the transcription, and then read and reread each transcript, noting what stood out to me and beginning the process of comparing within and across transcripts.

My formal coding process began when I went through each interview transcript line by line, identified meaningful units of data, and assigned them labels—or codes. In
this initial coding process, there was relatively little repetition of codes. I derived the
codes inductively from the data, and kept them close to the data. Examples of codes at
this stage include, “college as path to career,” “aligning college with goals,” “following
interests,” and “practical value of college.” Some units of data were assigned more than
one code.

During initial coding, variation in my data extended by the different roles of the
participants resulted in close to 600 codes, some of which were used across transcripts,
and some of which were specific to one transcript. For example, making sense of the
purpose of college appeared in six transcripts, while yearning for deeper process was
only in the student transcript. Only three codes appeared in all eight transcripts:
understanding difference between HS and PSE, accessing supports, and what does
preparation look like.

Initial coding served two purposes: 1) to launch the analysis by translating
narrative data into labeled units of meaning where the labels (codes) represented the
meaning at a more abstract level (Charmaz, 2014), and 2) to tag units of meaning for later
sorting and retrieval. As I coded one interview, I referred to codes used earlier in that
interview and in previous interviews, and noted distinctions that allowed me to refine my
codes. Because my participants represented different roles, the coding process also
involved determining where distinctions signaled the need for a different code, and where
the same code applied despite role-based variation.

Following initial coding, I reviewed the codes themselves to detect patterns in the
language of the codes that signaled points of synthesis. I identified codes that fit together
because of common features, and codes that stood out because of their frequency or
significance in the data (Charmaz, 2014). I analyzed how the codes settled together into groupings, and I began to think about titles for these groupings, which became categories (Charmaz, 2014; Galman, 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Focused coding (Charmaz, 2014), or the construction of categories, helps analysis advance in a more theoretical direction by allowing the researcher to “synthesize, analyze, and conceptualize larger segments of data” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 138). Comparisons between codes help to generate categories, which in turn help to consolidate the data and provide more interpretive representation of the data. For example, as I compared codes, I recognized a thread connecting codes such as building on existing resources, structuring the sharing of disability information, connecting to services, and creating a partnership, and the thread was “coordination,” which became one of my early categories. Because of the large number of initial codes, and because I wished to retain distinctions between participants related to role, I went through several iterations of focused coding and category construction. As I did this, I refined, expanded, and collapsed categories, reshaping them to fit the contours of the data. Later in my analysis, as I revisited the full body of data in light of the category “coordination,” I found that what was salient was “falling short of coordination,” which became one of my final categories.

“Your study fits the empirical world,” Charmaz (2014) writes, “when you have constructed codes and developed them into categories that crystallize participants’ experience” (p. 133). I continued to refine categories, review previously-coded transcripts and earlier portions within transcripts, and recode, and then adjust categories again until my transcript reviews convinced me that I had achieved something that crystalized my
participants’ experience. At that point, I began the final step in the analysis, the writing up of the study in a manner that is descriptive and interpretive and contributes to advanced understanding of the phenomenon. As I wrote up the analysis, describing each category and selecting representative quotes, I discovered new distinctions that led to further refinement of the categories. I had been testing out different articulations of the theory my analysis was leading to, but it was not until I had gone through the process of documenting each of the categories that I was able to construct the theoretical story of the data by relating the categories together into a coherent whole (Charmaz, 2014). Selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), or storyline creation, involves exploring the relationship of the categories to one another and constructing a theoretical statement that positions each of the categories in relation to the others. After a thorough process of developing, refining, and adjusting categories according to the underlying data, the work of developing the grounded theory is done by analyzing how an arrangement of the categories in relation to one another can maximize the meaning of the individual categories while expressing a theoretical assertion about the phenomenon under study that is true to the data.

**Trustworthiness**

Brantlinger et al. (2005) refer to credibility and trustworthiness as the counterparts to validity and reliability for qualitative research. Given the assumptions about reality that underlie qualitative research, including that it is multidimensional and shifting rather than single and fixed (Merriam, 1998), credibility and trustworthiness are what qualify qualitative studies. As Merriam (1998) states, “to have any effect on either the practice or the theory of education, these studies must be rigorously conducted; they need to present
insights and conclusions that ring true to readers, educators and other researchers” (p. 199). Qualitative researchers follow specific practices to ensure that their research is sound, giving readers reason to trust the findings and apply the new knowledge to related situations.

Different techniques are appropriate depending on the study, and these may include triangulation, member checks, peer debriefing, audit trail, thick and detailed description, and researcher reflexivity (Brantlinger et al., 2005). I applied several of these techniques in the present study.

**Triangulation**

Brantlinger et al. (2005) define triangulation as the “search for convergence of, or consistency among, evidence from multiple and varied data” (p. 201). The sample in my study, which resembles a case study sample with participants from multiple roles representing multiple perspectives on the phenomenon, lent itself to triangulation. Although all of my data came from interviews, I triangulated this data across interviews with multiple participants. I triangulated the data across participants within subgroups of my sample, such as secondary educators and postsecondary educators, and across participants from different subgroups. This enabled me to address points of divergence and inconsistency, drawing distinctions between divergence that appropriately reflected the varied perspectives of stakeholders in different roles and divergence that signaled an oversight in the analysis. By testing my analytical conclusions within and across transcripts from different stakeholders, I was able to demonstrate that data from multiple sources support the study conclusions, helping to create credibility and trustworthiness.

Applying the constant comparative method and grounded theory supported triangulation.
**Peer Debriefing**

Peer debriefing or peer examination is a process of inviting colleagues to review and provide feedback on emerging findings while a study is underway (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Merriam, 1998). I engaged in informal peer debriefing with former colleagues who are practicing secondary education professionals, and with one of my postsecondary educator participants who expressed interest in continuing discussion around some of the topics covered in the interview. I also engaged in formal peer debriefing with my doctoral advisor, who is a special educator with knowledge of high school to college transition and students with learning disabilities specifically. With my former colleagues and the postsecondary educator, I talked about what my findings were showing and solicited opinions about how this resonated with what they experienced in their work. With my advisor, I used weekly meetings to discuss codes and categories and to review memos and write-ups of findings. My advisor provided critical feedback related to my descriptions and analyses (Brantlinger et al., 2005), identifying inconsistencies and places where the evidence from transcripts (quotes) did not adequately support claims I was making or led in a slightly different direction. These debriefings did not remove my biases or subjectivity from contributing to the conclusions of the study, but added rigor to my process.

**Audit Trail**

Setting up an audit trail that catalogues each step of the research process adds credibility to the study by documenting exactly how the conclusions were reached. An audit trail provides details about “how data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry” (Merriam, 1998, p. 207). My audit
trail includes my record of participants, roles, interview length, and notable topics; the spreadsheets I created during coding; and my research memos. Beginning during interviewing and continuing throughout the analysis process, I wrote research memos. Some of these memos helped me to explore connections between interviews or concepts coming up in the interviews. Some of them were a stream-of-consciousness expression of my thinking about a piece of data or a particular code or category. I also used memos to wrestle with challenges in my analysis and when I felt there was something I couldn’t quite capture in the coding or as I settled on my categories. Finally, I used memos to help me document my process and remain mindful of the connections I was making and the sources of my ideas.

**Thick, Detailed Description**

The thicker and richer the description in a qualitative study, the more likely it is that the reader will find elements that resonate with their own experience or circumstances and be able to apply the results to other situations. While generalizability is not a criterion in qualitative research, Merriam (1998) posits that the reader or “user” determines “the extent to which a study’s findings apply to other situations” (external validity in quantitative research), and “the researcher has an obligation to provide enough detailed description of the study’s context to enable readers to compare the ‘fit’ with their situations” (p. 211). An additional function of thick, detailed description is to establish credibility and trustworthiness. My findings chapter demonstrates my commitment to providing thick and rich description that maximizes the likelihood of my study having relevance and application beyond its specific context. It uses illustrative quotations from the interview transcripts to narrate the path to my conclusions for the reader. By
“reporting sufficient quotes…to provide evidence for researchers' interpretations and conclusions” (Brantlinger et al., 2005, p. 201), the researcher convinces the reader of the authenticity of the process that produced the results.

**Researcher Reflexivity**

A final means of establishing trustworthiness is reflecting on and being transparent about researcher assumptions and biases (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Merriam, 1998). I have discussed the epistemological and theoretical standpoints that frame my research in previous sections. In addition, it is important to acknowledge that I have professional experience with transition services and transition outcomes that influences my interpretation of data in this study. My interest in this research topic stems from frustration with the lack of postsecondary education success of students with learning disabilities who were in my care as a secondary special educator. It is probable that some assumptions about the experiences of my interview participants, based on my own experiences, influenced my analysis and my conclusions. The credibility and trustworthiness measures described here helped me to check these assumptions at each step of the research process. My position as a successful college graduate and current graduate student, and my ability to meet higher education expectations independently also colors my perspective on college readiness. Researcher reflexivity is an on-going process. I used memoing and peer debriefing to reflect throughout my study on the assumptions, values, and perspectives (Brantlinger et al., 2005) that I noticed as I conducted my data collection and analysis. I worked to acknowledge these silent players and make sure that the story I am telling is my participants’ story, rich with their voices, despite the fact that I am not a neutral storyteller.
**Limitations**

Among this study’s limitations are some stemming from the period during which it was conducted, which was in the first months of a devastating pandemic. Though the impact of the pandemic is impossible to measure, it had a clear effect on my access to potential participants, and on the extent of participation. While I am extremely fortunate that I was able to secure participation from a sample that constitutes a full IEP team and additional stakeholders, I had hoped to include a secondary math teacher, but was not able to make contact with anyone in this role during school closure. Furthermore, I had hoped to review related documents, such as the participating student’s IEP and Transition Planning Form, and community college instructors’ syllabi or course expectations, as a form of triangulation. However, I found that the level of stress, fatigue, and overwhelm in the general population and among educators in particular precluded making additional requests beyond the initial invitation to complete an interview. My requests for documents from the student and parent were not successful. Member checks, which some consider a means of establishing trustworthiness, became an unfair burden on participants under the circumstances.

I have articulated the advantages of a study sample that represented an IEP team for answering my research questions. This design carries the corollary limitations of (a) a small sample and (b) only one participant speaking for each role. Although the sample (8 participants) is comparable to a typical case study sample, additional insight could be gained from involving more than one case or more than one representative from each role. Because my questions for team members other than the student and parent elicited
experiences and views related to their work with all their students, not just the participating student, the findings do extend beyond one “case.”

My study design included the choice to conduct individual interviews. This may have limited my opportunity to gain insight into the workings of an IEP team as a unit, and the dynamics between individuals with different roles that may affect transition service outcomes. Focus groups and field observations would be alternative data collection approaches that would address this limitation.

While I was clear in my recruitment materials that my study was focused on students with learning disabilities, and my interview questions directed my participants to respond regarding students with learning disabilities specifically, some interview responses seemed to reflect participants’ experiences and ideas regarding students with disabilities more generally, such as when they conflated students with learning disabilities and students with ADHD. This limitation means that the findings should be interpreted with caution as far as identifying a specific disability type to which they apply. It may be that the findings represent a broader group of students with disabilities; it may also be that phenomena specific to students with learning disabilities are not fully represented.

Summary

Taking the necessary measures to ensure the rigor of my study, I employed a qualitative approach using grounded theory methods to shed light on the phenomenon of transition services and college readiness for students with learning disabilities. My study involved interviews with IEP team members and related transition stakeholders. Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) guided my data collection and analysis,
allowing me to access deeper conceptualizations of the problem and construct theory from the data that can support meaningful changes in practice and policy.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This study was designed to inform the field of special education about how the stakeholders in the transition to college for students with learning disabilities conceptualize college readiness, with the purpose of illuminating transition service priorities for these students. The following research question guided the study: How do IEP team members/stakeholders conceptualize and operationalize college readiness for students with learning disabilities whose postsecondary goals include college? In this chapter, I present and discuss the analytic categories identified in the analysis and the grounded theory developed to explain the phenomenon of stakeholders conceptualizing and operationalizing college readiness.

There are five analytic categories relevant to the research question: Vantage Point, Conceptions of Readiness, Working Toward Readiness Criteria, System Limitations, and Falling Short of Coordination. The presentation of the Vantage Point category, which begins the chapter, also serves to introduce the reader to the study participants.

Vantage Point

Each participant stakeholder has a distinct vantage point from which they conceptualize college readiness for a student with a learning disability. Vantage Point entails both the perspective from which participants conceptualize college readiness, and what they base their conceptions of college readiness on—the basis of their knowledge. The interviews provided a window into the vantage points of the participants when they referenced aspects of their histories and their experiences that helped to shape how they conceptualize college readiness, and the sources of their information about college. In
this section, I discuss the personal, familial, educational, and/or professional experiences noted by each participant that are salient to conceptions of what college is like, what it means to be ready for college, and what students with learning disabilities in particular face in the transition from high school to college. Some aspects of a stakeholder’s vantage point are connected to their role within the IEP team (e.g., student, guidance counselor), while other aspects have more to do with their life experiences.

The Student, Grace

Grace’s vantage point reflects her experience within her family and her school. Her vantage point dictates what she anticipates a college experience being like, and her conceptions of college readiness are closely tied to these ideas of a college experience. Grace is unique among participants in that as a high school student, her responses reflected her conceptions of her own immediate readiness process, as well as her conceptions of readiness more abstractly.

Grace is a third child. Her brother and sister both completed college. From the start of her interview, Grace connected her ideas about college to her siblings’ experiences and what she had observed. She said, “I feel like my picture of college is different from most other students, because I’ve had two older siblings go through college.” Grace thought about what college would be like for her based on her similarities to and differences from her siblings, and what it had been like for them. She described her brother with a learning disability struggling initially and not seeking help, and her sister without a learning disability accessing many supports. She made a distinction, saying,

I don't necessarily base their experience on how mine is going to be. Because I know that I'd be somewhere in between, because I have the same learning
disability as my brother, but I'm also the kind of person that does ask for a lot of help and assistance when I need it. So, that's pretty much how I would see my experience. It's not an exact picture, but kind of a general idea.

Her siblings gave Grace points of reference for anticipating her college experience, and this anticipation is a fundamental component of how she conceptualizes her readiness.

Based on her siblings’ experiences, Grace thought about college in relation to what comes after college. For Grace, a big part of getting ready for college was making sure that college would be “a stepping stone to your future and to your career.” This meant thinking hard about her career interests, and looking for schools with programs that would prepare her for those fields. She had seen her siblings grapple with, “‘Now what? I did all these classes. I graduated. Now I gotta figure out how to put this degree to use.’” Her conceptions of readiness were rooted in her perspective that it is important to choose a college that will be useful, and this perspective came from her experience in her family.

Grace also had the vantage point of someone who had tried out a college class, through a dual-enrollment offering from her high school. The class had “helped [her] understand [that] a college class is much more fast-paced,” and she became aware of some of the expectations she was likely to face. Grace had put together information and impressions about college, including college support services, that she’d gathered from unidentified sources. She was quite articulate about how she thought supports would be different in college, but she was also quick to emphasize that she didn’t really know. In this sense, Grace operated from an uninformed vantage point, with a perspective about how college support services work and therefore what getting ready to access them would involve that left her guessing. From her vantage point, Grace conceptualizes readiness
primarily as related to choosing the right major and the right institution, and ultimately as arbitrary and unachievable, as discussed in the section on Readiness.

**The Parent, Grace’s Mother**

Grace’s Mother, representing the parent role, has a vantage point as a mother of three, Grace being the youngest. She is also an educator, and part of her professional role involves advising college-bound students with disabilities (not learning disabilities) about accommodations. She identifies as someone who knew her career path from an early age, and regarded her own college attendance as a “given,” which leads her to recognize that college should not be automatic for everyone. She wants Grace to consider all her options. She said, “I'm trying not to do the thing that happened to me where it was just the expectation, you go to college.”

Grace’s Mother provided a number of illustrations of the basis of her knowledge and understanding about college readiness, and the influences on what she thinks and does related to readiness. She learned from the advice of colleague-friends the importance of practicing advocacy and other skills with her children through role-playing. She confirmed, “It is people I've met in my professional life that helped me figure that stuff out. And just being a teacher.” Based on her experience having her son with a learning disability receive what she felt were inadequate special education services in high school, she demanded more for Grace. Based on watching another family go down an unproductive path of “helicopter parenting,” she insists that Grace handle questions about missing assignments directly with her teachers. Because she connects her son’s eventual success in college with connecting with disability services, she has very
specific ideas about what accessing support in college involves, and what students need
to set up and when.

From the vantage point of having witnessed her older children, including one for
whom she thought it would be easy, struggle with the transition to college, she lacks
confidence in her ability to anticipate what the challenges will be. This translates into a
lack of confidence about what readiness and preparation entail. She confessed, “I look at
those two, one who I thought, ‘You got this!’ and struggled, and the other one who I
thought, ‘Oh, geez, here we go.’ And I think—I have no idea. I really don't.” Grace’s
Mother conceptualizes college readiness from the vantage point of a parent of children
with diverse college experiences, an education professional with colleagues and friends
with relevant insight and experience, and an adult who recognizes her own postsecondary
path as only one in a multitude of acceptable paths.

**The High School Guidance Counselor**

The Guidance Counselor’s vantage point regarding college readiness is heavily
influenced by her experience in her professional role. She has many years of experience
working in high schools and helping students with the college-going process, including
“choosing colleges, applying to college, choosing where to attend, [and] financial aid.”
She said that one of her favorite aspects of her job is “helping high school students think
about their future.” She meets individually with juniors and seniors during short periods
of the school year to discuss “plans for the future,” including college. She also leads
group meetings. She describes the high school as having “a strong college-going culture.”
In her early years there, she focused on learning how to support the specific population,
“in terms of where they're looking at colleges, and what kind of support they need.”
The Guidance Counselor’s perspective is also influenced by her own college experience. In speaking about supports for college students, she noted, “Things I think are so different now than they were when I went to college.” Specifically, “Things are just set up more for students to access support now than they used to be.” She also remarked on how different the search process is now, given all the technological tools, from when she looked at colleges.

The Guidance Counselor described ways that she gets information about what college is like currently, and what colleges have to offer. This information contributes to her conceptions of college readiness. She referred to a number of “tools” that support searching college databases for specific criteria, such as one through College Board, and Naviance, the web-based software that the high school uses for college planning and tracking. The Guidance Counselor gains some information from looking at websites for specific schools with students. Outside of the high school, she has an occasional opportunity for professional development that is held at or sponsored by a college, and this offers her some exposure. She sometimes attends meetings of the local School Counselors Association held at area colleges. She has attended “a reverse college fair, for guidance counselors” a few times, which she found helpful. When asked if the events she has attended provide information that is specific to students with disabilities, she said, “I can't think of a case of that.”

The Guidance Counselor has the vantage point of working with the whole high school population, and so she thinks about college options including “two year and four year schools, and state schools and private schools.” Her typical picture of college includes living on campus, but she works with students who will be commuting as well.
She is familiar with programs that offer additional advising support, and special programs “for supporting students with disabilities” offered by some colleges.

Related to her vantage point and conceptions of readiness specific to students with learning disabilities, the Guidance Counselor described being the one to remind colleagues, students, and parents about differences between high school and college related to disability, such as when the high school arranged a dual-enrollment class with a local community college and others expected the college to follow students’ IEPs. She also acknowledged, in talking about models for special education service delivery at the high school, that she lacks training in special education. She sees her vantage point as a guidance counselor vantage point, not a special education one. She referred to herself as “uneducated in terms of special education,” and said, “So I'm just kind of talking from my own very guidance counselor perspective.” She participates in IEP team meetings, but she sees her role there as guidance counselor specific and only attends the parts of the meetings that are relevant to her role.

The High School English Teacher

The English Teacher is a general education teacher who works with students with IEPs in an inclusion setting. Like the Guidance Counselor, she has the vantage point of an educator responsible for students with and without learning disabilities, and students with varied postsecondary goals. She thinks about her students as having a range of skills, interests, strengths, and challenges, not necessarily tied to their special education or disability status. She thinks about learning disabilities as learning challenges, not as much as a specific diagnosis. She has the vantage point of someone with over 20 years of teaching experience, and feels confident that she meets the needs of most students,
including those with learning disabilities, by scaffolding and using approaches “sort of like universal design.” She also said, “I'm not an expert in this, even though I've been teaching for over 20-25 years, I guess. I don't have a lot of special ed training.”

The English Teacher sees many students planning to go on to college, but she pictures “two different worlds of college.” One aligns with what she remembers about herself, “coming from some privilege” and going to college “to do academic work.” She explained,

And then I see a lot of kids who see college as an opportunity, maybe something that their families didn't have the opportunity to do. And they're very focused on a specific career plan. A lot of students are interested in criminal justice, or nursing, more sort of maybe less academic and more practical careers.

She recognizes the economy as very different from when she went to college, resulting in more students planning to “start at community colleges and then transfer.” Her vantage point mingles her own college experience with her experience as a high school teacher, one more than two decades ago and one extending over more than two decades.

Relevant to the basis of her knowledge about college readiness, the English Teacher shared that once students leave the high school, she doesn’t know how they fare. She may know their college plans, but she doesn’t often hear what they struggled with or felt prepared for, or even if they stayed in college. Because of this lack of information about outcomes, there is something of a block in the English Teacher’s vantage point. She conceptualizes college readiness from what she knows from her own college experience and how current conditions compare, but beyond this, her sources of information are incomplete. For the most part, the English Teacher was left to guess about students’ behaviors, choices, and experiences in college, which meant she was unable to use their experiences to inform her practice at the high school level. The
vantage point from which the English Teacher conceptualizes college readiness did not include experiences or information from postsecondary institutions about their academic or other expectations for entering students.

**The High School Special Education Teacher**

The Special Education Teacher’s vantage point is characterized by his experience with and commitment to high school students with disabilities. He regards high school as a special developmental phase of identity formation—a crucial and significant time, especially for students with disabilities, that may be confusing and scary, and “doesn't get its due in that way.” He takes his work with this age group seriously, with a feeling of honor and responsibility. He said, “The genuineness of that time period, and that moment of growth for them, is really important to me.” He has experience with students with many different types of mild and moderate disabilities, including learning disabilities. He shared that the majority of his students (he estimated 60-75%) have had postsecondary education in their IEP vision statements, “for many different reasons and outcomes,” whether two- or four-year college, and a certificate or a degree program. This experience is integral to the vantage point from which he conceptualizes college readiness for students with learning disabilities. He acknowledged that he doesn’t have the perspective of someone like a guidance counselor who works with all students.

The Special Education teacher’s basis of knowledge is primarily informal information-sharing among colleagues and friends. He shared that he has learned more about the college process and college offerings because of a personal relationship with a guidance counselor at the high school. His understanding stems from this source, not from topics he was trained in, or information shared by higher education institutions. The
Special Education Teacher indicated that the basis of his knowledge related to college readiness is limited when it comes to information about postsecondary institutions and their offerings for students with disabilities. He doesn’t find that helpful information is readily available.

Overall, the Special Education teacher has the vantage point of someone who has learned what students need from on-the-job training: observation, trial and error, and seeking the wisdom and experience of colleagues. He consistently conveyed that his work with students with disabilities around postsecondary preparation has evolved based on informal and self-initiated learning, rather than any formal or administration-directed training. “I had to adjust to what I was seeing,” he said. Given the opportunity to reflect, the Special Education Teacher realized how much of his perspective came from on-the-job experiences and observing colleagues. He talked about learning from what hasn’t worked, and wanting something better than what he saw happening for his early students. He was motivated by negative outcomes. He explained,

I’ve had students where, when I first started—and this sticks with me—when they went to college, then it was like they had a semester, and they were like, done. And they didn't go back. And I didn't know what happened thereafter. But I just thought of that. And I was like, I don't know, I felt like it stuck with me. I was like, “What happened there?”

He knew he wasn’t comfortable with the outcome, and that drove him to try to improve preparation for other students.

The Community College Disability Services Representative

Through her years of professional experience in the community college setting, the Disability Services Representative has witnessed that transition is a struggle at her institution, and she believes more attention needs to be paid to it. She entered the
interview with the vantage point of someone who wants to be part of research that might lead to improvements. Her conceptions of college readiness are directly tied to her professional vantage point, and to the areas in which she sees students struggle to meet the demands and expectations at her institution. She also bases her ideas about high school and the preparation that happens there on her own experience, and she acknowledges not knowing whether or what things have changed. She said,

I don't know, you know, I wonder, I haven't been in a high school in so long, but, so I don't know if they still do that or not, you know, I'm not, I'm not sure. But I know that when I was in school, nobody talked to me about college.

Without direct, updated experience with high schools, she bases her assumptions on what she experienced, and on what she gathers from students who come to her institution. She remembers being told she wasn’t “college material,” and she is very sensitive to the idea that students are still getting that message. She remembers that she didn’t want to ask for help, and she sees students today as the same. “They don't want to ask for help. I know, I didn't,” she said. “When I first went to school, I didn't want to ask for help at all, you know.”

The Disability Services Representative identifies as a person with a disability, which is an important aspect of her vantage point. However, she identifies as having a physical and not a learning disability, and she does not presume to know what it is like to be a college student with a learning disability.

When it comes to the role or potential role of special education transition services in readiness, the Disability Services Representative has the vantage point of someone who reads “billions” of IEPs, shared by students who are seeking eligibility and services through her office. She asserted that she is “pretty familiar with the process and
everything like that,” but she made no reference to being informed about the transition components of special education law specifically, or having the opportunity to discuss higher education participation in transition planning or services. Other than her own high school experience, her vantage point does not extend to the realities of high school special education policies or practices.

**The Community College English Professor**

The English Professor’s vantage point reflects her professional role, which includes being aware of and involved in debate about “transition,” understood as the early experiences of students entering community college. Specifically, she is involved in discussions and decision-making related to developmental programming and curriculum for students who do not place into college level English classes when they enter the college, and this is definitely present in the vantage point from which she conceptualizes college readiness.

The English Professor talked about a significant distinction between high school and college based in the fact that students are not compelled to be in college, but they are compelled to be in high school. She explained that in her view, high school teachers are responsible for student success in a way that college instructors are not: “They're compelled to be in high school. They have to be there. And so everybody's job is to get them through.” If students don’t apply themselves, it “hurts” high school teachers, but it doesn’t hurt college instructors. Her vantage point thinking about transition and preparation relates to her understanding that students have a different role in college, because their learning is up to them and for their own benefit only. She referred to this as ownership, which she sees as essential to college success.
Contributing to the English Professor’s perspective are experiences with struggling students where she has felt guilt related to her inability to offer the level of outside-of-class support they require. She recognizes that students seek her out because they have a relationship with her, but she can’t meet their needs. She described, “These are students who really need an hour, at least; maybe two, maybe three hours of one-on-one work every week. And my job is not set up to do that.” When she thinks about what students need to be prepared for college, she thinks about the importance of support services such as tutoring for students who have come with gaps in their skills. She also recognizes the reluctance of students to access these supports, and her own difficulty helping them navigate their needs and the available, appropriate options.

The English Professor mentioned having some experience working with special education students in a high school context. When asked about her awareness of transition service mandates, specifically “the part of special education law that requires high schools to address students’ post-secondary goals and help prepare them for that,” she said, “I didn't really know that existed.” She added, “[It] sounds great!”

**The Community College Math Professor**

The Math Professor has the vantage point of someone who values teaching because of “the interaction with the students,” and specifically, “that energy of taking students who maybe aren't where they want to be, and helping them get a little further along their path.” In this way, she identifies with students who need support. She loves “working with students who really struggle,” and she is motivated by the opportunity to help students be successful. She explained,
So we have a lot of, obviously, students who are weaker. Community colleges take everybody, and so I kind of like that. I kind of like that we get some of the students who maybe haven't been as successful in high school.

In her view, “Sometimes it's just a confidence thing. It's a lack of kind of the social capital inside of the academic world.” She enjoys helping students build confidence, and she especially enjoys being part of their experience of eventual success. The vantage point from which she conceptualizes college readiness is built on experiencing community college students’ struggles and successes.

The Math Professor has high school teaching experience, and chose to move to the college level because she “really liked the idea of the responsibility being more on the student.” She recognizes major distinctions between high school and college. She called it “different worlds,” referring to both the experience of learning and the experience of teaching. Her perspective on community college comes from over a decade of experience there.

Relevant to her basis of knowledge about readiness for students with learning disabilities, the Math Professor has no way of identifying students with disabilities unless they choose to share documentation of their accommodations with her, so she speaks about students she knows have disabilities and those who may or may not, and struggling students can be in either group. She shared that she doesn’t have a sense of the proportion of eligible students who access accommodations and supports. According to the Math Professor, she is unable to identify determining factors in some students being more college ready than others. “I can't really pin it down,” she said. “I've at times done some sort of digging into who came from what high school,” she went on. “From the big high schools that we get students from, there doesn't seem to be a significant difference.”
The Team of Stakeholders

Grace is the only participant who hasn’t attended college herself, and the only participant without professional ties to education. Her vantage point is based on what she experienced as a sister, a daughter, and a high school student in a high school with, as the Guidance Counselor said, “a strong college-going culture.” Grace’s high school experience has not included consistent or coordinated messages from the various educators supporting her path to postsecondary life—members of her IEP team and others. Grace conceptualizes college readiness from this vantage point.

All the remaining participants have their own college experiences and their professional educator experiences as part of their vantage point. Grace’s Mother articulates how being a parent of children who have experienced college also plays into her perspective. The Guidance Counselor, English Teacher, and Special Education Teacher have vantage points shaped by their professional roles working with high school students, many of whom go on to college but about whom they lack longitudinal information. The Guidance Counselor and English Teacher work with a smaller proportion of students with learning disabilities, but take their responsibility for these students seriously. The Special Education Teacher has extensive experience with and focus on students with disabilities, including students with learning disabilities. The high school participants’ vantage points are limited in terms of information and experience about current expectations, practices, and procedures of postsecondary institutions.

The Disability Services Representative, English Professor, and Math Professor, all from a community college, share an educator vantage point with their high school counterparts. The English and Math Professors also have past experience working
directly with high school students. These participants have a distinct vantage point, however, which is based on experiences with students who have left high school and arrived at college. The community college participants’ vantage points are limited in terms of information and experience about current practices and procedures for preparing high school students for college.

Thus, each stakeholder operates with some degree of isolation from all the others, conceptualizing college readiness from a vantage point that overlaps intermittently with the vantage points of other stakeholders, but remains fundamentally distinct. Within the high school, stakeholders operate from positions anticipating college for their students, while at the community college, college performance is held in the foreground and assumptions about high school in the background. The transition from high school to college remains largely out of focus for the group of stakeholders as a whole.

**Conceptions of Readiness**

My analysis revealed that stakeholders conceptualize college readiness as a combination of (a) knowledge about what to expect in college and how college will be different from high school, (b) making and implementing plans and decisions and completing preparatory steps, (c) academic, executive, and relational skills, and (d) attitudes and frames of mind. The focus within and across these areas varies by team member role, but many similar and overlapping priorities appear across participants.

**Knowledge**

*Knowledge* refers to the aspects of readiness that relate to things students need to know to be ready. Knowledge requires that information be available and accessed by the student, and it requires a certain level of understanding. A student may be told something
or be provided with information about something and still not know it. Knowledge can come from many different sources, and it can result from the student’s initiative, such as when the student seeks answers to specific questions, or it can result from others’ efforts to make the student knowledgeable. Grace’s interview showed that getting questions answered ahead of time is an important part of preparation. Grace said, “I feel like the more answers you have to your questions, the more confident you'll be in going to a college.”

**Logistics**

The stakeholders identified logistical aspects of knowledge, such as knowing how to go about applying to college and applying for financial aid. Grace mentioned gathering information about scholarships and housing as part of preparation. The Guidance Counselor discussed knowledge related to campus life and practical matters, like what to take with you to campus. She also acknowledged that often there is a disconnect around financing college, related to missing information. For example, students and families may lack knowledge of how to go about addressing unmet need, the gap between what the financial aid process determined they can pay and what is offered in aid. They need to know “what that really means in terms of finding loans, being eligible for them,” she explained. The Disability Services Representative noted the knowledge that is needed at the start of the college-going process, in order to apply to college and complete the financial aid process. She remarked on the knowledge discrepancy for first generation families, which begins its effects right at the application stage.
**Expectations**

Participants also identified knowledge related to expectations in the college setting. Grace linked knowledge about what college classes are like to readiness, and saw her experience in a dual enrollment course as an advantage in this regard. The Math Professor noted the importance of knowing what the “college world” is like, including knowing that grades are directly tied to assignments, and that there is an expectation that students self-monitor their progress. She described students being surprised to find out they’re doing poorly when, “‘Well, you haven't turned in any assignments, or every assignment you've gotten back has been a D; clearly, you can't be getting a grade higher than that right now.’” Students need to know that these are correlated. The Math Professor also identified knowing the concept of a credit hour as crucial to readiness, and talked about students planning appropriately for the time demands of their coursework based on credit hours. She noted that this knowledge is especially important for students with work and other obligations.

**Support Access**

Knowledge of *when*, *where*, and *how to access supports*, and of *what* form supports take in college, was prominently featured in several interviews. *When* referred to timing, and specifically to anticipating the need for help in time to benefit from it and prevent more serious challenges. For Grace’s Mother, readiness knowledge centered on the specifics of on-campus supports, particularly the how and when of accessing tutoring. She talked about Grace knowing what she would need to do to arrange for tutoring, and knowing that she needed to do it before she struggled or fell behind. *Where* referred to
the physical places on campus students need to go to access different supports, and the options from which they can choose.

_How_ referred to eligibility and qualifying paperwork, the process of self-identifying, and the on-going requesting and communication needed to access supports. The Guidance Counselor mentioned “significant differences in how much support there is and how much help there is in accessing the support,” referring to high school versus college. She said she would “like to be able to help students with learning disabilities more systematically in looking at that,” recognizing that students need this knowledge to make a successful transition from high school, where support is initiated by others, to college, where they need to initiate the support process themselves. In the same vein, the English Teacher noted the importance of knowing where to go for help, and knowing how the process for accessing supports works. She regards this knowledge as important because she understands that students have to access support in college, rather than having it provided for them as they do in high school. At the postsecondary level, for the Math Professor, knowing that self-identification is required and knowing the paperwork requirements for accessing accommodations was also important. She said that students were often frustrated that eligibility for the same supports they had received in high school was not automatic.

_What_ was largely about what college supports are and how they are different from high school supports. Grace conveyed that preparing for college involves gaining knowledge about specific support offerings at potential institutions. She talked about her efforts to find out from college representatives visiting her high school what they could do for her as a student with a learning disability. “I don't want to apply to the college just
to figure out what they would do for my learning disability,” she explained. “I wanted to know a little more detail ahead of time.” The Disability Services Representative talked about the effect of family member knowledge of support options. She said,

I honestly think it's if your family, if you have a strong mom or pop or whatever, someone in your life, that knows about, you know, the supports at the college level, knowing that it's there will encourage their son or daughter to come to and work with us.

Knowledge that supports exist can be an important prerequisite for accessing appropriate supports. The Disability Services Representative also noted that students need to know about differences in supports; specifically, students need to understand the difference between accommodations and modifications and what supports at the college level are like. She said,

I think one of the biggest things is that they don't understand how their accommodations— How their IEP, perhaps, it's not the same as when they come to college. So when you're K through 12, they can modify programs, the curriculum; it's all about, “You have a right to be here, and we're going to get you through this thing,” right? But then when you come to college, it's not like that. It's about, “You are now an adult, and now, if you are not qualified, and you can't go through this without accommodations [sic], then you don't succeed.” We're not, they're not going to do everything— They're not going to modify their curriculum, they're not going to change anything, the learning objectives, you have to meet those learning objectives. If you don't, then you don't succeed. However, you can get accommodations. So the difference between accommodations, you know, so we have to explain that all to them, because they really don't know that at all.

Self-Knowledge

Finally, participants identified self-knowledge; specifically, knowledge of one’s academic and other learning needs. The Special Education Teacher emphasized students having knowledge about how the social world will be different in college and how to keep themselves balanced, knowledge of what their own academic needs are, and knowledge about how to communicate for support using multiple modes (e.g., in-person,
email). Students knowing what they need to be successful and acting on that knowledge was also very important in the English Professor’s view.

**Steps, Decisions, and Plans**

This subcategory of Readiness involves completing preparatory steps, making decisions, and making and implementing plans. It can be thought of as acute tasks toward readiness.

**Search, Choice, and a Student’s Path**

Several stakeholders identified tasks that students need to complete to be ready related to identifying colleges whose offerings match their interests and needs, applying to colleges, and choosing which college to attend. Planning how they will pay for college is also essential to readiness.

The steps, decisions, and plans that appeared in Grace’s interview revolve around choosing a college, financing college, and choosing a major, as well as choosing the timeline for beginning college. Grace was thinking about factors that go into choosing the right college, such as size of school, location, acceptance criteria, programs, and supports. She was focused on using these criteria to determine which schools to apply to, and if accepted, which school to attend. Readiness for Grace involved making an informed decision about where to go to college. It also involved planning how the costs of college would be covered. She said,

> My family always makes a joke that my brother got most of the money, my sister got some of the money, I get none of it. Because I’m the third, so— We always make our little joke, but sometimes you're just like, “If I do go to college, what are we going to do?”

Not knowing what the plan was caused her some anxiety, and she indicated that to be ready, she would have to have it figured out.
The Guidance Counselor was deeply familiar with college search and choice as a series of steps, decisions, and plans. She talked about the process she helps students through, beginning with interests and goals. She explained, “By the time they leave, they've usually been accepted to college and chosen where they're going. So that's definitely one piece [of readiness] is having a plan.” Financial aid is another planning area the Guidance Counselor identified. To be ready, students need to “have applied for financial aid and have a plan for paying for college with their parents.” As the Guidance Counselor made clear, these planning and decision-making steps are tied to information and support. She noted that for the search and choice process, “you have to have the information that you need, and in some cases, the support you need, to get through the process of looking for colleges and applying and choosing and paying—all those things.” In this way, the planning aspect of readiness is tied to other aspects, such as knowledge. And students rely on others to help them get ready.

According to Grace and Grace’s Mother, readiness includes planning and decision-making related to the post-secondary path; for example, whether to go directly to college or to spend a year doing other things. Grace referenced the option of “tak[ing] a year to figure out what you want to do,” meaning not going directly to college from high school, but taking a year in between to make the decisions and plans. For Grace’s mother, being intentional about the transition from high school was the priority. She didn’t want Grace to go directly to college as a default; she wanted her to make a decision about her path to her future, considering a range of options. Talking about what is important for readiness, she said,
Knowing that you don't have to decide at 17 what you want to do for the rest of your life. You just have to figure out what you're going to do next year—And then after that you can decide what you’re going to do with the year after that.

Before thinking about specific colleges, she wanted Grace to decide, “‘What is it you want to do?’” This is the first step in the decision-making process, from her perspective.

According to Grace’s Mother, readiness also includes planning how one will engage socially in order to make connections and find happiness and satisfaction in college. She identified these as crucial aspects for planning: anticipating what types of involvement will get you the connections you need and the experiences you need for happiness, and making decisions based on that. “‘How will you find your people? What will you be involved in?’” Part of getting ready is answering these questions.

**Support Access**

Some stakeholders focused on the steps required to access supports, which include deciding to self-identify, submitting necessary documentation for eligibility, and making specific arrangements for support. Grace’s Mother stated that part of planning and decision-making is identifying where support will come from, and arranging for that support. She believes, “‘It's important to think about things that might be hard for you and have a plan for when those difficulties might arise. Hopefully, they won't. But if they do, you've got to have a plan.’” After seeing her older child struggle with the transition to college when she had anticipated a smooth process, she knew that hoping for the best isn’t good enough, and that specific steps need to be taken and plans need to be made to set a student up for success and to prepare for contingencies.

The High School English Teacher referenced students’ decisions whether or not to “take their plan with them to college,” and by this she meant the students’ decisions to
self-identify as having a disability in order to access accommodations. She remarked, “If they take their plan with them to college, there’re all sorts of things that they can be set up with.” This is indeed a crucial and consequential decision, and as the English Teacher suggested, many students are inclined to leave the stigma of special education behind and they do not self-identify. Like other decisions, this one can be made intentionally or by default, in that unless they take the steps to pursue eligibility and accommodations, nothing happens. If they delay the decision, they are in effect deciding against support, at least for their entry into college.

Among community college personnel, the focus for steps, decisions, and plans is almost exclusively on self-identifying and arranging for accommodations and supports. The English Professor was very straightforward in saying, “The students that I have who give me accommodations agreements tend to be ones who do better.” This reference to a decision and a step (or series of steps) confirms the significance of the decision the High School English Teacher identified, of whether or not to “take their plan with them.” The English Professor also discussed specific examples of effective behaviors that involve students using their accommodations, something that only happens if they complete the necessary steps to establish their eligibility, arrange for accommodations through the Disability Services office, and then share their accommodation plan with professors. When the English Professor talked about readiness, she described students who have taken these steps.

The Math Professor spoke at length about how crucial it is for students to access supports. The first step is eligibility, and the Math Professor described, “I think for some students, it's frustrating, because they’ve had accommodations in the past, and then to get
accommodations [in college] they have to show testing of some sort.” This can be an unexpected step if students haven’t gained knowledge ahead of time about how accessing supports is different in college. “It's like a different process for them to go through,” the Math Professor explained. Once eligibility is established and the Disability Services office determines accommodations for the student, the student has to take an additional step of notifying their professors about their accommodations. “It's on their plate to bring us the accommodations forms,” the Math Professor said, because professors have no way of knowing who is connected to Disability Services or eligible for accommodations unless the students themselves complete the steps. This is a form of self-identification that students are required to repeat for each class, which means there is more to it than a single decision, whether or not to “take their plan with them.”

The Math Professor expressed the importance of timing, which is part of steps, decisions, and plans. It is not just a matter of what students decide about pursuing supports (whether or not to do so), but when they act on their decision. This echoes back to the Knowledge subcategory, and Grace’s Mother’s emphasis on knowing when to access help. Planning needs to include a timeline for taking steps. Specifically, the Math Professor suggested that readiness involves having supports and services in place before beginning college. She said,

I've definitely had students who come in and say, “Oh, this was what my high school world looked like, what would I have to do to get that here?” And part of me just feels like, Ooh, you should have had this conversation before you got here! … So that you could have been hooked up with the services.

In the Math Professor’s view, taking steps related to accessing supports in advance of college entry is key to readiness. She provided a complex and sophisticated
understanding of what it means to access supports, which her colleagues identified as a necessary part of readiness in more general terms.

**Commitments**

The final example of steps, decisions, and plans also comes from the Math Professor, who identified the concept of credit hours as problematic for some students. To be ready, she said, not only do students need to know how credit hours work and understand the time demands that their college courses entail, they need to make decisions and plan realistically around the combination of obligations that comprise their lives, registering for an appropriate number of credits. She described, “Almost like planning, being able to see your life and what kind of hours you're putting in in different places, and how many hours in a week that you really have.” She called this “huge” in terms of readiness. “So kind of that realistic view of what their time commitments are, I think would be really helpful coming in, to be able to map out what that looks like.”

**Skills**

Stakeholders included necessary skills when they described readiness. These generally fell into the areas of academic, executive, and relational skills.

**Academic Skills**

Academic Skills refer to content-area-specific skills as well as skills such as note-taking that apply across academic disciplines. Grace said outright that she does not believe it is possible to be ready for college. Nevertheless, when she talked about what she is doing to prepare for a transition to college and how she anticipates experiencing college, the skills she focused on were academic skills. In this way, Grace conceptualizes readiness in terms of what is familiar from her past educational experiences: she thinks
about course content and academic skills. She mentioned being nervous about academic
demands in college, specifically demands in known areas of challenge (i.e., writing).
Grace’s Mother also talked about academic skills and the skill areas where she knows
Grace will be challenged in college.

The Guidance Counselor acknowledged that there are “so many academic
pieces.” She expressed that reading and writing skills are crucial because “to get all the
way through college, no matter what your major is, you have to read pretty well and write
pretty well.” She believes that math skill demands vary more by major. When the English
Professor spoke about academic skills, she emphasized reading over writing skills,
saying, “It's easier to teach people to write than it is to teach them to read.” She
elaborated, “When I have students who are strong readers and weak writers, they can do
very well in the class. I can work with them pretty smoothly. But when it's the reverse,
it's very, very difficult.” The High School English Teacher emphasized writing and
writing about reading. She identified persistence within academic skills, saying, “Skills of
persistence, and editing and rewriting and not getting married to the first thing you put
down on the paper, you know, not to be afraid to rip it apart. Some of those kind of skills,
too.”

The academic skills the Disability Services Representative identified involve
content-related skills (i.e., calculation, spelling, and grammar skills), as well as general
academic skills—specifically note-taking skills, which she finds many students lack.

For the Math Professor, readiness is tied to content-specific as well as general
academic skills (e.g., “thinking skills”). She talked about the importance of basic math
skills, “to have coming in and be really confident and comfortable with.” She also talked about English skills that students need:

On the English side, being able to write coherently. I'm not talking about perfect grammar and perfect spelling, but being able to construct sentences and paragraphs that flow and make sense; to be able to, either in writing or verbally, be able to construct arguments, to be able to say, “I'm going to convince you of something and here is why you're going to be convinced, here's my evidence.”

In fact what the Math Professor describes are writing skills that would be called for across disciplines, rather than English skills per se.

The English Professor distinguished between students who display compensatory or coping skills and those who do not as an indicator of readiness. These skills, in her experience, make a difference in whether or not students with academic challenges can be successful. She explained, “If they struggle with reading, they kind of know what to do to compensate. Or if they struggle with writing, they have things in place to compensate for that.” These types of skills relate to academic skills while also drawing on planning and management skills, discussed below.

**Executive Skills**

Executive skills, or management/self-management skills, are the skills students need to manage the organizational and other demands of college. Time management skills and skills for managing assignments are part of what it means to be ready, according to Grace’s Mother. The Guidance Counselor emphasized independence, specifically around planning and organization, keeping track of assignments, and communicating with teachers. She said,

For students that are independent and can access and utilize resources well, I think they can go anywhere and be successful. … I think the ones that I worry about are the ones that will go to a college without a supportive program, and they're still struggling to organize themselves, or they're still relying a lot on their special
education teacher in senior year to keep track of their assignments or contact their teachers.

In terms of management, the High School English Teacher mentioned “time management and task management,” including prioritizing tasks and “break[ing] down tasks, because you oftentimes will get more long term projects. And not someone walking you through the different parts.” She connected these skills to avoiding becoming overwhelmed.

The Special Education Teacher also talked about “routine-making” skills, differentiating between high school settings where the schedule is highly structured and college settings where students have to establish and follow their own structure. “High school: block one, block two, three, four; bells are ringing, one place. Everything is just there and set. It's very concrete to go through your school experience when you've been in these one-building places,” he explained. In college, on the other hand,

There's not that concrete, consistent people there all the time. I think that that routine-making when it's sort of all open to their own discretion could be difficult for them. And it could play a part in their engagement in their courses.

Also related to changes from high school to college, the Special Education Teacher remarked, “There's so much kind of coaching that goes along with special ed [in high school],” and emphasized the need for students to develop skills to self-coach in college. He mentioned having an “internal monitor” and “inner monologue” to self-coach through set-backs and challenges and strategize for better outcomes.

The Disability Services Representative noted that students are dependent on the structures of high school, such as time or schedule structures, and adults telling them what they need to do. She made the distinction that in college, students are “doing things for themselves” and this requires skills including time management and scheduling skills, and organizational skills.
For the Math Professor, readiness is tied to self-management and self-monitoring skills, and planning skills. She noted,

There's less sort of, I don't know, chasing maybe? The kind of checking in like, “Oh, hey, you’ve missed two assignments, maybe you should sit down and come talk to me.” And I think there's more of that kind of checking in in high school than there is in college.

In college, “there is more onus on the student, just to kind of keep up with some of those longer term things,” which requires skills to monitor and manage one’s performance.

*Relational Skills*

Relational skills are the skills students need to communicate and connect with other people—peers and college personnel—so that they can be successful. These include advocacy skills, which students use to communicate their needs and request and access supports. Grace’s Mother referenced believing that Grace is more prepared than other students with learning disabilities because she has a long history of attending her IEP meetings and she has gained skills articulating her needs and describing helpful supports. These advocacy skills are part of how Grace’s Mother conceptualizes readiness. The Guidance Counselor’s conception of readiness includes skills of identifying, accessing, and utilizing resources and supports, including peers, for academic and non-academic challenges. The English Teacher included advocacy skills as part of readiness, identifying that students will need to do more to access help in college than they do in high school.

Readiness skills highlighted by the Special Education Teacher included skills to describe the impact of one’s disability on learning, which incorporates disability awareness skills, advocacy skills, and communication skills. The Disability Services Representative also remarked on the importance of advocacy skills, which include skills for communicating about needs, such as email-writing skills.
Some skills mentioned by participants reflect a combination of management and relational elements. When the English Professor talked about skills for readiness, she emphasized “College 101” skills. She described these as “the soft skills of being able to ask for help when they need it,” and reading directions, using verbal and written resources, and responding to feedback. As she said,

Yes, ideally, preparation also looks like being able to write complete sentences with punctuation, and being able to read at least at an eighth grade level. Because that helps a lot. But my job is to teach reading skills. I have some training in that. On the job, I have a lot of training in how to guide students through the College 101, but that's a way harder lift.

The English Professor suggested that for students to transition successfully to college, they need the self-management, communication, and advocacy skills that enable them to access their instructors and the curriculum, just as much as they need academic skills. These skills are what make them “able to recognize when [they’re] falling behind, and instead of shutting down, asking for help.” The High School English Teacher added self-care skills, which others didn’t name. She said, “To be able to take care of yourself so that you are getting enough sleep and can actually perform what you're being asked to do.”

**Frames of Mind**

The frames of mind subcategory captures some of the most elusive and crucial elements of readiness. *Frames of Mind* refers to attitudes and ways of thinking about being a college student that stakeholders identified as necessary for students to demonstrate readiness and find success. Students need to be in, possess, and/or display these frames of mind and attitudes to benefit from the knowledge and skills they have and the decisions and plans they’ve made. Attitudes and frames of mind are aspects of
readiness that are “instilled” in students. They go beyond what an educator, parent, or other stakeholder can tell or teach.

Grace did not talk explicitly about readiness in terms of attitudes or frames of mind. She was very practical and concrete in her thinking, and this code did not come up, though she did describe being aware of her disability and how it impacts her learning, as well as her experience and skill advocating for herself.

**Self-Reflection**

Self-knowledge was categorized as a form of knowledge and discussed in the *knowledge* section above. “Self-awareness” overlaps with self-knowledge, but moves into the realm of attitudes and frames of mind because of its dynamic, rather than static, quality. Self-awareness is evolving self-knowledge. Participants also described a slightly more involved—even more dynamic—form of self-awareness that I am calling self-reflection. Both self-awareness and self-reflection are frames of mind connected to readiness.

For Grace’s Mother, readiness is tied to disability awareness and understanding and being able to talk about one’s needs. Comparing Grace to other students with learning disabilities, she indicated that she believes Grace is more ready, because “she has a better understanding of her needs, and the supports that help her,” which sets her up to be a better advocate. Grace’s Mother identifies an attitude of recognizing personal challenge areas and seeking support with them as part of readiness. Recognizing when to seek help—before you really need it—is also an important frame of mind. Grace’s Mother also talked about picking up on feedback, which relates to an attitude or frame of mind that allows a student to recognize signals that improvement is needed, and not resist
or avoid those. Maturity also came up in Grace’s Mother’s interview. She said, “I have a lot of faith in [Grace], I think she's a pretty mature kid, I think she has pretty good self-knowledge.” In this way, she suggested a connection between maturity and self-knowledge, through an elusive quality or frame of mind in which a student can reflect on who they are and what they need with some distance and wisdom and without feeling defensive. The frame of mind goes beyond “self-knowledge,” part of the knowledge subcategory of Conceptions of Readiness, to self-reflection.

The Special Education teacher summarized what it means to be college ready as, “To be a self-aware advocate.” He described the self-awareness as an attitude or frame of mind that involves understanding one’s disability and how it impacts learning, understanding how accommodations and supports have been beneficial, and finally, understanding how to be “more engaged in [one’s] education.” He said,

To be aware of your own style and how you engage, maybe— It's a lot though; self-aware means like socially, academically, emotionally; you kind of have a sense of how you deal with things. And I think that's something that kids are going to develop more so in college, but you have to have the root of that, I think as a high school student.

This level of awareness requires self-reflection. Awareness and engagement were central to the Special Education Teacher’s priorities for his students, because he saw them as key to readiness. He concluded,

So, I think to be a self-aware advocate. I think my kids, that's something that I try to instill in them, but you know, there's layers to that. But I do think that that helps them to be college ready.

The idea that he “instills” this quality or characteristic in his students confirms that it is a frame of mind rather than knowledge or skill. He can’t tell them or teach them, but he can help them develop an attitude that is central to readiness.
Describing readiness, Grace’s Mother said, “I think also to recognize your strengths and areas of need. Whether you have a disability or not, what are things you might need help with? What are things you're going to need to do to be happy?” Again, self-reflection comes up as an important frame of mind that enables a student to anticipate not only challenges that will likely require support, but aspects of who they are that need to be fed so that they can not just get by, but find happiness and satisfaction. This is readiness that sets a student up for success. Interestingly, it is the parent who brings happiness, over other measures of success, into the equation.

**Initiative and Confidence**

For the high school Guidance Counselor, readiness involves initiative. Initiative is observed in behaviors like seeking rather than just accepting help, but behind those behaviors is an attitude or frame of mind that the student can be an independent agent working for their own benefit. She said,

> It’s the ones that aren't so independent that I worry about a little bit more. Yeah, even if they're willing to access help, it's like one thing to be willing, if somebody approaches you, and another thing to say, I'm going to go out and find this help, and I'm going to go get it. … I guess it's some of the initiative piece.

The Guidance Counselor spoke about students demonstrating readiness by identifying and using support networks, including peers. She also spoke about independent planning and organization around assignments and tasks, which not only involves skills, but initiative. Initiative and independence are interacting frames of mind within readiness. Another attitude that came across in the Guidance Counselor’s interview is the attitude that you can “make it through a struggle.” This attitude or frame of mind makes it possible to handle and recover from setbacks, which the Guidance Counselor identified as an important element of readiness. Readiness includes “just kind of knowing that … if
you struggle … that it's not the end when you struggle.” This attitude might also involve
confidence, or having a confident frame of mind.

The High School English Teacher spoke directly about confidence when she
identified elements of what it means to be college ready and said,

To challenge yourself and not be afraid— To be able to have that confidence that,
you know, you don't have to get an A in every class, you can— If you're
interested in something, just try it. You know, sort of resilience and risk taking a
little bit.

Like the Guidance Counselor, she was touching on an attitude of being okay when things
don’t go as well as you would like. She referred to confidence, and she also referred to
resilience and risk taking, other qualities that can be thought of as frames of mind. The
English Teacher also echoed the Guidance Counselor’s mention of independence and
initiative, saying, “In college, I think it's— they're on their own much more.” She said
this specifically in relation to the change in the way support works in college as
compared to high school, and to how students would need to take the initiative to access
support. Finally, in terms of academics, the English Teacher named persistence, as an
attitude that she connected to students being willing to edit and revise their work.

Like his high school colleagues, the Special Education Teacher brought
confidence into the discussion; specifically, “self-confidence.” This frame of mind is
what he described enables students to talk themselves through challenges or setbacks,
knowing they can try again and have a better outcome. He talked about how crucial this
becomes when students have been coached so closely by adults in high school, and then
they are on their own in college. Related to this, he mentioned that students need a frame
of mind to “remember that they can help themselves” when the supports that have been
by their side constantly in high school are no longer there. He went on to explain,
I think when you get people helping you a lot for so long, you forget—or not forget, but it becomes more natural for an external thing to kind of push you along, versus your own internal, you know, stuff.

That “internal stuff” is a frame of mind that seems to incorporate confidence, independence, and initiative. It interacts with self-awareness to enable a student to be successful despite the dramatic differences that the college setting presents.

The Math Professor also talked about confidence, alluding to the frame of mind that a student is entitled to success and that they are accountable for their learning, and they hold the institution accountable for partnering with them in that learning. She said that getting students ready involves building a certain kind of confidence:

Building confidence around that you're allowed to ask for help, that you're allowed to question things, that you're allowed to say, “I'm sorry, I still don't get this.” Or, “I really would like to drop this class. Where do I go to do that?” And if somebody kind of blows you off, to have the confidence to say, “Fine, I'm going to go talk to somebody else who's going to tell me how to do that.” I think that there are some students who have no confidence in the institution and in navigating the institution, by themselves. And I think that is huge. I think that puts students at a huge disadvantage, if they're lacking that kind of confidence. Because even if they're struggling in a class, even if they don't have math confidence, if they have the confidence to ask me a question, or if they have the confidence to go to an advisor and say, “I'm really struggling in this class, is there something I can do?” Or to have the guts to walk into a tutoring center and say, “I'm struggling in this class, is there someone who can help me?” That's hard. That's a hard thing to do for some students, and I think having that confidence of saying, “You know what, it's okay to say that I don't know how to do this right now. Because if I knew how to do this, why would I take this class? This would be a wasted class for me.” So I think that is the—to me—that is the most detrimental lack of confidence, much more so than content lack of confidence.

The behaviors or skills she described could be labeled as self-advocacy, but she focuses on “confidence,” which is attitudinal.

**Wanting It**

Many of the frames of mind themes that were present when high school participants spoke about readiness were echoed by participants from community college,
including confidence, initiative, resilience, and persistence. The Disability Services Representative referred to something that ties a few of these together and adds to them when she said, “You got to want it.” She recognized an essential attitude that is made up of confidence, initiative, persistence, as well as determination and optimism, and a bit of taking responsibility. She talked about the importance of believing that success is possible, and mentioned “enthusiasm or even motivation.” She said, “A lot of kids, they don't think it's possible. They don't, you know, when they're coming in, and they really don't feel like they're college material, they're less likely to succeed.” What stakeholders need to do to help student readiness is—again—“instilling” that “they can do it”: helping them develop that attitude.

Elsewhere in her interview, the Disability Services Representative listed different types of readiness when she suggested that being successful particularly in overcoming difficulties depends on being “emotionally, psychologically, physically, environmentally ready.” The emotional and psychological readiness reflect “resilience” and other attitudes and frames of mind that are unspecified but important to her conception of readiness. She concluded that students need to “be ready and be prepared to work. And also be prepared to be successful. Be prepared that people are there to want to help you. And don't be afraid. Do it.” Readiness for the Disability Services Representative is most essentially about attitudes and frames of mind.

Ownership

The Community College English Professor emphasized an attitude of ownership. Similar to what others identified as initiative or taking responsibility, ownership was the English Professor’s term for students being in charge of their own learning, and
recognizing that they are the ones to gain or lose when things are successful or unsuccessful. When asked what she thinks of when she pictures students transitioning from high school to college she said, “Taking ownership of the idea that if they don't do stuff, it is not hurting me. It's not something they have to apologize to me for. It's hurting them. And I think that's a huge transition thing.” She made a distinction between high school and college, as others did, identifying that high school personnel share more of the ownership with their students, but to be ready for college, students need to take ownership independently. Part of this involves valuing learning, and recognizing that it is not a matter of obedience or compliance with what is being asked by instructors, but a commitment to producing quality work for one’s own benefit.

The English Professor explained that some students have the frame of mind “that if they show up, and they hand something in, they'll pass. Even if they're totally checked out, even if the work they hand in does not reflect any real learning at all.” She imagines these students assuming a “social contract with the learning environment” where they just go through the motions and get a passing grade. “And that definitely is not how it works,” she said. Students who demonstrate readiness, on the other hand, take responsibility for how they are performing, and take ownership of their own progress. They are active, aware, and engaged, rather than showing up as empty vessels for instructors to pour learning into.

According to the English Professor, ownership as a frame of mind for college also entails recognizing and responding productively to struggle, rather than blaming others or giving up. Persistence in the face of failure is another sign of ownership and a ready attitude. When students demonstrate readiness and find success, they demonstrate
this sort of knowledge that I might not get it right the first time, and a first failure isn't a total failure. I can pick up and do it again and do a revision, work on it, ask for help. And … that's … really, really huge. In terms of preparedness for college.

The Math Professor didn’t use the term ownership, but she discussed something similar, that might be thought of as ownership and management. When a student is ready, they have the frame of mind that they manage their learning, and they are proactive in addressing anything that is getting in the way of their learning. The Math Professor described a frame of mind that comes through as, “I understand that I can ask questions, and that I can kind of push back a little bit on sort of the system to get what I need.”

Making a distinction between types of challenges she sees among her math students, she explained that students who struggle with the skills and content but have other qualities—like that frame of mind—are able to find success. “Content not prepared is kind of different than sort of college world not prepared,” she said, indicating that “college world” prepared has to do with the frame of mind.

The Math Professor also talked about students who are set up for success having a sense of purpose about their education and believing, “I'm here to learn, and that learning is going to take me somewhere.” She said, “Preferably, they have an idea of where it's taking them, but even if they don't, it's that belief that it is taking them somewhere.” Also tied to ownership, the sense of purpose involves motivation to do what it takes to be successful. Referring directly to a readiness-related attitude, the Math Professor stated,

I think to be really college ready is that sort of attitude of, “I'm here, I'm here for a reason, I'm choosing to be here, and I'm here to learn. And I want you as an institution to make me a better person, through content, through knowledge, through sort of pushing me to think and learn.”

The Math Professor called this description, “Kind of like the big lofty version of being college ready.”
Working Toward Readiness Criteria

Working Toward Readiness Criteria entails things stakeholders do, or actions they take to help students be ready for college and satisfy the criteria identified in Conceptions of Readiness. In the interviews, participants identified their own activities and actions as well as activities and actions of students they work with, and both types of activities and actions are included in Working Toward Readiness Criteria. In the case of Grace, the student actions are her own actions, and in the case of Grace’s Mother, the student actions are her children’s actions. For the other participants, the student actions pertain to a general population of students whom participants refer to when asked about students with learning disabilities. Because the high school-affiliated participants are from Grace’s high school, the population of students they refer to likely includes Grace. Essentially, there are three profiles of actors working toward readiness criteria considered here: Grace, students with learning disabilities (likely including Grace), and nonstudent stakeholders.

Nonstudent stakeholders work toward readiness criteria by taking actions that they perceive lead to their students engaging in other actions that work toward readiness criteria. The subcategories below reflect activities and actions that students engage in as they work toward readiness criteria, and the exploration of these subcategories involves the related actions of nonstudent stakeholders. For example, Grace practiced describing her disability-related needs by attending her IEP meetings from a young age. Grace’s mother prompted Grace to attend the meetings, and if she had not, it is unlikely Grace would have attended. Each of their actions is part of working toward readiness criteria on Grace’s behalf.
The activities and actions discussed in this section are drawn from how stakeholders describe what it takes for students to get ready for college. They are intertwined with stakeholders’ conceptions of readiness itself, and the study findings do not offer a linear or discrete path to readiness for all students with learning disabilities. Rather, the findings convey the considerations and priorities that stakeholders identify when they are given the luxury of thinking about readiness and preparation. In some instances, stakeholders distinguish activities and actions that they do from activities and actions that they deem preparatory but which, for named or unnamed reasons, they do not do. This study only looks at stakeholders’ perceptions, and not at actual behaviors conducted in homes, classrooms, and offices. This analysis presents what stakeholders say about working toward readiness criteria, and their perceptions of what happens and what needs to happen.

Though both of the following can be associated with preparation, Working Toward Readiness Criteria is more involved and extensive than the preparation that is captured in Steps, Decisions, and Plans, a subcategory of Conceptions of Readiness. Steps, Decisions, and Plans entails acute actions and decisions that students execute in the final stages before their transition to postsecondary education; for example, selecting a college. Working Toward Readiness Criteria, on the other hand, entails activities and actions of all stakeholders, leading to readiness over time.

Working Toward Readiness Criteria consists of actions related to: (a) Researching, Practicing, Navigating, and Reflecting; (b) Gaining Understanding; (c) Growing, Experiencing Consequences, and Adjusting Attitudes; (d) Coordinating, Connecting, and Orienting; and (e) Acclimating and Adjusting. In the presentation below,
I use examples that are most salient to each of these subcategories. This means that some participants are included under a subcategory and others are not. I highlight Grace’s perspective as much as possible, and when an example from Grace is not present, it is because I was not able to identify one for that subcategory.

**Researching, Practicing, Navigating, and Reflecting**

In their interviews, participants described preparatory work that can be classified as Researching, Practicing, Navigating, and Reflecting. While Navigating and Reflecting stand alone, Researching incorporates Looking, Observing, Surveying, and Evaluating; and Practicing includes Experiencing and Doing. This work is performed by students as they get ready for college. It results in knowledge and skills, it readies students to take steps and make decisions and plans, and it shapes attitudes. Alongside these activities and actions performed by students as they work toward readiness criteria, participants described **prompting, instructing, and counseling.** This work is performed by nonstudent stakeholders, and it fosters the work of students. I will present the Researching, Practicing, Navigating, and Reflecting elements first, followed by nonstudent stakeholder work involving prompting, instructing, and counseling.

**Researching**

Grace talked about attending visits by college representatives to her high school and asking them about the services and supports they offer to students with learning disabilities. Through this activity, she was researching, surveying, and evaluating, to increase her knowledge. Grace’s Mother talked about Grace learning that she would need to advocate for herself by observing what her siblings went through. “She saw it with her brothers and sisters, and now I think she's probably better at it than either of them ever
were. And I think it's just from watching them,” Grace’s mother claimed. Observing made Grace more ready in her knowledge and her skills.

**Practicing**

Grace relayed that she had attended IEP meetings since elementary school, which gave her practice advocating:

> I've definitely gotten more confident with self advocating for myself. You know, when I was younger, I would cry, having meetings, because I got kind of embarrassed in a way. And then as I got older, I'm like, this is, it's just how I learn. It's just how my brain is wired. … I just think that that first meeting that I went to was kind of the first step into becoming who I am to self advocate, in a way. You know, being able to say, “Look, this is what I have, this is what helps me, this doesn't help me.” You know? So, that's how I think I became, like good self advocate for myself.

Practicing enabled her to build skills to advocate effectively, and she became more confident, which is important as a readiness attitude. The Special Education Teacher also referred to students practicing when he described how he uses role-playing as a method to help his students practice talking with professors about their needs and being persistent about arranging accommodations.

As I noted, practicing incorporates experiencing and doing. Grace experienced a college-level course when she participated in dual enrollment. She recognized that she gained important knowledge and built important skills, both part of her readiness, when she had the practice of experiencing what a college course is actually like. Grace’s Mother referred to having her children practice by leaving the doing to them. She recounted asking her children, in relation to communication with teachers, “‘Did you do this, did you do that? Because I'm not going to do it. You have to do it.’” She explained, “I think it's empowering to the kids, and I think that's the only way they're going to learn to advocate for themselves.” Leaving it up to them to do what needed to be done
empowered them, helping to set the stage for ready attitudes and frames of mind, and ensured they practiced important skills.

**Navigating**

The High School English Teacher noted that as students work toward readiness criteria they have to “navigate” the college search and choice process, or “the process of getting into college,” which she called “a big huge process.” In fact, there are many systems students have to navigate as they collect knowledge and prepare to complete steps, make decisions, and formulate plans.

**Reflecting**

Reflecting is also a key action students engage in as they work toward readiness criteria. Reflecting captures a piece of what Grace and Grace’s Mother each talked about when they described a process of determining a path forward from high school, including weighing postsecondary education and other options for the first year, and selection of the right institution. For Grace, the process also involved identifying a major. For her mother, it involved identifying, “Who are your people going to be? How will you find your people? What will you be involved in?” Reflecting is part of this process, bridging the past, present, and future, and setting students up for effective steps, decisions, and plans.

**Prompting, Instructing, and Counseling**

The activities and actions performed by students as they work toward readiness criteria have a shared context with prompting, instructing, and counseling, performed by nonstudent stakeholders. Through prompting, stakeholders get students started with what they need to do. Through instructing, they tell them how they can do what they need to
do. Through counseling, they help them think about what they need to do. Grace’s Mother had prompted her to attend her IEP meetings from an early age. She recounted,

It started with just a simple, “Come and introduce yourself.” … And then we added things like, “Talk about what you're good at, talk about what's a little bit hard for you.” And then we added, “Talk about how teachers can make things that are hard for you easier; what are ways that you find that are helpful?,” and we just kept expanding.

Grace’s Mother believes that Grace is “more prepared than other kids I know who have learning disabilities” because of this practice, which helped her build advocacy skills, knowledge of her disability, and confidence to ask for what she needs. Her mother’s prompting was the first step.

Instructing involves telling students how they can do what they need to do. The high school English Teacher instructs her students around writing college essays by building the essay writing into her class and working with all students to understand how they can write strong essays, including college essays. She also instructs them in close reading and annotating, going “slow and deep,” to help them prepare for the reading and writing demands they may face in college. Grace’s Mother instructed Grace’s older siblings and now instructs Grace about the details of accessing support in college, such as from a tutoring center. She does this by talking through the details of how and when to arrange support. She referenced these actions as part of preparing Grace. Being told, and overhearing her siblings being told, is how Grace was prepared.

Through counseling, the Guidance Counselor helps students think about what they need to do. She meets individually with juniors and seniors to counsel them around the college search, application, and choice process, which then involves a great deal of researching and reflecting on their part. The English Professor sees the potential benefit
of more counseling and opportunity for reflecting, saying, “I wish that guidance counseling included more discussion of gap years, and avenues before college.” She explains that this wish comes from observing students who have taken time off from school coming back “ready” and being successful. The Guidance Counselor recognizes the importance of counseling students around supports in college, helping them acknowledge that they need support and helping them have a realistic sense of what their support needs are. Unfortunately, her opportunities to provide the counseling she thinks is essential are few.

The Disability Services Representative referenced counseling that happens informally on the part of family members regarding support access. “We have sisters and brothers that are, you know, saying, ‘Hey, we know about, you know, [Disability Services], you need to go there, you know, they can help you,’” she described.

**Learning and Gaining Understanding**

Participants also described preparatory work done by students that can be classified as Learning or Gaining Understanding. Learning and Gaining Understanding happens when there is Educating (explaining how something happens), Informing (notifying that something happens), and Showing (demonstrating how something happens; e.g., providing examples) on the part of stakeholders.

**Learning and Gaining Understanding over Time**

Grace conveyed that her process of learning and gaining understanding relevant to college readiness spanned many years. She shared actions and activities that she engaged in beginning in elementary school, which continued through middle school and into high school. As a result, she had gained understanding of herself as a learner. She said,
More and more, as time goes on, you know in the end you're the only person that knows your academical limits. And, what help you need, what kind of, you know, what papers help you to write an essay. Like what do you need to write an essay.

This understanding prepared Grace to access effective supports and to communicate with college professors and support professionals about what works best to support her learning.

Grace’s Mother shared that she made sure to educate Grace about her disability, destigmatizing it and helping her understand how she struggles:

I spent a lot of years saying, “There's nothing wrong with your brain, you just learn differently. You don't learn by someone talking at you all the time, you need more support; you don't learn just by reading independently, you need to—you need both things.” And so I think she has a better understanding of her needs, and the supports that help her.

The educating, and the understanding, are part of Grace’s preparation.

**Educating, Informing, and Showing**

The Special Education Teacher described activities and actions he focuses on that help students understand in a concrete manner how they have been supported in high school, and understand that getting help works. These involve educating, informing, and showing, and the students’ learning and gaining understanding prepares them to access support in college. He explained,

I think when I first started, it was less clear to me about how kids need to be informed concretely about how they need to access and how they get help, and how they do those things. And then I think, through the years, I knew I needed to develop a practice to make it more concrete for kids transitioning from high school to college, because I wanted them to be very invested in how they were supported, because it helped them see the connection of like, your advocacy, your connection with your learning will—actually has made the difference for you. And I just try to be straightforward with them about that.
He also explained that especially when he has been able to work with students continuously through high school, he can inform and educate them as older students about what has been going on:

They can see how it might have—They can look back and say, “Oh!” They can be more reflective of that, and see how it has helped them. So then that awareness helps them to, ideally, gain more motivation in their advocacy and understanding.

Reflecting is part of this process, as well, contributing to the learning and gaining understanding that students do as they work toward readiness criteria related to accessing supports in college. Through this process, students build their readiness-related knowledge and “gain more motivation in their advocacy,” an important readiness-related attitude development.

The Disability Services Representative sees students as they come into college, and as they make their way through or out of college, but she is disconnected from the preparatory stage of high school. She talks about preparation in terms of what she thinks is missing. She offered suggestions based on what her students don’t have, and need. She emphasized the importance of informing and educating students and parents about how the support process is different in college, because she sees students who don’t know “at all” how accessing accommodations works in college as opposed to high school. When the college does outreach to high schools, she explained, “We have a sheet that actually, it’ll explain it to the parent, especially, because sometimes the parent really doesn’t know, at all. And the students.” This informing and educating is intended to help families gain understanding.
To the Disability Services Representative, overcoming fear about college is also an important piece of preparation, and in her experience, students need to be shown ways to be successful. She said,

You have to show people that it's possible. And so I think if you show by example, and again, everybody learns differently, right? So I think, you know, maybe creating more opportunities for learning about what it is to be a college student, just creating more opportunities for all students to really, you know, to go on those college tours, meet people, connect with people at college.

Thinking about other ways for students to learn and gain understanding about what college is like and how crucial and beneficial support can be, the Disability Services Representative identified having college students act as peer educators. One of her suggestions for improving preparation is to have current college students work directly with high school students to show them—by giving examples—options that lead to success. She imagined,

So you get these peers with various learning disabilities to go and talk to other students with learning disabilities and saying, “I did it. This is the way I did it, though, this is what I needed to do to get through and this is the support that I received. This is, you know, this is my journey, this was my path. And this, you know, yours may not be the same as mine, but you can do it too.”

This would help high school students envision their own journey and gain understanding of how they could be successful in college.

**Growing, Experiencing Consequences, Adjusting Attitudes**

Participants described preparatory work done by students that can be classified as Growing, Experiencing Consequences, or Adjusting Attitudes. This is related to nonstudent stakeholders **Challenging, Empowering**, and **Building Up** students, such as by promoting independence or weaning them off existing supports. Knowledge and skills
can result from this; it can propel steps, decisions, and plans; and this work may nurture ready attitudes and frames of mind.

Participants described actions that challenge students. Grace’s Mother challenged Grace’s siblings and Grace by making sure not to do things for them that they could learn to do themselves. She described ways that she had Grace be responsible for herself as a student. “If my kids are going to learn to be independent, it’s not going to be because I’m going on their Aspen account every day checking [their grades].” She talked about teaching her children from an early age to talk to their teachers directly, and address issues themselves. She helped them by modeling and role-playing with them.

Challenging students allows them to grow.

The Guidance Counselor also referred to stakeholders working toward readiness criteria by challenging and empowering students to grow. She suggested that an effective approach not currently in place at the high school would be to identify concrete steps toward independence. She described,

I would like to see my students, really by sophomore year, being in charge of emailing their teachers. I think it is going to vary by student, but it would probably be good to have a list of goals towards independence for students that you kind of piece together.

The Guidance Counselor and the English Professor both referenced the option to fail or receive poor grades as an important growth opportunity. When students are allowed to fail, they experience consequences, which is important to preparation. The Guidance Counselor identified parent advocacy as standing between students and such experiences, because parents often object to low marks, and hold school personnel responsible for not having provided adequate support. She also referenced a greater societal force:
I think we do have to be willing to let them struggle a little bit. And there's, I think, a huge cultural trend against that really, where I think that we're kind of being trained as parents to see our role as making things easy and comfortable for our children. And that, while I fall into it and I understand, you know, the desire, I think it can be really harmful to them.

Whether it is parents or high schools—or both—that stand in the way of this growth opportunity, the English Professor recognizes it as well. She said, “I do think that high schools are terrified of allowing students to fail in a protected space, like fail with some consequences, but still in a protected enough space.” To confirm my understanding in the interview, I asked, “So where you see there could have been an opportunity for growth through the failure, you think the schools are afraid to let that happen?” She responded, “Yeah, I do.” Elsewhere in her interview she connected the possibility of failure to the attitude of ownership she identified as so essential to readiness. She expressed that when students at the college level expect that they’ll be given credit regardless of their performance, something important is lost. Without the option of failing, she said, “it does become really hard to have a meaningful education. Because there's not that piece of ownership.” Experiencing consequences in high school is an important preparatory opportunity for developing the ownership attitude that was identified as essential to readiness. When stakeholders challenge and empower students, including empowering them with the option to fail, they can have important readiness-related adjustments in their attitudes.

When stakeholders build up students, such as by helping them see their strengths and how they can be successful, they work toward the readiness criteria in the area of attitudes and frames of mind. The Disability Services Representative emphasized building confidence in high school students that they can succeed in college. The Math
Professor identified that because community colleges aren’t selective, “We get some of the students who maybe haven't been as successful in high school.” She explained, “Regardless of grades, sometimes it's just a confidence thing. It's a lack of, kind of the social capital inside of the academic world.” Building up the social capital, and with it the confidence, is preparation that has to happen when students arrive if it hasn’t happened in high school. The Math Professor suggested that if students come to college without “college confidence,” they should start with courses where they feel most comfortable, to foster college confidence, before taking courses—often math, in her experience—where they have “content lack of confidence.”

Challenging, empowering, and building up students can also look like weaning them off supports they have come to rely on, and helping them be more independent and proactive about their learning. The Guidance Counselor expressed her support for having goals and plans for all high school students to go through this. The Special Education Teacher described a developmental progression toward independence, where he involves his students more in the process of arranging support and communicating with teachers, and helps them understand their IEPs. He said,

I think that 9th, 10th grade, there’s a bit of that magic that goes on. Just push them along, kind of get them an understanding, because it's developmental, right? … Maybe 10th grade I'm saying, “Okay, you need to be more direct in asking your teacher for these things.” I will throw an email their way or whatever. But in the 11th grade, it's like, I need to push them to have more communication, to be more aware of like, “Hey, you know, I have been in touch with your teachers a bunch, I don't know if that's something you want me to do.” I'm starting to have conversations really discretely and boom, straightforwardly, in like the 11th grade year to really help them to be like, “Oh, we need to be on top of this.” And then in the 12th grade year is when it's even more so leading them in that direction, and when I at times have reviewed their IEPs, and helped them to kind of synthesize some of that info accommodation-wise, and disability-wise. So it's kind of a process: 9th and 10th grade year, I'm more involved in that. And then 11th grade, I'm kind of dissecting how it had worked with my role.
The Special Education Teacher’s approach of transitioning responsibility to students is likely to promote their growth as advocates and managers of their own affairs and development of the attitudes and frames of mind identified in *Readiness* as necessary for the students to take full ownership for their success in the college setting.

**Connecting, Collaborating, Coordinating, and Orienting**

Working Toward Readiness Criteria, according to participants, also entails Connecting, Collaborating, Coordinating, and Orienting, which is performed by other stakeholders on behalf of or in concert with students. In the activities and actions discussed above, certain actions are performed by nonstudent stakeholders, and these bring about actions by students, all working toward readiness criteria. In the case of Connecting, Collaborating, Coordinating, and Orienting, there are not separate activities or actions for the students to perform, other than the steps, decisions, and plans that participants talked about as actual readiness criteria and that are discussed in the *Readiness* section.

Some high school personnel referenced this type of action—or in some cases, lack of action. For example, the Guidance Counselor spoke about occasional opportunities to visit college campuses as part of professional development conferences organized for guidance counselors. These visits help her gain familiarity with what the colleges might offer her students. The Special Education Teacher relayed that he relies on the information available on college websites to understand and help his students understand supports institutions offer. Unfortunately, he often finds the information difficult to locate and interpret. Grace shared that she has been able to connect with some of the college representatives who visit her high school about the support offerings at their campuses,
and then use that information to gauge whether or not an institution is a good option for her. “Majority of the time I’d ask, ‘What do you do to help students who are either on IEPs or 504s that have some sort of learning disability?’” she reported. When they were able to answer, “It was helpful for me to know, ‘Okay, so they kind of have an idea what to do for a student who has an IEP or language-based learning disability or something like that,’” she explained. “Versus the ones that didn't tell me and you're like, ‘Okay, that's a little hazy. I don't know if I feel comfortable not knowing that much.’”

Connecting, Collaborating, Coordinating, and Orienting actions were most prominent in the interviews with community college personnel. These participants offered their suggestions for how to improve work that is done toward readiness criteria based on where they observe deficits in student readiness. Connecting was a key action in the interview with the Disability Services Representative. She spoke about the importance of connecting high school students with college personnel and especially with college students while they are making their college plans. She hypothesized,

If they saw their peers, or if they had mentors, from the get go, that would come in and— Maybe we hook them up with mentors while they're in high school, to— Maybe students can help other students, before they even come, to talk with them about what it is like to be a college student, what they need to do, and how they need to be prepared, and how they're going to be successful.

She explained that college personnel make visits and presentations to high schools, often with a representative from the disability services office participating. But she imagined something more powerful than this information-sharing; something that would involve an actual connection. Having students hear directly from students was a particularly promising option in her view. Later in the interview, she referenced collaboration, saying,

You just gotta form collaborations between high schools and colleges. And the student body. … I think we need to get more students involved in the process of
helping high schools get to where they need to get to. I think it's going to take, yeah, other students and other student voices.

She was also enthusiastic about the potential benefits of connecting disability services representatives to high school students through participation in transition planning. When asked what she thought about having disability services representatives at IEP team meetings for high school juniors and seniors, she responded, “That would be brilliant. Yes. I would love to see that happen.”

For the Math Professor, collaborating, connecting, and coordinating were priority actions. When working toward readiness criteria includes collaborating, she sees a great deal of promise for improving preparation and readiness. She mentioned having colleges and high schools share responsibility for an effective transition: “I think that transition has to go between a high school and the college. I don't think it's all on the high school.”

She specified where working together on students’ behalf can be especially effective:

But I do think open communication— And I do think some of that stuff we were talking about with college readiness that doesn't have anything to do with content, I do think those things can be collaborated. Those things can kind of overlap a little bit. And some of those conversations about the realities of school, or realities of college, or challenges, or things that people seem to be surprised about when they get here, I think those kinds of conversations can be very fruitful in collaboration. And whether it's having a speaker come in or having a handout, or I don't know what it would look like, but it does seem like that's an area where collaboration would be fairly easy, and effective.

Where she sees much of the potential for collaboration is in the knowledge area of readiness, as described here. Through collaboration between high schools and colleges, students can benefit from preparation where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

The Math Professor also emphasized the importance of individualized planning and getting students “plugged in” to the right supports and the right classes—even the
right professors—before they arrive. Here, connecting is the action performed by nonstudent stakeholders with students in support of readiness steps, decisions, and plans.

The Math Professor sees high schools playing a crucial role in ensuring the connections happen. “I do think that there could be a stronger connection between maybe high schools making sure that [students] are hooking up with certain programs or offices at the institutions that they're moving towards,” she said. Again, effective planning and taking necessary steps may involve efforts beyond what students typically do for themselves.

The Math Professor went on, “So it's making sure that those students are in touch with services that might be beneficial to them at their next school.”

Even more specifically, the Math Professor talked about students meeting with college personnel who know the range of support offerings and can match students to supports based on their profiles and needs. She said, I think those kind of informed conversations would have been really helpful prior to even starting classes. And I think some students are hooked up that way. And I don't know if that's them, or their parents, or their high school, but they come in already kind of plugged into those things. But there is enough students who don't come in plugged in that I feel like that could be a huge part of the transition for them.

This requires collaboration and coordination between high school personnel who know about students’ needs, college personnel who know what supports and programs are available, and students themselves, leading to meaningful preparation in the area of steps, decisions, and plans.

Finally, the Math Professor noted that her college had put significant effort into “revamping” their student orientation, and had made it mandatory. She felt that the orientation covered a lot of crucial material and could be very beneficial. “I do think there was a little less sort of deer in the headlights when we revamped our student orientation,
and then made it mandatory,” she said, referring to how students had often been surprised by aspects of college that are different from high school or for which they were unprepared in the area of knowledge. “And a part of that is definitely access to services and what services are available,” she added. “So that has definitely improved since I've been there, which I think also added—It benefitted all students, but definitely students with learning disabilities, I would say even in particular, to provide some of those kind of checkpoints.”

Acclimating and Adjusting

The last type of Working Toward Readiness Criteria is Acclimating and Adjusting, which is up to students, and happens only once their college experience has begun. For some, this is a way of working toward readiness criteria that is born out of necessity. Grace and Grace’s Mother suggested that there just is no way to know quite what to expect or how college will go for a particular student. Grace said, “I don't think there's ever a way to actually be prepared for college; it's more so, you do the best you can. Once you get to college, you kind of just have to figure everything out as you go.” The High School English Teacher said, “I think there's only so much you can tell kids until they get there.” Community college personnel talked about acclimating and adjusting as working toward readiness criteria that happens in the early days of college even for students who are for the most part ready. The Disability Services Representative explained,

Most [students] are successful, you know, with the appropriate support, and especially after their first semester, after they get sort of used to the way that it goes and they get in a rhythm, and they understand sort of what's expected of them, they adjust and they adapt pretty quickly.
This adjustment requires a significant amount of preexisting readiness. It applies the finishing touches on readiness criteria, if a strong foundation has been laid.

**System Limitations**

As stakeholders work toward readiness criteria, they encounter a host of system limitations involving resources, institutional structures, training, and legal and community expectations. These limitations impede and at times undermine operationalization of readiness, including delivery of transition services. The category *System Limitations* explores the barriers participants referenced directly and indirectly in their interviews. At times stakeholders are acutely aware of the barriers, and at other times they are so accustomed to working within a challenged system that elements of that system that undermine their efforts go almost unnoticed. The system limitations discussed here include (a) inadequate resources, (b) structural barriers, (c) lack of training and knowledge regarding special education, (d) restrictive special education policies and practices, (e) counterproductive school and community cultural elements, (f) stigma, and (g) acute fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Inadequate Resources**

Participants identified limitations to a coordinated approach to readiness that are directly tied to insufficient resources. The High School English Teacher alluded to the resource problem when she named “large class sizes” as something that gets in the way of students with learning disabilities having the best possible preparation for college. The Guidance Counselor made several references to aspects of preparation that are missing or compromised due to workload challenges and competing demands on counselors’ time. She began her interview by sharing that her favorite aspects of working with high school
students include “helping [them] think about their future.” She was quick to follow that with, “Every year that goes by, my job becomes more administrative. And so I don't usually get to work with students in quite the way that I like to.”

The Guidance Counselor explained that due to administrative tasks that have been added to her responsibilities, she has “significantly less” time directly working with students. As an example, guidance counselors now meet individually with seniors about their postsecondary plans only once during the school year. The Guidance Counselor commented, “I get a sense that there are some things that students just aren't prepared for in terms of campus life,” that can interfere with a successful transition. “I'd love to think about how to prepare students for kind of what campus life will be like. I don't have time to even begin to think about that, really,” she stated. Similarly, she regrets not having time to “work with students on their interests [and] choosing a major. I do very, very little of that,” she said. The Guidance Counselor knows that transition to college cannot be successful without solid financial planning. Referring to financial aid, she said, “There are students who I would love to be able to sit with through that process more than I can right now.”

The Guidance Counselor also has less time for activities that can indirectly benefit students preparing for college, like attending college-sponsored meetings of the local counselors association that could provide important contacts and exposure to local institutions. Landmark College, which offers programs specifically for students with learning disabilities, “constantly” tries to do outreach, “and they're trying to get us to meet with them,” the Guidance Counselor shared. “And I've tried to explain, I can't, I'm
not, I don't have the time to do that kind of meetings with colleges, I just don't.”

Likewise, she said,

We have college reps that come visit the high school; I always want to sit in on their meetings, and I usually don't get to. I do sometimes go and visit campuses, not nearly as much as I would like.

Nor does she have time to read the “dozens a day probably of emails that I just delete, delete, delete, because I can't.” Email is an inexpensive but ineffective way for postsecondary institutions to do outreach. The Guidance Counselor said, “They inundate us, like it's so much that it's really not useful because we get mail and email like, you know, constantly from colleges.” Without resources to connect, gather information, and offer comprehensive preparation, high schools leave students with many unknowns, and their transition is more makeshift than intentional.

In his account, the Special Education Teacher articulated the challenges special educators in particular face as they attempt to meet the day-to-day demands of their jobs while also getting their students what they need for effective college preparation. In one example, he referenced difficulty accessing information about disability-related supports at colleges. He said, “So you have to do a lot of detective work. And a lot of outreach that sometimes, that stuff is where my ability to follow up consistently— I can't do it all the time.” Moreover, inadequate resources lead to large caseloads for teachers, who then “can't develop a positive rapport as much as they want to and are pulled in so many directions with their meetings and testing responsibilities,” the Special Education Teacher explained. “It's sad, you know, and the way that the burnout can occur there,” he lamented. In a thoughtful and somewhat pained reflection, he went on to say,

I don't think everyone has— You know, I was a young person working in a school, I didn't have a family that I was caring for, through my early years, so I
could just put in a lot of time and effort and understand systems that I can make. And I'm grateful for that after a few years, because I think it—You kind of have to fight for your position in public education in a way, to kind of navigate your duties and your—what you know is a responsibility you can manage or not. And I think that it's very difficult. And I think that it's sad that it impacts the highest need population, you know, across the board.

The Special Education Teacher appreciates having a smaller cohort of students now, and having relationships with families and administrators that enable him to feel effective.

“But it was so hard to get there,” he said. He tied the overwhelming demand on public educators, and special educators in particular, to failure of our systems to adequately serve people with disabilities. The excessive and unsustainable expectations placed on these professionals mean that to do the job well requires making other life sacrifices, and the services a student receives depend greatly on the availability of their providers to go above and beyond reasonable job expectations.

On the other side of the transition, at the postsecondary level, the Disability Services Representative echoed realities of resource-related limitations. Speaking about opportunities to share information with high school students about disability-related support at the community college, she said,

We definitely give [information] out to the students when we do our visits. But you know, we don't have the resources to do enough visits. I mean, I think there should be visits constantly, you know, to all the schools in the area.

When asked for her thoughts on the role of the community college in special education transition services and the possibility of having disability services representatives at IEP team meetings for high school juniors and seniors, she replied,

That would be brilliant. Yes. I would love to see that happen. But that's a—That's a whole nother position, I think, a person, you know, like that's a whole nother position, which, you know, there's no way that's gonna happen right now, at the College. I'd love to see it happen, but there's not—
In short, practices that are easily identified as beneficial to effective preparation and transition are off the table because resources are not available to support them.

**Structural Barriers**

Aside from limitations directly linked to resource availability, participants identified numerous structural barriers to effective preparation and transition service delivery. Policies and practices currently in place often work against the interests of students with learning disabilities with postsecondary education goals.

The Guidance Counselor provided an example of this when she spoke about the disadvantages of the current model of special education service delivery at the high school. The model involves students being scheduled for an academic support/learning strategies class as one of their four courses each semester. “So they might not be taking as many college preparatory classes or as many electives. They're not taking as many classes overall, because a quarter of their classes are special education classes,” the Guidance Counselor explained. Grace’s Mother shared this concern, pointing out,

That's basically two years of a class in one [year], because one semester is a yearlong course. So basically, for eight year— it's eight of those— they don't get to take courses. They have to give something up: chorus, band, you know, unless somebody’s bitchy enough to pitch a fit and say, “No, that's not what we— Nope, that's not how it's gonna work.”

Here Grace’s Mother referred to the fact that she had insisted on more flexibility in Grace’s schedule, with the strategies class only two or three days per week opposite an elective, but what is generally offered is the five-days-a-week version.

This is a structural limitation resulting from scheduling challenges that make it prohibitive to individualize the level of service, despite individualization being what special education law requires. Grace’s Mother shared that Grace’s team agreed the lower
frequency support was more appropriate, but cited the scheduling challenge. With the current model, students miss out on other college preparatory learning opportunities, and may actually pay a developmental price for excessive services. As the Guidance Counselor cautioned, “There's so much support that students, if they are resistant to being really independent, can kind of be successful in being dependent a lot of the time.” This works against preparation for initiative and ownership at the college level.

Scheduling limitations lead to additional challenges, such as student groupings that do not meet students’ needs. Grace’s Mother talked about her disappointment with Grace’s special education instruction one year. She said,

And I can't say I totally blame the teacher, because she was put in a class with kids who were a year ahead of her. So they had very different needs. … So, she didn't really benefit from that. And I think that's not necessarily the teacher, but the way the system is: we just chuck all these kids into this period, because they fit there.

Grace and Grace’s Mother talked about how this limitation affected her college preparation specifically. Grace explained, “It was a little difficult because there were seniors in my class.” The learning strategies teacher “focused college stuff with the seniors and not as much of with me and the other junior that were in the class.” Grace said the teacher suggested,

“Hey, you might want to go look on—” like search and stuff, but that was about it. We never got like the whole spiel on how to find and get scholarships, you know, how to apply for scholarships, how to talk to someone about housing and stuff like that. We didn't get any of that.

Class placement, based on scheduling factors, interfered with transition service delivery that should have been individualized to Grace’s strengths, preferences, and interests, and should have included significant college preparatory instruction.
Postsecondary educators are aware of the structural barriers to coordination between K-12 and postsecondary worlds. The Math Professor spoke about the challenge of responding to what is going on with students as they come out of high school, because there isn’t a one-to-one correspondence. She said,

I think it's hard because a high school, especially a large high school, their students are going to so many different colleges, that it's hard to sort of make changes because this high school is doing this one thing, and you have some students who are coming from there.

And in fact, she is not optimistic about the potential to coordinate across levels at all, because the K-12 system and postsecondary institutions “live under such two totally different umbrellas.” She explained,

Colleges live in a totally different world than K-12. And K-12 has so much more hanging on it, and so many more restrictions and standardizations and stuff that colleges have a lot more freedom to work around. So I think collaboration would be awesome, but I think it's unrealistic, with the system that we have.

Elsewhere in the interview, the Math Professor offered several suggestions for how coordination could occur, and how students could benefit. Underlying her suggestions, however, are serious reservations, based on the structural limitations and barriers she recognizes.

**Lack of Training/Knowledge in Special Education, or Failure to Implement Policies**

Grace’s Mother spoke about their family’s experience with scheduling policies that they successfully fought against but that limit most students’ options and can interfere with individualized services. Beginning in middle school, Grace’s Mother objected to the policy that students with IEPs would be scheduled for learning strategies/academic support classes five days a week, regardless of their level of need for the service. The school was suggesting that Grace replace chorus with a daily special
education class, and Grace’s Mother reports responding, “We're not going to take her out of chorus! So you're going to have to think of something else.” When they insisted that their “policy” was full-time support, she reminded them, “No, that's why it's called an Individualized Education Program.” Whether it is a lack of knowledge of special education laws and regulations, or failure to implement the laws consistently, school policies and accepted practices can undermine preparation and coordinated transition services.

Interviews revealed a number of instances of misunderstanding or lack of knowledge of special education law, and lack of special education training. The High School English Teacher acknowledged, despite over 20 years of teaching experience, “I don't have a lot of special ed training.” The Guidance Counselor qualified opinions she shared about special education service delivery models by saying, “That’s just my un— And I have to say, like uneducated in terms of special education. I know not that much about special education. … Like I really know— like pedagogically I know almost nothing about it.” Her master’s program, she explained, required one course in special education. IEP team members are responsible for delivering aspects of coordinated transition services according to special education law with minimal training in or knowledge of special education.

When it comes to transition-specific special education policy, there is even more ignorance, at times resulting in failure to implement law. Grace’s Mother, though she has relevant personal and professional experience, interpreted the term “transition” as the movement from middle to high school, and between grades, rather than services delivered during high school specifically focused on postsecondary goals. Her responses indicated
that she did not have experience with Grace’s team using the special education meaning.

The Community College English Professor said that the interview was the first time she heard of the idea of special education law requiring high schools to address students’ post-secondary goals and help prepare them to meet those. This is not surprising, given that she is outside the realm of high school service delivery, but familiarity with the concept could certainly be helpful as she strategizes about improving college students’ entry. “Sounds great!,” she added.

The Disability Services Representative referenced reading “billions, billions of IEPs,” and getting to see “what the schools, all the decisions that they've made, with the student, with the parent.” She said, “So, I am pretty familiar with the process and everything like that,” but her responses also suggested that she was not explicitly familiar with the transition services mandate and was not likely to draw on it in any efforts she made at coordinating with high schools, should she find the time to do so.

In a particularly striking instance, the Special Education Teacher spoke very earnestly about a process they had adopted at the high school. He was responding to a question about how big a role college preparation played in the services he was providing, and he was relating his answer to how common it was for students to express postsecondary education goals as part of their IEP vision statements. He said,

We started to do this thing where we would write goals for kids around something called transitional skills. And when we had a team meeting, we would, you know, talk about the student's vision, in their IEP, drafting their plan.

What was striking was that he mentioned, “And this was about, I'd say it was about three to five years ago, where we started to draft these transitional goals that were specifically focused on, you know, what that kid's vision was for themself.” Given that transition
services based on students’ needs, preferences, and interests have been mandated since 1990, and the amendment to IDEA passed in 2004 further clarified the requirement that transition services be tied to postsecondary goals, this was a striking admission of what appears to be the school district’s failure to implement transition law for over a decade, if not longer.

**Special Education Policy and Practice Undermining Student Development and Readiness**

Beyond issues of knowing and appropriately implementing special education law are the potentially undermining effects of legally compliant practices. As the Guidance Counselor relayed, she worries “about whether the initiative piece is kind of in place.” Robust special education services can support students to such an extent that they do not practice and learn crucial habits and attitudes. The Guidance Counselor explained, And that I would say, that's a little bit of a drawback of our model. I love our model. It's great. And I think our teachers are really good at helping students develop skills. At the same time, there's just so much support available that I think some of the students kind of over-rely on, on that, you know, on having an adult who's kind of going to manage everything for them.

The Special Education Teacher concurred when he mentioned, “I think when you get people helping you a lot for so long … it becomes more natural for an external thing to kind of push you along, versus your own internal … stuff.” The concern about a side effect of special education support being reliance rather than initiative and responsibility relates to the readiness criterion of *ownership* identified by participants. The Guidance Counselor and Special Education Teacher indicated working toward readiness criteria may be undermined by supports that put too much of the ownership of learning on others and deprive students of an experience that cultivates it in them.
According to the Guidance Counselor, “The goal of the special education teachers and the team is to, you know, move students towards independence. But it's like how successful we are with that really varies.” The Special Education Teacher described the steps he takes in fulfilling his role that leave little to the student. As the Special Education Teacher relays,

There's accommodations, the teachers have a sense of them, the special ed teacher’s put forward the IEP, told the gen ed teachers that they're the liaison, review the IEP, look over things, you know, you act as like, you’re case management, you're monitoring, you're making sure everyone has the pieces. But I think sometimes it's like, the kids are mystified, like, “Oh, Mr. So-and-So knew I needed this extra time. Cool!”

So much is done on behalf of the student rather than in coordination with the student, that the student is “mystified” and removed.

In addition, special education can be perceived as a safeguard against failure, since not making progress is an indicator of needs not being met, and special education requires providers to meet students’ needs. The system can place more responsibility for keeping up with assignments and passing classes on the special education teacher than on the student. As the participating Special Education Teacher recalled,

Being a first year teacher … I felt like I was just needing to get kids like, “Alright, pass the paper in, it's a week late, just get it to your teacher, come on, we got this, go ahead and do it.” Like, there's a lot of that. There's a lot of just pushing the academic ball.

This reality means that special education itself undermines postsecondary preparation, because a dynamic is established where teachers have to provide the initiative, and adopt the ownership, and it can be very difficult to shift these to the student later. Coordination and shared understanding of the importance of a progression toward independence can be an effective antidote.
School/Community Culture Undermining Readiness

Outside of special education, there are school culture and community culture aspects that can undermine the development of initiative, responsibility, and ownership, which are crucial for readiness.

In the interview with the Guidance Counselor, we discussed the readiness criterion of what she called, “[Knowing] that it's not the end when you struggle.” This criterion was echoed by other participants, appearing also as “persistence,” “resilience,” “risk-taking,” and “knowledge that a first failure isn't a total failure.” I asked for the Guidance Counselor’s thoughts on how to help students develop that knowledge. She responded,

I think we do have to be willing to let them struggle a little bit. And there's, I think, a huge cultural trend against that really, where I think that we're kind of being trained as parents to see our role as making things easy and comfortable for our children. And that, while I fall into it and I understand, you know, the desire, I think it's—it does—it can be really harmful to them.

When asked if she thinks schools as institutions are also part of that culture, she said she feels her school is “moving in that direction, because there's so much pressure from the parents.” She explained that whether or not students are allowed to go through the experience of having their grades suffer when educators hold back from rescuing them “depends in some ways more on the parents than on anything else.”

Elsewhere in the interview, the Guidance Counselor shared,

Unfortunately, though, for students on IEPs, students with 504s, and students with well educated, white, middle and upper class parents in [town where the high school is located], most of them are not allowed to get bad grades at all, and that will happen through a lot of means. Sometimes it's through the IEP or 504, sometimes it's through the parent complaining to the teacher, complaining to administration, complaining to the superintendent, complaining to the school committee about how their child didn't get enough extensions, or didn't get the right kind of support, and so they need to be allowed to retake this test again, after
the semester closed or whate— you know, like stuff that's— that in my opinion, I've seen it sometimes do more harm than good to the students. So I would say that's not— Yes, it is a problem with students with disabilities, but by no means exclusively to them. There's just a high degree of parent advocacy that students don't get a chance to struggle and learn from it, in the same way that I think they should.

For students with learning disabilities and postsecondary education goals, one repercussion of this is that the transition services they are entitled to may be impeded because educators are not empowered to develop ownership in their students that requires some experience of “struggling and learning from it.” When ownership of learning at the high school level is relegated exclusively to the educators, under the pressure of “parent advocacy” and an infantilizing school and community culture, students are likely to arrive at college unfamiliar with and ill-equipped for the ownership their college readiness requires.

What Grace’s Mother referred to as “almost an overemphasis on going to college” can also have undermining effects. “There’s a lot of emphasis put on going to college. And nobody ever talks about not,” she said. If college is presumed to be the only legitimate option within the school and community culture, students may adopt postsecondary education goals without a self-determined process that establishes that college is the right next step based on their preferences and interests. This can make a commitment to developing the criteria for readiness difficult to fulfill. An intentional and individualized transition planning process will ensure students consider all options so if they want to plan for college it is for the right reasons. Similarly, if selective colleges are favored over more accessible options like community college, as Grace’s Mother also described, students may feel that preparing for community college is not necessary or worthwhile, because they get the message that this endeavor is not valued.
Stigma

In my eyes, it's like a societal like, thing to participate in, to get individuals with disabilities more engaged in the world. And I think a part of that is having a level of self-acceptance that's very hard to come by in a world that if you have a disability it’s a huge stigma, to a degree.

These words from the Special Education Teacher express his calling and his commitment to his work, as well as the fundamental challenge stigma presents to the forward movement of students with disabilities. In varied ways, stigma interrupts coordinated efforts at college readiness.

One concrete example of this is students’ decisions not to identify as a student with a learning disability when they get to college. The Community College English Professor described recognizing some students struggling. She said,

And I'll bring up with a student, you know, “Some of the patterns I'm seeing in terms of how you're writing” or whatever, you know, “have you ever been diagnosed?” And then often they will say, “Oh, yeah, I had an IEP in high school, but I didn't want to use it in college.”

Stakeholders suggest that this independent spirit is misdirected. Unlike ownership, which may need to include ownership of disability, denial of disability and/or dismissal of support works against readiness. The English Professor reported, “The students that I see who decide that they're going to like, overcome heroically in college, with no support, struggle more.” She acknowledged that the decision could be related to “internalized stigma and shame.” The Disability Services Representative concurred:

A lot of people are battling with their own— the stigma of being disabled and having a learning disability, you know, and just, and even accepting help, I mean, so you're dealing with, again, their sort of pride, and they don't want— They don't want help, they want to try to do it on their own.

She expressed that students respond to stigma by being more resistant to help, perhaps because they feel they need to prove their competence.
As I have noted, educators regarded Grace as exceptional in her apparent comfort identifying with her disability and being unaffected by stigma. These qualities contributed to her being identified as a possible interview participant, and were likely key to her agreeing to be part of this study. In contrast, another student who was contacted by the High School English Teacher declined on the basis, “I'm not going to continue with my plan in college, so I don't think I'm the best person to talk to.” The English Teacher had the impression, “A lot of kids don't want to take their plan with them [to college].” A third student, whose mother agreed to be interviewed, did not want to have anything to do with a study that would focus on her disability-related experience. She worked very hard to be just like her friends without IEPs, and preferred not to admit that she received special education services, her mother reported. For these students, stigma seems to make conversations about support experience and support access difficult, leaving them less likely to complete steps that are part of readiness.

**COVID-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic added numerous challenges and limitations to coordinated efforts at college readiness, as it did to all aspects of education. Though this was not a focus of the interviews, participants noted the part the pandemic played. Grace mentioned that communications from the Guidance Department that had been providing college-related information and prompting student actions were interrupted when school buildings closed. Grace’s Mother lamented that the special education curriculum that might have addressed transition topics during Grace’s junior year was not delivered in its entirety due to the disruption in March 2020, and college tours were not available to Grace. Furthermore, at Grace’s IEP meeting during her junior year, which was held via
Zoom, it was evident that the team was struggling with “the whole COVID and how to have team meetings.” In response to a question about transition planning at the meeting, Grace’s mother said, “I wouldn't have asked a thing of those people after that. It was really hard.” Transition services, often regarded as an extra, were evidently not a priority during the compromised functioning of the pandemic period.

At the postsecondary level, the Community College English Professor observed

Students who were getting special education services in high school, who were in their graduation year, who then suddenly went remote, I think they didn't get a lot of sort of coaching in transition. … like they didn't really have any work to do at the end of the year. So nobody was really talking to them about what would or wouldn't be beneficial for them to seek out in college. … And so sometimes, you know, some of them are coming into college sort of fresh faced and ready to go but … they're struggling more to bridge it because there was this interruption, and they weren't sure how to handle the transition.

She also mentioned the additional difficulty she faces connecting students with supports due to remote instruction. She said, “I think that has an impact on students coming in who need special education services, because under other circumstances, there's more opportunity for sort of casu— for like visiting the writing tutors, to be normalized.” She felt that students were much more reluctant to access support under remote conditions. Furthermore, she explained, “In person, I can walk them down to the tutoring center and introduce them.” The in-person, interpersonal connections can make the difference in a student getting the help they need.

Falling Short of Coordination

Stakeholders articulate priorities for readiness that convey the importance of a planned, coordinated, team effort at readiness, but in the face of System Limitations, their practices and policies are more reactive and makeshift than coordinated. The category
Falling Short of Coordination captures practices and policies within secondary and postsecondary education that represent stakeholders making do with what they have, rather than delivering what the transition services mandate promises.

Falling Short of Coordination can involve (a) operating in the dark or being left to assume, (b) functioning in isolation, (c) doing too little, or doing it too late, (d) reacting to challenges rather than having a proactive and planned approach, and (e) improvising based on informal and circumstantial relationships and training experiences. These makeshift practices and policies compromise service delivery and student success. The lack of a formal, explicit, coordinated process leads to haphazard and uncoordinated approaches that minimize the effectiveness of stakeholders’ efforts to operationalize readiness, despite their conceptions of readiness being largely aligned. The following terms describe the character of these approaches: Piecemeal, Disconnected, Disjointed, Fragmented, Incomplete, Patchy, Disorganized, Haphazard, Hit-or-miss, Arbitrary, Casual, Informal, Off-the-cuff, Improvised, Unpremeditated, Unintentional, Inadvertent, Serendipitous.

Illustrating the uncoordinated and haphazard nature of preparation in Grace’s experience is this account from Grace: When asked, “Does the team talk about preparing for college? Or what you'll need to do to be ready for college?,” Grace replied,

They haven't— so the team of people that usually show up to my meetings, it’s—they haven't really talked to me much about what to do for college. I have talked to my guidance counselor when I took my PSATs, or for like junior college searching stuff. And she mentioned like a couple of things that because my score on the PSATs were very low that I should consider a school that is test optional, that maybe I should consider a small school and like stuff like that like suggestions. But I've never been— I've never talked to the team of kind of like, what I should do to prepare for college and what to look for in a college. So I've been kind of— going on my ow— like my own thought, like going off of Naviance and College Board, like, the little search things that you have, where
you can be like, “I want this at the college,” you know? But that's about it. I have— that's all that my team has talked about.

Without a coordinated conversation or message about how to approach the college search and choice process, Grace is improvising, “going on [her] own thought,” and making do with the tools that are at her disposal. Her efforts at preparation occur in isolation.

**In the Dark**

In their interviews, participants frequently expressed being unsure. They qualified statements they made, said “I think,” or simply stated that they didn’t know. It became evident that stakeholders are often left to operate on assumptions and function ‘in the dark,’ without information that could help them work toward readiness for students with learning disabilities.

**College Supports**

Grace conveyed a lack of confidence in her knowledge when she talked about how she thought college would differ from high school in terms of disability-based support. She said,

The way I depict it, and I'm not saying it's 100% how all colleges handle it or if any colleges handle it this way, but a student that has some sort of learning disability is kind of pushed in with students of other disabilities in general. And I'm not saying that's how any college might actually do it, but that's just how my mind works. ... That's just the way I think of it. And I, like I said, … I could be very wrong.

Grace was engaged in a process of preparing for college where understanding what support would look like in college was crucial, yet she didn’t know “if any colleges handle it” the way she envisioned. She was functioning within an uncoordinated system that neither confirmed nor denied her assumptions. Grace also explained that she had attended several of the visits by college representatives to her high school, but had been
disappointed by some of the responses to her questions about supports the institutions offered for students with learning disabilities. “I understand that they can't give me an in-depth answer, because they had a very limited time that they could be there,” she said.

“But, you know,” she continued, “it would have been helpful just to have, like a small little answer, just like, ‘Yeah, we could do this. Yes, the college offers … like, tutoring or staying after with teachers for help,’ and like stuff like that.” In the absence of a planned, coordinated approach to conveying information about disability-related supports during these sessions, Grace was left wondering and discouraged.

When asked, “Has anyone talked to you about how the whole process works in college, of getting support?,” Grace replied, “Nnno! No one's really talked to me. I know that because I'm on an IEP, I will be transferred to a 504? When I'm in college? That's what I've heard. But that's all I know.” Someone had alerted her, or somehow she had surmised, that there would be a change, but she had minimal knowledge of it, and no specifics about her rights, or her responsibilities, under the new scenario.

The Disability Services Representative confirmed how common it is for students to be in the dark about the changes. When asked what comes to mind when she thinks about students transitioning from high school to college, she said,

Lack of preparedness, period. They just don't know— They don't know anything about college whatsoever. They don't know how to apply, they don't understand the financial aid piece of it, they don't understand the skills, they don't have, they— I think one of the biggest things is that they don't understand how their accommodations— how their IEP, perhaps, it's not the same as when they come to college.

The Disability Services Representative also said that students are often in the dark about the specifics of their disability and how it affects their learning. “They know they [have a disability]. But they don't know what it entails, what's, you know, they don't know
completely what it is,” she said. Grace demonstrated that she is an exception to this, with a high level of disability awareness, attributable to the efforts of her mother and the commencement at a young age of Grace’s participation in her special education process. As the High School English Teacher confirmed, referring to Grace and her confidence around and comfort with her IEP, “It’s who she is, and what she needs, and she's got it, and you need to follow it, and you need to honor it … and it’s pretty cool! But more kids are not like that, I would say.”

**College Expectations**

Similar to Grace, non-student high school stakeholders relied on vague notions and assumptions about what current college expectations are, and how what they work on with students will apply to postsecondary education demands. The English Teacher shared that she found it “disheartening” to get “data from our counselors that a lot of our students, even when they're going to [one of the local community colleges], when they go to take the placement exam, they have to take a remedial English.” She elaborated that this “tend[s] to be more of the ELL students, and special ed students,” which she seemed to feel offered some reassurance that she and her colleagues could be preparing some students for postsecondary success. However, the only other indicators she could access of her students’ preparedness in her content area were Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) and Advanced Placement (AP) scores. Regarding MCAS, she said, “I don't know if that's really from colleges.” She continued, “The AP exams, I think, give us some sort of data.” Many students, including students with postsecondary education goals, do not enroll in AP courses or take the AP exam. The English Teacher concluded,
I'm not too sure. I think we're, you know, amongst the English teachers, we're always trying to, you know, find creative things for [students] to read and write about. But I'm not sure we really know for what college purpose. Sort of intrinsic.

Teachers are expected to teach to state standards, which are not exclusively tied to college preparation. Herein lies the rub for students with learning disabilities whose special education status entitles them to transition services aligned with their postsecondary goals: If they are enrolled in general education English, they need to be accessing lessons there that include learning outcomes with known—deliberate, intentional—college purpose. The English Teacher’s suggestion is that college preparation is a side effect of a high school education, rather than something explicit. But for students in special education with postsecondary education goals, transition legislation calls for it to be explicit.

The Special Education Teacher expressed the difficulty he encountered learning “about a college's disability-related processes.” Information he found on websites was “very vague,” leaving him in the dark about “how in [his] role [he] could connect with them” or guide his students. Other pathways to this information were not evident to him. Furthermore, when asked if there are opportunities to hear directly from colleges what they expect students to be prepared for, he replied, “You know, it's not like there's been seminars for—.”

**Colleagues’ Efforts**

Stakeholders were also unsure about the efforts of other stakeholders, including their colleagues. Though the Guidance Counselor referenced working “very closely” with special education teachers “on supporting students through getting ready for college,” she indicated she was not sure exactly what special education teachers do or discuss with
their students. For example, she said she sometimes talks to her students about having to take much more initiative to access supports in college than is expected in high school and she said, “I think that some of the special education teachers have that kind of conversation with the students as well.” When she talked about challenges ensuring that students are prepared to take more of a role in their education, as opposed to relying on their special education teachers to organize their assignments for them, for example, the Guidance Counselor acknowledged, “I mean, I'm guessing a little bit of what I th— because I don't do that part, really—at what happens.”

The Guidance Counselor also talked about what she would like goals to be for her students, working toward independence, but she didn’t appear to have had the opportunity to discuss this with special education teachers who would play a key role in goal-setting and skill-building. Referring to the special education teachers, she said, “So I don't—I think, I mean, I don't know, I guess I— I don't know the details—you know, how they see the goals.” She was working hard, and doing her best, as a component of an uncoordinated system, with some optimism but lack of clarity that others were reinforcing her efforts. At the postsecondary level, the Disability Services Representative knew that others in her office did outreach to high schools, but she wasn’t able to go herself and didn’t know the specifics of where they went, how often, or exactly what they shared.

**Longitudinal Outcomes**

High school stakeholders also operate in the dark when it comes to learning from the postsecondary experiences of their alumni. They receive little, if any, information about what happens when students they have worked with enroll in postsecondary
education. Therefore, they miss the opportunity to apply lessons about what has worked and not worked to their efforts with current students. The Special Education Teacher shared this experience:

I've had students where, when I first started—and this sticks with me—when they went to college, then it was like they had a semester, and they were like, done. And they didn't go back. And I didn't know what happened thereafter.

He was left to guess exactly what hadn’t worked out and why, and left to figure out for himself what to do about it. The not knowing, and the perceived failure, haunted the Special Education Teacher, and had an impact on his developing approach, as I discuss in a subsequent section. Self-driven professional development notwithstanding, the system he operates in is not adequately coordinated for him to track what happens when his students attempt postsecondary education. The English Teacher confirmed that she does not typically learn what students struggled with in the transition to postsecondary education, or what they felt prepared for. She acknowledged, “And how it all pans out for these kids in the end, you kind of never know. They go out—they leave the high school, and then I'm sure the guidance department has some exit data on them.” For her part, the Guidance Counselor explained, “I would also love to know more about how things go; follow up the year after and find out how it went.” But she lamented, “I hardly ever get to talk to students after they go.”

Likewise, the English Teacher gets the sense that many students prefer not to access disability-related supports when they leave high school, but when asked directly, she replied, “I don't know. I'm not really sure about that.” Without clear and accurate information about support-related behavior, high school stakeholders are left with
guesses and assumptions rather than insight that might guide their decision-making and transition service delivery.

**Preparatory Experiences**

Postsecondary educators operate on assumptions when it comes to the high school experiences of their students, because of a lack of information and coordination. Reflecting on what students might learn in anticipation of the transition to college, and recalling her own experience many years ago, the Disability Services Representative acknowledged, “So I don't know, you know, I wonder, I haven't been in a high school in so long, but, so I don't know if they still do that or not, you know, I'm not, I'm not sure.”

The Math Professor indicated the mystery that surrounds how some students are connected with support services before starting classes, while others are not. She said, “I think some students are hooked up that way. And I don't know if that's them, or their parents, or their high school, but they come in already kind of plugged into those things.” She also expressed, “There is enough students who don't come in plugged in that I feel like that could be a huge part of the transition for them,” suggesting the need for a coordinated process that would be consistent across students. Unfortunately, knowledge and information about what is currently happening for some students and that could support improvement in this area is missing.

**In Isolation**

As opposed to working in coordination, stakeholders seem to work toward readiness criteria in isolation. Their shared conceptions of readiness suggest that they are working toward many of the same goals, but because of an absence of communication about preparation and as a consequence of some of the system limitations discussed
previously, stakeholders make their efforts in a way that is detached from other team members.

Grace’s Mother acknowledged this when I asked if she felt the role of helping Grace understand the need to advocate was shared between her and the school. “Oh, I think that's me,” she answered. “I could name certain teachers, special ed teachers, who I thought were on that same page with me,” she said, but she did not express that she experienced working with Grace on aspects of readiness as part of a coordinated team. Meanwhile, the Math Professor indicated her discomfort asserting her opinions about what should be prioritized in preparation, coming from the “totally different world” of postsecondary education. She is accustomed to thinking about readiness issues in isolation. She said, “I think if I were going to sort of give advice, which makes me feel a little uncomfortable …,” suggesting that coordination across education levels feels foreign and awkward.

The Guidance Counselor introduced the idea of “domains” when she said, “And there's just so many things that are— There’re so many academic pieces that are kind of not my domain so much.” It is appropriate for stakeholders to have distinct domains, just as they have distinct roles. Falling short of coordination occurs when there is no blueprint for how the pieces of preparation are spread across the domains, and stakeholders, including families, are left to assume that everything will be covered without an articulated plan or comprehensive design.

The Guidance Counselor took a notable pause before answering the question, “Would you say there's a shared understanding of what students need to be college ready? Is it something that the teams talk about?” When she replied, she explained,
I don't know if I know the answer to that. I guess probably not so much—like I think there's a strong college-going culture at the high school, a lot of the parents are really educated, and the guidance counselors and the special education teachers work together very closely on supporting students through getting ready for college. But I don't know that the team as a whole has a vision for that so much.

The college-going culture of the school is a unifying force, and there is a shared understanding that many parties are ushering students toward college. The guidance counselors and special education teachers do coordinate their efforts at helping students prepare. But a “vision” for what it means to be ready—or how to get there—held by the “team as a whole” is missing. Instead, stakeholders hold their own conceptions of readiness and work toward them from isolated, rather than coordinated, positions.

The Guidance Counselor continued,

The way that the IEP meetings happen, the guidance counselors don't always stay for the whole thing, and I would say particularly with ninth and tenth graders. And there are sections about what are your goals, and so I'm not very often in that section of the meeting for ninth and tenth graders, so I don't know what's being discussed there. So I don— I wouldn— there might be a shared vision that just doesn't include me.

The Guidance Counselor is open to the possibility that the rest of the team has a shared vision, but even if that is the case—and she didn’t offer any evidence that it is—it is hard to imagine an effective coordinated effort that excludes the Guidance Counselor, given the key role guidance counselors play in the college preparation system at the high school. The Guidance Counselor was explicit about having to prioritize IEP meetings for juniors and seniors, and playing a smaller part in the meetings for ninth and tenth graders.

This means that opportunities for involvement of crucial stakeholders in goal-setting are missed, and long term planning that might facilitate the development of readiness criteria over four years is seriously thwarted.
The Guidance Counselor’s account of IEP meetings is telling: schedules and workloads do not permit all team members to participate in the full meeting. This reality would dictate that for coordination to be realized, there would need to be highly effective mechanisms for coordination outside IEP meetings; yet on multiple occasions stakeholders indicated that IEP meetings are really the only form of a “team” they recognize. They did not convey a sense of access to the team, or of a team functioning, beyond the meeting setting. For example, the Special Education Teacher, asked if he felt that the team had a shared idea about what was needed to get a student ready for college, replied, “Sometimes, yes, but sometimes, no,” and described a team meeting scenario.

Finally, the Guidance Counselor’s conclusion echoes back to the subcategory, ‘Operating in the Dark.’ She said, “I can’t say the team doesn't have a shared vision, but I can’t identify that there's a shared vision.” If it is that unclear, it is unlikely to be effective. The not knowing in itself undermines the potential of a coordinated, team effort, and of the Guidance Counselor’s own efforts. She is left to guess about whether or not what she is working toward is aligned with and reinforced by what others are doing. The very long pause that followed the question, “Do you think that your ideas about what students need to do to get ready are reflected in the transition services or in the IEP in any way?” seemed to confirm this.

**Too Little or Too Late**

Sometimes coordinated work toward readiness is occurring, but at an inadequate level or at too late a point. When asked if the IEP team has a shared idea of what a student who has stated that they want to go to college will need to be able to do when they get there, the High School English Teacher replied, “Yeah, I think so. But it's pretty
general, like they need to be able to, you know, read a text and respond to a prompt and write an essay.” This example, likely from a common academic IEP goal, suggests a very superficial level of coordinated efforts at preparing students for college demands.

Similarly, Grace’s Mother responded to a question about what is included in Grace’s IEP that is specifically college preparatory with, “Aside from just the study skills, and that kind of things, and time management, and— but I don’t think there’s anything specific to, you know, taking your IEP to student services.” Grace’s Mother spoke very positively about the skill building that was done in Grace’s high school special education classes around study skills and strategies, but her understanding of preparation was that it did not go far enough to include essential elements like preparing to access accommodations and services under a different system.

For her part, Grace expressed two concerns related to “too little or too late.” She indicated that she knew college preparatory instruction happened in special education classes, but it was directed toward seniors, “because they were closer to college than we were [as juniors].” Grace acknowledged that she would have preferred to start the process earlier. She explained,

I feel like a little bit more time to work on it would be better. Just because, looking at a college, there are a lot more factors that go into looking for a college for you—Especially with someone who has an IEP, you don’t just want to look at the fact that they have like a Help Center, or like tutors, you also— you also wanna look at the basic college stuff, like, “Do I want to be in a rural area, or do I want to be in a city? … Like, “Do I care if I can bring my car to the campus?” Like stuff like that.

Grace feels the importance of the whole search process, and she does not want to be pigeonholed as a special education student and have it just be about support. It was important to her to have time for a thoughtful process that went beyond disability-related
aspects to the factors typical students consider. And this meant senior year would be too late.

Grace also expressed her desire for a supported college search process that was individualized, personalized, and went deeper than what she experienced. She articulated it this way:

Sometimes when you're talking to a guidance counselor, they kind of don't—- They don't sound realistic in a way. Because, when you talk to them, they look at the classes you've taken, and they look at your test scores, and they think, “Oh, these colleges would be perfect for you!” And you kind of look at them, and you go, “Yeah, they might be good.” But then you're like, they don't have anything that I would want to do. Or, they're expensive, I don't have the financial situation for that. Or, just in general, that's really far! Do I want to go that far for college? So, I feel like, in a way, guidance counselors should also listen to their student—to the student that they’re talking to about college, instead of just looking at a paper that says these are the classes they've taken, this is what they excel at. … You know, I feel like, most guidance counselors should loo— should ask the students more questions.

Grace expressed that this aspect of her transition services was too superficial, suggesting that meaningful transition assessment, evaluating her strengths, needs, preferences, and interests, was missing. Intentional, proactive, coordinated, and adequately resourced preparation would include a transition assessment with interest inventories and other elements to get to the heart of Grace’s questions about what would be the best next step for her.

While the previous examples relate to “too little,” a postsecondary educator interview provided an example of “too late.” In their efforts to help students entering community college understand what will be expected of them, professionals have worked hard to develop effective orientation programming. The Math Professor talked about the explicit information about credit hours and associated time demands that has been added to their orientation, “because we just realized that that was a skill [incoming students]
didn't have.” She confirmed that student orientation is offered in the summer before students begin, and she acknowledged, “But, you know, sometimes that's a little too late. Or it's so much. It's like they're being bombarded with a ton that day.” If information about college expectations can be made available to students while they are still in high school, perhaps spread over a longer period than a one-day orientation, they may be able to process, internalize, and apply it more meaningfully and effectively.

Reacting

Participants painted pictures of policies and practices that are reactive, rather than proactive, planned, and intentional. Reactive responses are an indication of a system that falls short of coordination and leaves stakeholders to respond to what arises without the benefit of forethought.

Grace’s Mother gave more than one example from Grace’s time in the school district when educators proposed or provided services that she didn’t feel met her daughter’s needs, and when she objected, decisions were changed. Grace’s mother reacted to what was happening, and then other stakeholders reacted to her. Referring to her successful objection to the one-size-fits-all policy of daily academic skills/strategies class, she said, “I worry there are a lot of parents who don't know they can fight, and try and change things for their kids to give them the best of both worlds.” Among other problems, the reactive approach meant that practices were different for students whose parents did not object than they were for Grace. Referring to an arrangement made for Grace to access more individualized special education instruction, Grace’s mother said,

That was definitely something set up just for her because— My reputation precedes me and I had a fit and they did something about it. But it's not right. Because I think there's a lot of other kids who that happened to and because their parents don't know what they can ask for, maybe they didn't get it.
The idea that strong parent advocacy changes services for students and contributes to inequities is familiar in special education. Grace’s Mother articulated her experience in a compromised system where what is simplest or least expensive for the school district is offered to many students, and individualized services are granted only through a reactive process, when a parent or other stakeholder raises an objection.

From inside this system, the Guidance Counselor seemed unfazed. What I identify as reactive may have felt responsive to her. She said,

I have had a couple students informally split the learning strategies with either chorus, internship, or work study. It’s not like something we advertise or offer, but if a student has asked for it, we sometimes figured out how to arrange it. And I think that, you know, that’s been good for students.

The Guidance Counselor acknowledged limitations of the school’s service delivery model, but she also had learned to function within a system that did not have the capacity under its current design to be proactively individualized.

Discussing the college readiness services she is able to deliver to students given her workload and competing demands, the Guidance Counselor mentioned that she would like to be more thorough in reaching students about the differences in support between high school and college, something we know is crucial for students to understand. She explained,

I'd like to be able to help students with learning disabilities, like more systematically in looking at that, because right now, it's kind of like, either a student asked me for help with that, or I kind of know that they need that, but I don't get to check in with all of my students with learning disabilities about that.

“More systematically” would mean in a coordinated, proactive fashion, reaching all relevant students. Rather, when she is able to work toward this readiness criterion, it is in
a reactive mode, reaching a somewhat arbitrary subset of students while others who may also need the preparation are missed.

Stakeholders also anticipated a reactive quality in the adjustment to the college setting. Grace told me she does not believe “there's ever a way to actually be prepared for college; it's more so, you do the best you can. Once you get to college, you kind of just have to figure everything out as you go.” The High School English Teacher concurred, saying,

And unfortunately, I think when they get there, that's when they find out about the preparation. So sometimes I think they have a pretty tough fall, and then they find where they can get what they need. They figure it out … . I think, you know, it's a jump in independence. And it's, you kind of don't know, until you get there.

This raises a question whether reacting to a challenging fall semester is inevitable, or if with more effective preparation, it could be avoided or minimized. There is a lot at stake, as the Disability Services Representative emphasized when she said, “Because so many, if they don't have a successful first semester, we lose them.”

Some aspects of postsecondary education are dramatically different from high school, and knowing may not be adequate; yet, there is no way to practice functioning with a lack of structure, for example, in a high school that is full of structure. The Math Professor referred to the “surprise” many students experience when there is less scaffolding for long-term projects: “I think there is more onus on the student, just to kind of keep up with some of those longer term things, which can be a surprise, I think, at the beginning.” The Disability Services Representative referred to not mere surprise but shock—culture shock—at the adjustment to monitoring one’s own performance. “Because they're not used to that, right, they're used to teachers really being on top of them, telling what they need to do, all the time. And it's not like that,” she said. The Math
Professor acknowledged, “It really depends on the high school they went to,” suggesting that some high schools find ways to help students develop necessary skills and attitudes and face less surprise and reaction. The High School English Teacher seemed content to accept reaction as the reality. She said, “I think there's only so much you can tell kids until they get there. And then they realize, ‘Oh, I do need to be able to do this more independently,’ perhaps.”

**Informal/Circumstantial**

Stakeholders often engage in makeshift practices, piecing together knowledge resources and material resources and improvising in the absence of comprehensive training and clear supervision. Under informal and circumstantial conditions, they learn from trial and error, working to improve their practices based on the outcomes they observe.

The Special Education Teacher, arguably the stakeholder holding the bulk of responsibility for delivering transition services, talked extensively about practices he developed “on the job,” incorporating elements that were successful for colleagues, and fixing what hadn’t worked for previous students. He said, “It wasn't until I just had some experiential learning on the job early on, that I got a sense of how kids can be prepared in the college setting.” He described a process of “kind of channeling other teachers” as he prepared for IEP meetings in his first years. He could turn to colleagues to ask for guidance about supporting his college-bound students. He described, “I would talk to my co-workers, and say, ‘Alright, this kid wants to go to college, so what are some things I should be aware of?’” He confirmed the informal and haphazard nature of this training:

Definitely, it was an informal thing. We didn't have our administrators giving us that information or anything like that about those very clear processes of how
students get accommodations or whatnot at the post-secondary level. That was something I had to pick up between, you know, interpersonal relationships, and whatnot.

He described adapting a practice that a colleague used with students with more intensive needs than those on his caseload:

That teacher is incredible, and would really help their students make a slideshow about their needs and stuff like that. It was really in-depth stuff they were doing. And maybe at first I didn't see my students as kids who needed that level of intensive look at their own profiles. But then I was like, “Wait a minute, you really do in some way,” like something more appropriate for them.

From that realization, he launched an independent effort with his students to develop their disability awareness and advocacy and engagement around accommodations and IEPs through conferences and role-plays. He explained, “So those are parts of my practice that I’ve been developing through the years and are still in development, because I just feel like I had to adjust to what I was seeing.”

The Special Education Teacher described these transition services as “something that I had to kind of self-design and become confident that this was important, because of those conversations I had with my coworkers, because of what I’ve observed of kids transitioning to college.” Through observation, improvisation, and “self-design,” “through the years,” he developed his practice. “It was definitely something to build, you know, and that I picked up informally,” he said. Presumably, his current students benefit from these practices, almost at the expense of those who came before them, when the trial and error was still playing out. Improvising, observing, and adapting may produce effective practices in the long run, but this system falls short of a coordinated system, and has a price.
The Special Education Teacher provided additional examples of operating within a system that relies on the informal relationships between stakeholders to make up for incomplete training and supervision. He described,

[A guidance counselor] and myself are actually close, and we'll have lunch and whatnot. And that has been huge, because that individual has given me so much perspective on the details of the college admissions process, etc. And I don't think that without that rapport I would actually be as well aware, and consistently aware, of how to think about the college either admissions process or aspects of what a college offers, if I didn't have a close relationship with someone who has much experience in guidance counseling.

Despite this benefit, the Special Education Teacher still struggled to cover all the aspects of preparation he knew his students needed, but he had a distinct advantage that had nothing to do with his formal training.

The Special Education Teacher even surprised himself with the realization that something he found quite helpful, “general knowledge to share with families about, ‘Hey, okay, you need to meet with the disability office, and there's going to be a level of advocacy needed for your child,’” did not come through formal training, but informally from colleagues. At first, he said it was “something I learned in my coursework, etc.,” but when I attempted to confirm that, he corrected himself:

No, that was also a coworkers thing. I understood disability law; IDEA, stuff like that. But I think then when I worked with my co-workers and had experience with them early on about, “Okay, what are kids doing—? I know we have an IEP—” like learning that from them. It's actually something I had to pick up on the job; now that you ask me more in depth.

He also referred to having a “sense,” rather than explicit knowledge, of what would be involved in students accessing disability-related support in postsecondary education, and he considered it “lucky” that he had a sense. It would follow that students would have to be “lucky” to receive this critical element of transition services.
The Special Education Teacher pointed out potential consequences of a lack of
coordination and intentional and explicit processes, especially combined with the system
limitation of inadequate resources that results in large caseloads. He described the
problem of relying on the informal transfer of information and on-the-job training that he
had experienced:

Imagine if you're a very overwhelmed special ed teacher just coming into the job.
I had been five years in that school as a paraprofessional, so I had rapport. But if
you're coming in new, and then you don't get that information, and then you're
sitting in meetings with families who are expecting things, that's just when your
stress and all that is going to impact and you're not going to be able to, you know,
build those understandings and get those kids what they need.

Operating in this way falls short of coordination by relying on informal and
circumstantial development of knowledge, skills, practices and policies. When training
and professional development are not intentional, planned, or formal, transition services
are at the whim of chance. Beneficial circumstances, learning on the job, and informality
may come through for some students in some situations, but they are unlikely to serve all
students adequately.

**Theory of Stakeholders’ Conceptualization and Operationalization of College
Readiness**

The final stage of analysis is the development of a theory to explain the
phenomenon of stakeholders conceptualizing and operationalizing college readiness for
students with learning disabilities. The theory, or story of the data, is as follows: *While
stakeholders’ conceptions of college readiness are largely aligned, system limitations
lead to a lack of coordination between conceptions of readiness and preparation, and
between respective efforts at preparation. The absence of both an explicit approach to
and a formalized process of preparation compromises operationalization of readiness,*
including delivery of transition services. Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the phenomenon, and the model description provides further explanation of the mechanisms at work.

**Figure 2**

*Model of Conceptualization and Operationalization of College Readiness*

Each team member, or stakeholder, has a *distinct vantage point* from which they view college readiness, related to their role and their personal and professional experience. For example, the student is influenced by her older siblings’ college experiences, and by her college planning related interactions at school, among other things. The high school English teacher’s vantage point reflects her own experiences as a college student, and feedback she has gotten about her students’ performance on tests.

Each stakeholder holds their own *conceptions of readiness* according to their vantage point. Across stakeholders, there is some overlap and alignment in *conceptions of readiness*. For example, all of the high school and postsecondary stakeholders referred to
an attitude of ownership, in some form or other, as part of readiness. Stakeholders agree on many points of what it means to be ready for college.

System limitations, such as resource inadequacies and structural barriers, interfere between stakeholders’ conceptions of readiness and working toward readiness criteria. This is seen in the descriptions of special education teachers and guidance counselors with large caseloads and increasing administrative duties that interfere with their service to students. Furthermore, working toward readiness criteria tends to be compartmentalized, rather than collaborative and coordinated, based on the stakeholder’s role or “domain.” While working toward readiness criteria, each stakeholder addresses a distinct aspect of preparation, covering much of the appropriate terrain, but without overlap or integration of their efforts. The Guidance Counselor focuses on the college search and choice process, the English Teacher addresses reading and writing skills, and the Special Education Teacher focuses on advocacy and disability awareness, with few opportunities to work together or even to talk with one another about what they are doing or how to reinforce one another’s efforts.

With additional system limitations related to training and community culture, stakeholders operationalize readiness as part of a college preparation process that is reactive and haphazard, rather than intentional and coordinated. Take for instance that informal relationships with colleagues, rather than professional development or administrator direction, led the special education teacher to develop meaningful transition curriculum for his students. Preparation falls short of coordination, and students experience an outcome of compromised operationalization of readiness, including delivery of transition services. The student reported that her IEP team didn’t talk to her
about what to do to prepare for college. Compromised operationalization of readiness becomes part of each stakeholder’s experience, and plays into the vantage point from which they continue to operate.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The poor success rates of students with learning disabilities transitioning to postsecondary education signal that transition services, as currently delivered, are failing to prepare students adequately for the demands and expectations they face in college. Despite long-standing legislation designed to ensure that special education addresses students’ postsecondary goals and placing responsibility on high schools to do more than get their students to graduation (Wilson et al., 2009), young people with learning disabilities are not seeing their college aspirations come to fruition at the rate of their nondisabled peers (Newman et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2010).

Poor postsecondary education outcomes for students with learning disabilities call for a careful examination of how practice is falling short of the promise of the IDEA transition mandate. To date, transition research has provided limited guidance for IEP team members and other stakeholders charged with preparing students with learning disabilities for successful pursuit of higher education degrees. Furthermore, existing literature is nearly silent on the process of postsecondary education transition service decision-making, and team member understanding of college readiness. This study sought to answer the question, *How do IEP team members and related stakeholders conceptualize and operationalize college readiness for students with learning disabilities whose postsecondary goals include college?* The intent of the study was to gather insights from how stakeholders think about and go about the business of readiness to inform additional research as well as improvements to policy and practice, leading to more satisfactory outcomes for this population of students. I used Constructivist
Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014) to address the research question, and found that conceptions of college readiness are largely aligned across stakeholders, but there is a lack of coordination between conceptions of readiness and preparation, and between respective efforts at preparation. The absence of both an explicit approach to and a formalized process of preparation compromises operationalization of readiness and delivery of transition services.

In this chapter, I discuss connections between my findings and prior studies identifying evidence-based transition practices and predictors for postsecondary education, and connections between my findings and prior studies exploring what special education team members and transition stakeholders say about what students need to succeed in postsecondary education. I present the implications of this study for transition service delivery going forward, and the implications for future research.

**Connections with Prior Literature**

The literature that is relevant to this research study falls into two categories. The first is literature addressing transition services and postsecondary education outcomes, and the second is literature examining how transition stakeholders understand readiness and determine the college preparation needs of students with learning disabilities. In the first category, quantitative methods have been used to identify predictors of positive postsecondary education outcomes. The studies in the second category are a mix of quantitative and qualitative research, utilizing primarily survey and Delphi methods. Only one available study, a dissertation study (Hudson, 2011), employed qualitative interview methods, and this study focused only on high school counselors. By using Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014) and a sample that includes each of the roles in an IEP
team, my research pries into the dynamics between stakeholders and predictors, and between predictors and the systems that dictate stakeholder behaviors and student outcomes. My qualitative findings fill out a broader and deeper picture of positive predictors, which can be difficult to operationalize, and provide a sophisticated depiction of stakeholders’ views of readiness and preparation priorities.

**Postsecondary Education Predictors**

The existing literature endorses a handful of predictors of positive postsecondary education outcomes identified in correlational studies. These are 1) inclusion in general education, 2) participation in a transition program, 3) youth autonomy/decision making, and 4) special education/guidance counselor coordination (Haber et al., 2016; Kosine, 2007; Mazzotti et al., 2016; Test, Mazzotti, et al., 2009). The predictors are general, and despite some efforts to define related terms (e.g., Rowe et al., 2015), there are no specific guidelines in the quantitative literature for putting them into practice. The details of how these concepts are operationalized can make the difference in whether or not they are effective. References in my qualitative work to these predictors do not have correlational or causal implications, but they provide descriptive information that can build our understanding of how the predictors function in the day-to-day experiences of stakeholders.

**Inclusion in General Education**

While most participants in my study did not identify inclusion in general education per se as a priority when they spoke about readiness, inclusion was often implied. The parent did refer to general education directly, expressing the effort she had put forward to make sure that Grace was only in the special education classes she
absolutely needed, maximizing her participation in general education. The secondary participants all referred to performance in general education courses and communication with general education teachers, indicating an association between general education inclusion and the path toward college. The service delivery model that secondary participants referred to was special education skills and strategies class, accompanying general education content area classes. These priorities reflect widespread acceptance of inclusion in general education as a positive predictor of postsecondary outcomes (Haber et al., 2016; Test, Mazzotti, et al., 2009).

Transition Program

My findings reveal that secondary stakeholders address select readiness criteria within their own domains, but coordinated transition programming is sorely lacking. For example, the English teacher instructs students in how to write about what they read, the special education teacher role-plays requesting accommodations with students, and the guidance counselor meets with students to identify potential institutions, but Grace reports that no one has talked to her about what to look for in a college or how disability-related support works in college. Meanwhile, postsecondary participants point to the void where a bridge should be between secondary and postsecondary supports.

In the literature, Transition Program as a positive predictor of postsecondary education is defined as “comprehensive transition planning and education that creates individualized opportunities, services, and supports to help students achieve their post-school goals” (Rowe et al., 2015, p. 123). While vague and general, this definition conveys high standards for the predictor. Comprehensive transition planning is precisely what my findings suggest is lacking. Instead, efforts are haphazard and services are
makeshift and uncoordinated. Individualized opportunities, services, and supports are not the norm, but are provided as a reaction to strong parent advocacy. Participation in a transition program thus defined is conveyed as an ideal when participants describe readiness criteria. Providing comprehensive transition planning and education, however, is stymied by system limitations.

**Youth Autonomy/Decision Making**

Student ownership, initiative, and responsibility are prominent in my findings as frames of mind essential to a successful college experience. These concepts, expressed with varying terminology (confidence, investment, purpose, self-reliance, and independence were also used), appeared in postsecondary as well as secondary stakeholders’ conceptions of readiness, and are consistent with the literature identifying youth autonomy/decision-making as a predictor category correlated with postsecondary education (Mazzotti et al., 2016). Grace’s mother expressed her belief that it was important Grace got to make decisions about her high school schedule and courses and how her special education class would fit in. When students experience autonomy and empowered decision-making in high school, they can develop ownership for their college education. I discuss Ownership of Learning further in the section on College Readiness Criteria below.

**Special Education/Guidance Counselor Coordination**

In my findings, coordination between secondary educators is a matter of happenstance, and it is clear that the structures in place at the high school do not facilitate coordination between school counselors and special educators. The consequences of the lack of coordination—namely, compromised transition services—are apparent, as are the
potential benefits of coordination. In the only published review of literature specific to students with learning disabilities and postsecondary education transition programs, Kosine (2007) found the importance of comprehensive and coordinated services, particularly coordination between school counselors and special educators to facilitate effective college transition planning. Kosine links comprehensive services and coordinated services, which my findings also support, indicating that transition planning and services need to be organized so as to address both the required scope and complexity of preparation.

**How Stakeholders Conceptualize College Readiness**

Based on the literature, we do not know the degree to which IEP team members or other stakeholders typically consider evidence-based practices and predictors when making decisions about college preparatory transition services. Neither the role of evidence-based practices nor of other influences in stakeholder decision-making is well understood. The literature has all but overlooked the topic of how IEP team members and related transition stakeholders determine the college preparation needs of students with learning disabilities, and how they understand readiness. My study adds to the literature by contributing findings on stakeholder *vantage points*, which reveal some of the influences on college readiness conceptualizations. My findings provide qualitative evidence that the factors previously identified as predictors are valued by stakeholders. I also found that participants did not cite education research as a source of their conceptions of readiness criteria. Rather, conceptions appear to develop out of personal, family, and professional experiences, with the professional experiences reflecting chance encounters and circumstantial observations more than deliberately-promoted evidence-
based practices. The following sections address the ways in which my study builds on existing literature related to conceptualization and operationalization of readiness.

Typical Study Samples

The available studies that examine team member views on readiness use samples of parents, special education teachers, secondary counselors, secondary administrators, postsecondary student support personnel, and disability advocates and consultants. No such study has included high school students, though a substantial body of literature examining postsecondary experiences and outcomes for students with disabilities relies on college student samples (e.g., Joshi & Bouck, 2017; Lightner et al., 2012; Newman & Madaus, 2015). My study sample consisted of all the members of a representative IEP team, including Grace, a high school student able to reflect on her own conceptions of college readiness as well as the preparatory experiences created by others’ conceptualization and operationalization of readiness. Grace’s accounts, an important contribution of this study to the literature, shed light on distinctions between conceptions of readiness and operationalization of readiness—gaps between what people identify as important for readiness and what the system can deliver.

My study sample also included general education/content area instructors at the secondary and postsecondary level. These professionals have a very minor role in the existing relevant literature, despite the crucial part they play in students’ preparatory experiences (given the significance of general education inclusion) and at receiving postsecondary institutions. Community college math and English professors, who experience directly the distinction between students demonstrating readiness and students who appear inadequately prepared, have highly consequential insights to lend regarding
academic as well as non-academic elements that support student success, but have not previously been consulted in published studies.

The extant literature tends to be role-specific, meaning samples consist of a specific subgroup rather than a team. Perhaps most significant is my study’s contribution stemming from selection of a sample that assembles a full IEP team. With this design, my findings reflect not only the multiple perspectives of stakeholders in different roles, but also the insights drawn from interactions between stakeholders’ perspectives in the analysis. The design leads to conclusions about the bigger picture of readiness conceptualization and operationalization across an IEP team, beyond what can be learned from an individual role or from pair or triad comparisons (e.g., Harvey et al., 2019; Skaff et al., 2016). Unique so far in the literature, my research utilizes a case-study type sample combined with grounded theory to build a deeper understanding of how stakeholders think about and do the work of transition service delivery. Namely, I found that stakeholders share a common understanding of much of what constitutes readiness, but denied opportunities to connect their conceptions of readiness to shared and coordinated practices preparing students for college, they provide ineffective and inadequate transition services as a whole.

**College Readiness Criteria in Existing Literature**

In their Delphi study, Milsom and Dietz (2009) identified 62 college readiness factors for students with learning disabilities around which special education, higher education, and counseling experts reached consensus. Many of the factors in Milsom and Dietz are also present in the Readiness portion of my findings (e.g., persistence, time management skills, knowledge of personal strengths and weaknesses, having a sense of
Confidence, which emerged as a crucial attitudes and frames of mind criterion in my findings, ranked first among Milsom and Dietz’s factors, with the highest median rating and lowest variability.

Ownership of Learning, which is central in my findings, emerges from the interview analysis as a unifying concept extending previous research by incorporating many of the criteria in Milsom and Dietz (2009), and connecting them to the broader college readiness literature. Conley and French (2014) identify a five-part model of ownership of learning, one of the components of Conley’s (2012) college readiness model. Ownership of learning comprises motivation and engagement, goal orientation and self-direction, self-efficacy and self-confidence, metacognition and self-monitoring, and persistence. These elements, several of which also appear in Milsom and Dietz, were identified by the participants in my study, at the secondary and postsecondary levels.

Because of the emphasis in Conley and French (2014) on readiness components that can be taught, they describe ownership of learning as behaviors and techniques rather than a frame of mind. According to the participants in my study, it is both: teaching the behaviors and techniques helps to develop the frame of mind, which then supports and promotes the behaviors. An example of this is when high school educators work with students to monitor their own performance, and the students develop effective habits, as well as moving toward adopting the attitude that their learning is within their control, and up to them. Indeed, Conley and French talk about the “mind-sets” of students who demonstrate the elements of ownership of learning (p. 1028). Morningstar et al. (2017) convened focus groups of state level experts in secondary/transition services for youth with disabilities to review and refine a CCR framework for students with disabilities.
developed by the authors. Among the resulting six “skill” domains is “mind-sets,” which includes “ownership of learning.” Whether a behavior, skill, or frame of mind, aiming toward ownership of learning as a readiness criterion can help to structure the non-academic components of preparation efforts, which have a strong presence in my findings and are receiving increasing emphasis in the college and career readiness literature (Lombardi et al., 2018; Morningstar et al., 2017).

Milsom and Dietz (2009) considered possible groupings for the readiness factors in their study, and among these they identified “personal characteristics, academic skills and strategies, support systems, and knowledge areas related to self and college” (p. 319). Categories in my findings overlap with these categories, with some important distinctions. In Personal characteristics, Milsom and Dietz include factors such as confidence and resilience, which I called attitudes and frames of mind. Notably, Milson and Dietz refer to personal characteristics as “innate characteristics” (p. 318), while attitudes and frames of mind, as I discuss, can be instilled, fostered, and developed as part of preparation. Conley and French (2014), referring to Conley’s model of college readiness, claim that all identified components “can be taught and learned” and “are not personality traits” (p. 1019). My findings fall between these two examples from the literature, with attitudes and frames of mind being distinct from more directly teachable criteria, but not something that students either have or don’t. Because of how essential these attitudes are, effective transition services depend on educators believing that they can make a difference in these areas, and prioritizing the planning and implementation of instructional practices to address them.
Milsom and Dietz (2009) suggest academic skills and strategies as an independent grouping, while the skills category in my findings bridges academic and non-academic areas, incorporating executive and relational skills as well as academic skills. The knowledge category in my findings, composed of college logistics, college expectations, support access knowledge, and self-knowledge, is consistent with knowledge areas related to self and college in Milsom and Dietz.

My categories are reflective of Edmunds et al.’s (2017) work, not specific to students with disabilities, which identifies the following categories within faculty and college student conceptualizations of readiness: academic knowledge and skills, academic behaviors and attitudes (skills and strategies, goal setting, self-advocacy, and responsibility), and understanding of college processes (“attitudes, actions, and knowledge”; Edmunds et al., 2017, p. 119).

Operationalization of Readiness

Other than Milsom and Dietz (2009), who investigated conceptions of college readiness explicitly, the literature pertaining to readiness for students with disabilities explores readiness criteria indirectly by asking stakeholders about their experiences with students related to readiness. This literature connects to Operationalization of Readiness in my study.

System Limitations

Janiga and Costenbader (2002) surveyed college service coordinators and found that the coordinators were most concerned about students with learning disabilities’ self-advocacy skills. The item with the lowest agreement referred to students being
adequately prepared in high school to advocate in college. Furthermore, the college service coordinators identified student independence as a priority area for improvement. My findings concur, and build on this aspect of the literature by articulating the many issues at play. In my study, self-advocacy was valued by stakeholders at the secondary and postsecondary levels, and by students and parents. Postsecondary stakeholders described the level of self-advocacy that is required, such as students needing to register with Disability Services and then share their accommodation plan with each professor, each semester, and initiate accessing each accommodation. Secondary stakeholders revealed barriers to building these skills, including the structure of secondary service delivery, special education policies that incentivize educators to advocate on behalf of students rather than setting students up to advocate for themselves, and school and community culture that thwarts development of student independence. The priority readiness criterion of ownership or responsibility in my findings is consistent with Janiga and Costenbader (2002). Ownership and student independence are mutually reinforcing, as students who are able to act independently on behalf of their education feel empowered to claim success, and students who have a sense of ownership for their learning access what they need to move forward on their own.

**Falling Short of Coordination**

System limitations preventing educators from implementing effective instructional practices are not unique to transition services, or to special education. Because my study explored perceptions of stakeholders about their practices, and did not employ measures of actual service delivery, there are limitations to the interpretation of the findings. Still, it is clear stakeholders perceive their options are limited, and systemic
barriers interfere with their ability to engage in the effective planning and delivery of transition services. For example, the guidance counselor and special education teacher referenced working together and benefitting from each other’s expertise. Importantly, they also conveyed that realities such as large caseloads and conflicting duties limit their availability for collaboration, and they rely on informal connections for much of the coordination that does occur. Specifically, the counselor in my study lamented her limited availability to participate in coordinated transition planning, to communicate with team members about preparation, and to provide direct transition-related services to students.

While stakeholders in my study held collaborative work as a beneficial practice, they reported that operationalization suffered when their opportunities to collaborate were restricted. Other researchers have documented similar challenges. Milsom (2007) found that while school counselors typically attend at least part of IEP meetings for students with learning disabilities, it is less common for them to provide input in transition plans. Hudson (2011) examined high school counselors’ perceptions of transition services and priorities for students with learning disabilities, and found that counselors value collaboration with special education teachers, and recognize the importance of consistent and aligned efforts related to assessment, goals, and planning. The counselors in Hudson’s study identified their availability to contribute their expertise to transition services as an area of concern. As discussed above, collaboration between counselors and special education teachers has been confirmed as a postsecondary education predictor (Kosine, 2007), making this example all the more salient.

In my findings, lack of coordination is present not only for secondary education colleagues, but across stakeholders including family and postsecondary educators.
Though the stakeholders in Grace’s transition, including her mother, all worked toward readiness criteria, their efforts were not coordinated. Grace’s mother was outspoken at IEP meetings and asserted what she felt was important for Grace, but what she did to prepare Grace for college was independent of the high school’s efforts. In one of the few studies to address parents’ perceptions of postsecondary planning for students with disabilities, Skaff et al. (2016) focused on Individualized Learning Plans (ILPs), a general education initiative that parallels transition planning. They found that parents and educators agreed that preparation for postsecondary endeavors was stronger among students without disabilities, and that the ILP process was not adequately individualized for students with disabilities. Areas for improvement included providing opportunities for parental involvement in the ILP process. My findings support the importance of individualized, coordinated transition services designed and delivered in partnership with families.

**Study Design Considerations**

As a qualitative study, this study does not provide findings that are generalizable, as they might be in quantitative research. The goal of qualitative research is not generalizability, but providing compelling evidence through analysis that is clearly grounded in data and descriptions that are thick and rich. By meeting these criteria, this study positions itself to have value beyond the specific context in which it was conducted, and to be the basis for implications for practice. The depth and detail of the description of the findings enable others in the field to make their own determinations regarding the applicability of the findings and conclusions to novel contexts. This qualitative study serves an important purpose of exploring elements of transition service
delivery no prior researcher has examined in this way, rendering the hues and textures of the phenomenon accessible so that they can guide future practice and subsequent research. What may be perceived as a limitation—a loss in generalizability—is gained in discernable relevance.

At this point, it is appropriate to revisit the subjectivity of the qualitative researcher, and to acknowledge that my relationship to the subject matter and to the participants as hypothetical colleagues permeates the study. Throughout the study, however, from developing the interview protocol to articulating practice implications, I have reflected on this relationship, and taken steps to identify any areas where my own experience or preconceived ideas were interfering with the voices of my participants or the conclusions their data provoked. A tediously methodological coding process helped to mitigate this interference, as the codes themselves structured the identification of patterns in the data. Still, the choice of codes and their appointment to segments of data reflects an intersection of my personal and professional assumptions and biases with the data itself. On-going memoing and regular discussion and debriefing with my advisor throughout the data collection and analysis processes provided additional reflexive layers, ensuring I unpacked how I made certain determinations or reached certain conclusions, and helping me to identify and address any deviations from the path cast by the data itself.

**Implications for Transition Service Delivery**

High school student voices are not represented in the small body of existing literature addressing conceptions of readiness among IEP team members and stakeholders. Researchers have, however, made efforts to include the perspectives of high school students, including those with learning disabilities, on other aspects of transition
and preparation, such as student involvement and choice in transition planning (Cavendish et al., 2020) and alignment between transition plans and postschool goals and anticipated support needs (Thompson et al., 2000). My research adds to these student perspectives by highlighting Grace’s ideas about what is involved in readiness and her insights into what can interfere with effective transition services.

Like the students in Thompson et al. (2000), Grace, from her perspective, did not experience transition planning aligned with meaningful assessment of her strengths and interests. IDEA (2004) requires, and effective transition services depend on, transition assessments. IEP teams should carefully determine the right assessments for each student, and allocate time for the appropriate professionals to conduct the assessments. Results should be discussed by the full team, including the student and parent(s), and used to develop an individualized transition plan that reflects meaningful student and parent involvement in the planning process, rather than mere compliance with the law (Cavendish & Connor, 2018).

Grace and her mother noted that college preparation aspects of transition services were typically covered during a student’s senior year of high school. This is common in the literature (e.g., Cavendish & Connor, 2018), but inadequate and ineffective. Cavendish and Connor (2018) recommend that college preparation begin early in high school, if not before. Discussion of postsecondary goals can begin as early as middle school, and if a student’s strengths, preferences, and interests align with postsecondary education, the IEP team can plan out a progression of steps leading to college readiness by high school graduation. These steps, addressing academic and non-academic
development, can be documented in the transition plan, and updated on an on-going basis.

Ownership of Learning

In addition to beginning early and being individualized according to students’ strengths and preferences, transition services should address known postsecondary education predictors and readiness criteria identified by secondary and postsecondary stakeholders. In my findings as well as prior research, autonomy, ownership, and other synonymous factors are emphasized for their make-or-break role in readiness. Fortunately, some aspects of special education structure, if employed deliberately, can support development of these criteria. Unfortunately, common patterns in school-level special education policy and practice can also undermine them.

Research links goal-setting with ownership of learning (Edmunds et al., 2017), suggesting that the goal-setting process is itself part of college preparation. Goal setting facilitates ownership of learning by establishing the “action potential” between where students are and where they want to go, providing purpose and motivation for them to take charge of getting themselves to the desired state (Chan et al., 2014; Conley & French, 2014, p. 1020). Following the design of transition services, secondary educators can lead students through transition assessments that inform the development of meaningful postsecondary goals. Developing—and monitoring progress toward—realistic, shorter-term goals gives students a sense of control over and agency in their success, and builds confidence (Conley & French, 2014), another essential attitude for readiness.
Students with learning disabilities served by special education have the benefit of a goal-setting and goal-monitoring structure already in place through the IEP, and the requirement that students age 16 and over participate in the IEP process provides an additional opportunity for student ownership development (Chan et al., 2014). Secondary educators working with these students need to maximize this benefit by executing a deliberate and coordinated process of IEP development and implementation that engages all stakeholders in a consequential way, including students and families who will likely need ample occasions outside team meeting settings to formulate and express their input (Cavendish & Connor, 2018).

According to Conley and French, ownership of learning “is not sufficiently taught or measured” (p. 1019). They maintain, “It can be developed systematically and will have the greatest effect on students for whom college is likely to be particularly challenging in the first place” (p. 1019). Conley and French argue that ownership of learning enables students to overcome other barriers, such as content knowledge, making it especially crucial for students with learning disabilities. The community college English and math professors in my study supported this claim when they explained that students who exhibit ownership get what they need to be successful. As Chan et al. (2014) argue, ownership of learning is not only an aim for postsecondary education, but a means to higher achievement at any stage. Students can be taught to take an active role in their learning, and when this happens, they engage in goal-setting, monitoring, and identification of needs, which increases achievement.

Educators need to navigate strategically special education policies and practices that sometimes undermine student ownership of learning, and hold the ideal of ownership
up for the whole team to commit to. Secondary educators can refer to college readiness scholarship as grounds for prioritizing these efforts, and administrators need to support them with policies and practices that engender shifting responsibility to students and educating families about the value of this. Too often, administrative decision-making bows to pressure from parents and advocates to put immediate success ahead of long-term beneficial development. Morningstar et al.’s (2017) participants identified being allowed to fail as part of problem solving and the development of perseverance, and expressed that schools were not effectively teaching students about perseverance. Milsom and Dietz (2009) list “belief that there is learning in failure” as a readiness criterion. Responsibility for learning and independence are among the distinctions between postsecondary and secondary education for which students need to be prepared, and mapping out multi-year services that reflect gradual weaning from supports is a way to facilitate readiness (Edmunds et al., 2017).

**Postsecondary Education Norms**

In my findings, I describe the “different worlds” of high school and college, and the challenges students face anticipating college expectations and the differences in support services. A crucial aspect of effective transition services is telling and showing students how their world will change, and giving them opportunities to practice expected behaviors and skills.

In their work on the role of the community college student, Karp and Bork (2014) identified the importance of self-awareness and reflection for a successful transition from the highly structured high school setting, where students are told “what to do and how to do it and when to do it” (p. 12), to college, where expectations are often implicit and
student initiative is required. Student and faculty interviews confirmed that to be successful, students must demonstrate a commitment—must show they “want it,” as the Disability Services Representative in my study put it—to finding out what the expectations are, reflecting on their progress toward the expectations, and making a plan or seeking assistance to meet the expectations (Karp & Bork, 2014). It is up to students to recognize when they need help and what help they need, and to pursue it, which requires self-awareness and agency (Karp & Bork, 2014) not fostered by a secondary model that spoon feeds support to students and puts more onus on educators than on students. These norms of the postsecondary environment are crucial for students with learning disabilities to understand before they make the transition. Moreover, they need effective instruction and ample opportunity to develop the related skills and mindsets, as they cannot be expected to perform what they have not learned. Special education itself may interfere with students with learning disabilities having exposure to messages about postsecondary norms, such as those often conveyed indirectly in upper-level general education courses, and to “cultural and social capital related to postsecondary transition” (Banks, 2014, p. 36). Therefore, IEP teams need to be especially mindful and deliberate about assessing and developing this aspect of readiness as part of transition services.

Similarly, students need to be educated about legal differences between secondary and postsecondary education settings, about the importance of maintaining up-to-date disability documentation, and about benefits and risks of disability disclosure and strategies to combat stereotypes and discrimination (Dong & Lucas, 2016). African American students and other students of color may be especially vulnerable to delaying support access due to the desire to avoid negative stereotypes (Banks, 2014), making it
especially crucial that students of color receive transition services that build their transition knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Access to information about postsecondary disability services and opportunities to develop disability awareness can have significant consequences in terms of grade point average, credits, and postsecondary completion (Banks, 2014).

**Prioritizing Transition Services**

My findings depict how extensive system limitations can be, and how defining for service delivery. Overcoming these barriers will take commitment on the part of secondary administrators to allocate resources to make transition services a priority, and creativity on the part of secondary educators, including counselors. Promising practices involve schools “negotiating the constraints” they face (Cavendish et al., 2020, p. 9). For example, in an unconventional use of resources, upperclassmen have served successfully as mentors to younger students regarding college planning and the college application process (Cavendish et al., 2020).

Scholars have identified collaboration among secondary educators, and coordination between special education teachers and school counselors in particular, as both crucial to promoting readiness and difficult to achieve (e.g., Hudson, 2011; Kosine, 2007; Morningstar et al., 2017). Milsom (2007) found a common reason for school counselors not engaging in a transition-related activity is believing that someone else is taking care of it, which signals a need for coordination and clarity around role assignments in transition service delivery. Administrators can facilitate coordination by assigning duties to counselors—and all team members—in such a way that attending team meetings in their entirety and collaborating outside meetings is an achievable
priority (Hudson, 2011). Counselors working collaboratively with IEP teams is key to ensuring coordinated service delivery that maximizes the expertise of secondary educators (Milsom, 2007). IDEA (1990) defines transition services as “a coordinated [emphasis added] set of activities for a student” (§101[d]). The intent and significance of the law are clear, and should be upheld.

Students with more intensive needs whose transition services are typically focused on employment and independent living are sometimes served by educators with relatively small caseloads. These professionals can coordinate with other educators and address the complex planning needs of the students. Special education teachers and guidance counselors assigned to students with learning disabilities often have large caseloads that make the necessary level of individualization and coordination impossible to deliver. Education systems need to commit the appropriate staffing to make coordinated and comprehensive transition services for students headed to postsecondary education effective. This means special education teachers and/or transition specialists and guidance counselors with caseload sizes that allow them to 1) work directly with students, delivering individualized services, and 2) coordinate with other members of the students’ teams, including families and postsecondary education providers. Because this is in the best interest of postsecondary institutions as well, it should be a shared investment, but ultimately responsibility rests with special education to provide transition services that meet students’ needs.

Implications for Educator Preparation and Professional Development

Simply put, special education teachers who are more satisfied with their training and feel more prepared are more likely to plan and deliver transition services (Benitez et
al., 2009). My findings portray in rich detail how a special education teacher can be left to their own devices when it comes to transition training. The special education teacher in my study relayed how committed he was to improving the services he offered his students, and from that commitment he derived the initiative to access on-the-job training from his colleagues. He did not have any preservice training relevant to transition, which is consistent with prior studies showing that only about half of special education teachers have had any preservice transition courses, and most transition training occurs at the in-service level (e.g., Benitez et al., 2009). Because “teachers simply cannot be expected to perform what they do not know” (Benitez et al., 2009, p. 13), addressing this shortcoming in special education teacher preparation is essential to improving transition service delivery. Not only do courses in transition need to be added to teacher preparation programs, but because further training inevitably will be necessary, formalized mentorship programs should be established to support teachers learning from their colleagues.

My findings confirmed the need for more special education training for counselors and general education teachers (Milsom, 2007), who acknowledged that despite their years of experience, they lacked knowledge in many areas of special education. The potential role of school counselors in effective postsecondary-education focused transition service delivery has been highlighted above, and depends not only on administrative decisions to allocate counselors for this work, but on counselor professional capacity. For example, research shows it is not common for counselors to discuss college disability services in their work with students (Milsom, 2007). To be instrumental in the college choice process for students with disabilities, counselors need
training in college support services for these students (Murray et al., 2016), including service offerings and eligibility processes.

**Implications for Postsecondary Student Success Efforts**

Previous research has shown that students with learning disabilities who access accommodations and supports fare better in postsecondary settings, but most students do not register with disability services, especially in their first year (Dong & Lucas, 2016; Lightner et al., 2012). As Dong and Lucas (2016) point out, “this group of students seems to need special attention when they enter the university, including an introduction to the diverse academic support services such as tutors and study skills counseling available on campus” (p. 52). My findings make the case that the introduction to support services needs to happen even earlier, before college entry. Other research has shown that postsecondary providers are not consulted in the transition planning process, nor are linkages to postsecondary supports made (Thompson et al., 2000). With greater coordination, collaboration, and alignment between K-12 and postsecondary education spheres, students could have support that overlaps secondary and postsecondary systems (Dong & Lucas, 2016; Murray et al., 2016). This begins with opening lines of communication between high schools and postsecondary institutions to share preparation expectations and support needs (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). Currently, whether or not preparation has been effective is measured through student success or failure (Driver, 2014), often at great cost to students. Instead, taking a proactive approach that demonstrates commitment to student success, postsecondary institutions can initiate relationships with high school representatives and establish what effective preparation looks like, and how to work together to achieve it.
One innovative way to address the challenge of linking in-coming students to postsecondary education supports is to invite current college students to act as peer mentors to high school students, sharing their support experiences and guiding high school students through the process of identifying and pursuing appropriate supports. Students who have made the transition from special education to postsecondary education supports can provide powerful messages and detailed information based on first-hand experience, and high school students may be more receptive to their peers than to secondary or postsecondary educators. Peer mentors should be fairly compensated for their services.

A Coordinated Effort

A possible approach to address implications for transition service delivery as well as postsecondary student success efforts is to shift the current practice of discontinuing special education eligibility at high school graduation, instead continuing to support students through special education until they transition fully to postsecondary education. According to IDEA, high school graduation marks an end in eligibility, and this establishes a catch-22, because students need a high school diploma to be eligible for postsecondary degree programs, but they may need continued special education services to be successful in pursuing that degree. Policy and practice changes to address this could enable students to enroll in postsecondary education and participate in the new norms of that environment while still benefitting from the monitoring and specialized instruction of special education. Many students access a version of this by participating in dual enrollment programs, where they take college courses for high school and college credit while still in high school. A new approach could make this a norm rather than an
exception, and extend the dual enrollment opportunity to a fifth high school year for students who are not ready for college courses by their fourth year. Relatedly, school districts could assume financial responsibility for any college preparatory courses students are required to take at the postsecondary level. Currently, at college entry, high rates of students with and without disabilities place into remedial or “developmental” courses (Chen, 2016), which they must pay for and pass before they can take courses that count toward a degree. Given that IDEA mandates that students in special education receive transition services to assist them in reaching their postsecondary goals, students with postsecondary education goals could be considered eligible for free appropriate public education to include remedial courses at the postsecondary level.

**Future Research**

A consistent shortcoming in the existing literature base is the lack of specificity around college readiness criteria. In most of the studies relevant to stakeholder conceptions of readiness, the criteria for readiness are implied rather than specified, and an assumption is made that definitions of readiness are common knowledge. For example, in Harvey et al. (2019), the authors compare perspectives on the effectiveness of College and Career Readiness (CCR) programs across high school administrators, guidance counselors, general education teachers, and special educators. Yet the study does not identify the skills, behaviors, or attitudes (Karp & Bork, 2014) that underlie the construct of CCR, leaving participants to evaluate effectiveness based on their sense of those criteria, which may be very different depending on their role. In this example, special educators had the lowest agreement that CCR programs achieved the goal of readiness for their students. Special educators may be more aware than other stakeholders
of the readiness priorities for students with disabilities, which may extend beyond standard criteria. Future research must address the issue of consensus around readiness criteria, which will require a more careful examination of how different role perspectives affect understanding of what it means for students with disabilities to be ready.

Monahan et al. (2020) performed an exhaustive review and identified only 10 original studies examining a framework or construct of either CCR, college readiness, or career readiness. The two frameworks that were examined were Conley (2012) and Morningstar et al. (2017). The few studies that included students with disabilities were not specific to students with learning disabilities. As efforts continue to validate CCR frameworks and develop measures of the domains, it will be important to focus on specific categories of disability. Given the prevalence of learning disabilities, and the postsecondary education goals of high school students with learning disabilities, future research should include validation and measurement of CCR domains with this specific population of students.

Finally, the findings from this study call attention to the system limitations and specifically the lack of coordination that interferes with stakeholders’ effectiveness in preparing students with learning disabilities whose goals include postsecondary education for the demands they will face in college. Future research should include intervention studies that pilot efforts to coordinate transition service delivery at the secondary level and between secondary and postsecondary arenas. With evidence that stakeholders share many conceptions of college readiness for students with learning disabilities, the next step is to support them in operationalizing readiness in an explicit, intentional, and
coordinated manner while measuring and evaluating the results. Peer mentoring should be considered and trialed as an aspect of such interventions.

**Conclusion**

This study contributes new insights to the transition literature by leveraging a sample composed of a full team of transition stakeholders, gathering rich qualitative data, and using grounded theory methods to thoroughly and systematically analyze the data. By looking within and across stakeholder roles and within and across secondary and postsecondary education, the study reveals role-related influences on conceptions of readiness as well as commonalities in those conceptions across roles. The study also reveals holes in and barriers to operationalization of readiness, and the absence of both an explicit approach to preparation and a formalized process of preparation. The study demonstrates the need for a marked increase in commitment to transition services for students with learning disabilities and postsecondary education goals. This involves an earlier start to transition planning; extensive, ongoing, and individualized transition assessment to identify goals; adherence to the goal-setting and monitoring policies already in place in special education to support student ownership of learning; and a careful look at what makes students in special education particularly unlikely to exhibit ownership of learning. Most importantly, it involves coordination and individualization of transition services so that they serve the purpose intended in IDEA legislation, to assist students with disabilities in reaching their postsecondary goals.
APPENDICES
Note: This is a semi-structured interview. Questions are intentionally broad, and convey the general themes the interview will pursue, rather than all the content the interview may cover. Participant responses contribute to the direction the conversation takes.

**INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS** (e.g., “What are some of your interests, inside or outside of school?” or “What are some of your favorite aspects of working with high school students?” – adapt to participant role)

**ROLE-SPECIFIC QUESTIONS**

*Student*

When you think about college, what do you picture? (prompts: academically, socially)

What do you think it will be like to be a college student? (prompts: academically, socially)

Tell me about some of the ways you’ve learned about what college will be like. (prompts: family, teachers, peers, counselors; informally or formally)

Are there aspects of college you’re really looking forward to? (prompts: what do you think will come easily to you/you’ll be good at?)

Are there aspects of college you’re nervous or unsure about? (prompts: what do you anticipate struggling with, what challenges do you anticipate? Do you think your challenges will be the same as or different from someone without a learning disability?)

In what ways do you think college will be different from high school? (prompts: academically, socially, responsibilities, access to help, initiating getting help; what supports do you think exist, what do you think is involved in accessing them, how does it work in high school and will it be the same or different?)

Do you feel ready for college? (prompts: tell me more about that; what makes you feel ready/not ready; what have you learned that will help you be ready, what do you think you need more of to be ready?)

What have you done to get ready for college? (prompts: at home, in school—general education, in school—special education, in school—transition services, in community; timeline—when did you start?; was it the same as or different from students without learning disabilities?)

What do you have planned to get ready between now and college? (prompts: at home, in school—general education, in school—special education, in school—transition
services, in community; will it be the same as or different from students without learning disabilities?)

Is there anything that has gotten in the way of you having the best possible preparation for college? (prompts: personal, family, school; time, resources; attitudes/beliefs)

What do you think it means to be college ready? (prompts: academically, socially; how do you know? Have people talked to you about college readiness? If so, who/when/how?)

If you were an adult helping students with learning disabilities get ready for college, what would you focus on? (prompts: what was the process like in your case, of deciding what to focus on?)

How do you feel about your special education transition services? (prompts may include: in what ways are your ideas about what you need to be ready for college reflected in your transition services, what has your experience of formalized planning been like, has your IEP team discussed what you’ll need to be college ready, is there a shared understanding of what you’ll need to be college ready, how do your ideas about college readiness influence your requests for services, what are service decisions based on?)

[If family has shared special education documents such as IEP or Transition Planning Form, discuss transition-related elements of the document, how they came to be, how they play out in the student’s experience of being prepared.]
APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Consent Form for Participation in a Research Study
University of Massachusetts Amherst

Researcher: Jordan Abbott, Doctoral Candidate, Special Education
Advisor: Alexandra Lauterbach, Assistant Professor, Special Education
Study Title: Stakeholder Conceptions of College Readiness for Students with Learning Disabilities

1. WHAT IS THIS FORM?
This form is called a Consent Form. It will give you information about the study so you can make an informed decision about participation in this research. I encourage you to take some time to think this over and ask questions now and at any other time. If you decide to participate, we will review the form before beginning our interview and I will audio record your verbal consent.

2. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF THIS RESEARCH STUDY THAT I SHOULD BE AWARE OF?
Consent is being sought for research. Participation is completely voluntary. The goal of the research is to explore how IEP team members and related transition stakeholders think about college readiness for students with learning disabilities. Improved understanding can benefit the field of special education and the transition services students receive. If you participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in an interview asking about your ideas and experiences related to college readiness. Although we perceive minimal risks associated with your participation, there is the potential risk that you may feel discomfort in answering questions about your ideas and experiences. Additionally, while we will attempt to mask your participation, it is impossible to guarantee your complete anonymity. The benefits of this study include the opportunity for reflection, and helping to influence positive change within transition education. You will receive a $20 electronic gift card for your participation. Details about the research study are in the sections below.

3. WHY IS THIS RESEARCH BEING DONE?
The purpose of this research study is to better understand how the various members of an IEP team, as well as postsecondary education representatives, think about what it means for a student with a learning disability to be ready for college. I hope that results from this research can be used to inform future studies and to improve transition services and the success rates of students with learning disabilities who go on to college.

4. WHO IS ELIGIBLE TO PARTICIPATE?
Members of the IEP team of a student with a learning disability, including the student, parent/guardian, teacher, counselor, service provider, transition specialist, and other involved educators or community members, as well as college instructors and disability services representatives, are eligible to participate. All participants must be willing to have their interviews audio recorded.
5. WHERE WILL THIS RESEARCH STUDY TAKE PLACE AND HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL PARTICIPATE?
Due to COVID-19, the study interviews will be conducted remotely, either using the online conference tool Zoom or by phone. In the event an interview is scheduled after social distancing restrictions have been lifted, it may be held in a place of mutual convenience, such as a private meeting room at the high school or in a public building (e.g., library). I am expecting up to 15 people to participate in interviews.

6. WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO AND HOW MUCH TIME WILL IT TAKE?
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an individual interview, lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes. You may be asked to participate in a follow-up interview of similar duration, to clarify or expand on your initial interview. You will be asked questions about your thoughts on college readiness and preparation of students with learning disabilities for college. You may skip any question you feel uncomfortable answering. Interviews will be audio-recorded and later transcribed.

7. WILL BEING IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY HELP ME IN ANY WAY?
You may not directly benefit from this research; however, I hope that your participation in the study may help researchers to better understand how students, parents/guardians, secondary education providers, college instructors, and disability services providers think about student needs for a successful transition from high school to college. This knowledge may help with the ways we support students with learning disabilities preparing for college. In addition, participants may personally benefit from the opportunity to reflect on their own ideas and experiences.

8. WHAT ARE MY RISKS OF BEING IN THIS STUDY?
We believe there are minimal risks associated with this research study; however, a risk of breach of confidentiality always exists. We have taken the steps to minimize this risk as outlined in section 9 below. A possible inconvenience may be the time it takes to complete the study. Additionally, you may experience discomfort around particular topics related to personal or professional ideas and experiences. Again, you can decline to answer any question.

9. HOW WILL MY PERSONAL INFORMATION BE PROTECTED?
Your privacy and confidentiality is important to me. The following procedures will be used to protect the confidentiality of your study records. All records (including the interview audio recording and transcript) will be labeled with a code, rather than your name. The master key that links names and codes will be maintained in a separate and secure location, to which only I will have access. All physical files will be stored in a locked room. All electronic files, including interview audio recordings and transcripts, will be stored in a password-protected file storage system. Only my advisor and I will have access to the coded files. The master key and all other identifying information will be destroyed five years after the close of the study.

At the conclusion of this study, I will include the findings in my dissertation. The findings may also be included in future publications. You will not be identified in any publications or presentations, and measures will be in place to protect your anonymity (e.g., the use of pseudonyms).
10. WILL MY INFORMATION BE USED FOR RESEARCH IN THE FUTURE?
Only de-identified information may be used for future research without additional informed consent from you.

11. WILL I BE GIVEN ANY MONEY OR OTHER COMPENSATION FOR BEING IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY?
As a token of appreciation for participating in the study, you will receive a $20 electronic gift card, which will be emailed to you.

12. WHO CAN I TALK TO IF I HAVE QUESTIONS
Take as long as you like before you make a decision. I will be happy to answer any questions you have about this study. If you have further questions about this project or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact Alexandra Lauterbach via email: alauterbach@edu.c.umaass.edu.

If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research participant, you may also contact the University of Massachusetts Amherst Human Research Protection Office (HRPO) at (413) 545-3428 or humansubjects@ora.umaass.edu.

13. WHAT HAPPENS IF I SAY YES, BUT I CHANGE MY MIND LATER?
You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to be. If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate.

14. WHAT IF I AM INJURED?
The University of Massachusetts does not have a program for compensating subjects for injury or complications related to human subjects research, but I will do my best to assist you in getting treatment.

15. PARTICIPANT STATEMENT OF VOLUNTARY CONSENT
I am agreeing to voluntarily enter this study. I have had a chance to read this consent form, and the study has been explained to me in a language that I can use. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers. I have been informed that I can withdraw at any time. I agree to have my interview responses recorded and later transcribed by the researcher.
APPENDIX C
IRB APPROVAL LETTER

UMassAmherst
Human Research Protection Office

Date: May 8, 2020
To: Professor Alexandra Lauterbach and Jordan Abbott, College of Education
From: Professor Lynnette Leidy Sievert, Chair, University of Massachusetts Amherst IRB

Protocol Title: Dissertation Study: Conceptions of College Readiness
Protocol ID: 1971
Review Type: Expedited – NEW
Category: 6, 7
Approval Date: 05/08/2020
No Continuing Review Required

This study has been reviewed and approved by the University of Massachusetts Amherst IRB, Federal Wide Assurance #00003909. Approval is granted with the understanding that investigator(s) are responsible for:

Consent forms - A copy of the approved consent form (with the IRB stamp) must be used for each participant (Please note: Online consent forms will not be stamped). Investigators must retain copies of signed consent forms for six (6) years after close of the grant, or three (3) years if unfunded.

Use only IRB-approved study materials (e.g., questionnaires, letters, advertisements, flyers, scripts, etc.) in your research.

Revisions - All changes to the study (e.g. protocol, recruitment materials, consent form, additional key personnel), must be submitted for approval in e-protocol before implementing the changes. New personnel must have completed CITI training.

Final Reports - Notify the IRB when your study is complete by submitting a Close Request Form in the electronic protocol system.

Serious Adverse Events and Unanticipated problems involving risks to participants or others - All such events must be reported in the electronic protocol system as soon as possible, but no later than five (5) working days.

Annual Check In - HRPO will conduct an annual check in to determine the study status.

Please contact the Human Research Protection Office if you have any further questions. Best wishes for a successful project.
REFERENCES


Hudson, D. J. (2011). *Perceptions of high school counselors involvement in the provision of postsecondary transition services to students with specific learning disabilities* (Publication No. 3462049) [Doctoral dissertation, East Tennessee State University]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.


