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## Notes From The Field

Marilyn Fayram, Guest Columnist

Someone once said, "Parental love is the only one that leads to separation." How true this is for those of us who have tried to or have successfully "separated" from our children through their leaving home for college, a job or to set up a new household. We are obviously proud that they can stand on their own, but sad to see them go. We are also fearful. I remember when my daughter got her driver's license; I thought it a wonderful thing that someone else was certifying her as being competent to drive alone. She was objectively a terrific driver but as her parent, I could not let go of my anxieties long enough to certify that she was "perfectly competent." How could she be since I had known her when she could do virtually nothing-

that is as my baby? For parents of a child with a disability this issue can be even more profound. From the beginning, these parents have been their child's strongest advocates. They have persisted in the face of others who said that their precious child "could not", "should not", "wasn't able." They have heard about reducing expectations. "Really, you need to look at reality." Ah, but they were! They knew exactly how their child was. They lived with them every day and even through their rose colored glasses they were able to see what others could not because they knew the "material" so well.

So what happens to these knowledgeable parents when they come face-to-face with the big transition from high school

to postsecondary education? The law says that they are no longer able to get any information about their students. They can no longer be advocates in the same way. It is not even a two-way street. It is a one-way street and information is more than likely funneled through the student. We want our sons and daughters to be able to advocate for themselves. We want them to carry on when we are no longer physically present and we want to continue to support them.

The law makes it difficult for all parents. When my daughter was in her sophomore year in college, she needed to see the doctor. Now, it was my insurance that paid the doctor bills and as things usually go, there were some problems with the

insurance claims. When I tried to inquire as to how we could settle the bills, I was advised that since my daughter was over 18, I did not have legal access to her medical records. I responded that I did not want access to her medical records, but only to find out how much we owed so we could settle the bill. They were so sorry, but no deal. Then I did what I had to do; I called my daughter who was, as you might also guess, not all that interested in tracking down the vagaries of an insurance bill. Negotiations occurred and to make the story short, she took care of it before we had to face a collection agency. In the end, my daughter learned some valuable skills and I was one step closer to letting go. After this experience, and others along the way, I began to research some ways that parents, but especially those whose children have disabilities, can continue to advocate for and support their child.

At Madison Area Technical College (MATC), the disabilities resource staff (DRS) holds an annual Parent Preview day. The purpose of this day is to educate parents regarding ways they can be helpful to their transitioning student. A starting point for us was an article by Susan Vogel and Pamela Adelman (1992). In their article, they talk about the kinds of factors that contribute to higher graduation and lower attrition rates for students with specific learning disabilities. From this article, we have extracted some of their points and centered on eight factors that can contribute to student success. We have coupled these factors with ways parents can continue to support their student. These factors are:

1. Self-understanding
2. Prior experience with college life

3. Availability and quality of intervention
4. Level of acceptance or denial of disability
5. Developmental life stage
6. Realistic goals
7. Family and mentor support
8. Motivation

Our Parent Preview Day is held in conjunction with our student orientation for students with disabilities, called SmartStart. During this day, we touch on a number of areas that we hope can meet our goals of reducing the anxiety of parents during the transition process and providing suggestions for meaningful ways that parents can continue to support their student. The agenda includes information on the differences between high school and college with a special emphasis on the changing laws governing parent access to information. We have a student panel to advise parents on the student's perspective and we have a tour of the college. At a school-provided lunch, parents can meet the staff, who will be working with their student. We also have activities related to how to receive accommodations and what to do when things go wrong.

Using Adelman and Vogel's factors as a starting point, we have developed 14 support strategies that parents can implement for both encouraging their student and continuing to offer their critical support. They are:

- 1. Give the student access to high school records, IEP's, evaluations from specialists etc. and discuss contents.** Look at records and discuss strengths, weaknesses and in a general way, start a discussion about postsecondary or post high school goals.
- 2. Discuss what you see as strengths and things that may need work .** For example: "You are very social. You

might do well in a job where you interact with people ." There is no need to talk about the negative side of things as in: " You wouldn't like a job where you are alone." Positive feedback is the rule.

- 3. Talk about goals.** Why is your student attending college? Motivation is crucial and you may find out they are doing it for a variety of reasons not necessarily related to the desire to graduate. They might even be doing it because they think *you* want it. That's nice, but it won't be enough to sustain them when things get difficult.
- 4. Encourage attendance at summer transition workshops for incoming students.** These can be program oriented or oriented towards strategies for students with disabilities as in our SmartStart program.
- 5. Visit the campus.** Parents and students can eat in the cafeteria, look at housing options , take a tour, and attend orientations if offered.
- 6. Have your student take a summer short course.** Maybe something like WordPerfect, College success, Internet use etc. These can be for credit or noncredit.
- 7. Give a friendly reminder that support services do exist.** Something along the line of " Isn't it nice that they offer \_\_\_\_\_."
- 8. Find out for yourselves what services are available so you can serve as back-up memory.** You might be able to find out what is available through parent orientations or by simply calling or e-mailing the staff that work with students with disabilities and asking. Most people would be happy to provide the information and this is not classified stuff!!

- 9. Give the student opportunities to see various people at work in different occupations.** Create opportunities for your student to talk to your friends about jobs, what they like, don't like, what they might think would be barriers to your student's doing that kind of work. If there are barriers, then there will be time to think of ways that they might be overcome. Visit work sites with your student, both to give them an idea of the varieties of work out there and to again look at potential barriers.
- 10. Encourage taking career aptitude and interest tests.** Many times these kinds of instruments are available free of charge.
- 11. Never say "never."** That's the easiest one for parents of students with disabilities.
- 12. Recount experiences that you have had with friendly, good instructors.** You might also share experiences with poor instructors you have had and how you managed to endure and overcome.
- 13. Encourage your student to talk to the instructor about class work instead of taking on the burden yourself.**
- 14. Relax!!** You have done a good job. See how far your student has come.

There are two stories I would like to share regarding student transition. One has to do with motivation. Let's face it, there are some boring classes out there and if students don't have a goal and strong motivation to get through them, it's easy to flounder. I worked with a student years ago who had a dual diagnosis of depression and a fairly severe learning disability. She had dropped out of high school in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade but later went on to complete her GED after the birth of her two children. Her husband lost his job

and she determined that one of them should have a career where the possibility of lay-offs was less likely. She selected the Medical Lab Technologist program which is a very difficult program and furthermore, her scores on the ACT test required for admission were shockingly low. I rarely try to dissuade a student from his or her choice but in this case, I did make a bit of a try. She persisted, however and ultimately she succeeded! She had to take several courses twice, and she rarely received a grade above a "C" but in the end she graduated, took the national boards, and is successfully employed as a medical laboratory technician at a major clinic. Motivation goes a long way.

The other story is about a student who when asked what his career goals were, responded that he wanted to be a skateboard demonstrator. Now we don't have a degree in skateboard demonstration and his parents were understandably not enthusiastic about his life plan. Nevertheless, they did a brilliant thing. The summer before his first enrollment at MATC they took him out to California and toured a company that manufactured skateboards. There, the student found out that not only were there skateboard demonstrators, but also artists, engineers, publicity, accounting and marketing people working in the skateboard world. He came back to MATC and enrolled in the Commercial Art program which, I am happy to say, led directly to a job designing the artwork on skateboards. I have lost track of him and so perhaps he has gone on to be a demonstrator, but the important thing is that he was where he wanted to be and was happy. And of course, that's all we parents really want which is not so much to ask!

In conclusion, I want to tell parents that your role is still a vital one. My daughter took 25 years before she acknowledged that perhaps I had been helpful after all. Even though you can no longer advocate directly or in the same way as you have done during the 12 years of public education, you play an important role. You can continue to be your son or daughter's number one cheerleader knowing that with their motivation and your support, their chances of succeeding in college are vastly increased. The way your support is given changes over time but students in transition still need it and will do better when they have it. Good luck to you all.

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