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# NETWORK

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DCDT WEBSITE  
[www.dcdt.org](http://www.dcdt.org)

## MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT



Over the years I have had the privilege of interacting with and supporting individuals who experience barriers to employment and community living and engagement. These experiences have shaped who

I am today. While my career in higher education began in 2010, I have always been driven by a passion for inquiry. When working in schools and for adult agency providers, I implemented effective practices aimed at improving overall quality of life for individuals with disabilities. I was always asking questions about my practice and determining ways to measure whether the way I was supporting students and their families was leading to the outcomes I had expected. As I have moved into higher education to pursue my goal of impacting change on a larger scale, I am now supporting others (e.g., teachers, other services providers) who are giving direct support to students and families. My experiences have helped me understand the layers of support needed to really make an impact in this field we call secondary transition. I understand the need to not only ask questions about individuals and family supports but to also question the systems and the capacity of leadership to engage in strategic planning for program improvement. My journey to today has illuminated many barriers that impact individuals' ability to achieve employment and good quality of life.

I have personal/professional values in education and research that drive my day-to-day operations and align with the core values of DCDT, including:

### Education

- Every individual should have the opportunity to engage in high quality edu-

cational experiences that align with and expand their interests and aspirations.

- Participation in educational programs and planned outcomes of educational programs should not be determined by individual characteristics (e.g., skin color, family structure, income, disability status, language, sexual orientation, or gender identity).

### Research

- Data should be collected, obtained, analyzed, and used to identify and address structural and institutional barriers that inhibit equitable participation and outcomes for participants.
- Different research questions require different methods, and multiple methods are often needed to understand issues (including issues of equity) more fully.

In addition to my own personal values, my work is also guided by professional ethical principles (Council for Exceptional Children [CEC], 2015). The two below are especially important aspects of not only my professional practice but my research and scholarship.

- Responsible for “maintaining challenging expectations for individuals with exceptionalities to develop the *highest possible learning outcomes* and *quality of life potential* in ways that respect their dignity, culture, language, and background” (CEC, 2015, p. 1).
- Promote “meaningful and inclusive participation” in schools and communities while “protecting and supporting the physical and *psychological safety* of individuals with exceptionalities” (CEC, 2015, p. 1).

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My experiences as an educator have prepared me to serve as your DCDT president. These experiences span from teaching in the classroom to providing transition-related technical assistance and supports to state and local education agencies. In each of these capacities, in order to be successful, I had to know the research and be able to make data-based decisions. As a classroom teacher, I spent many hours planning and collaborating to develop programs unique to each student. I can personally attest that the evidence-based practices and predictors of post-school success identified by the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition Collaborative (NTACT-C) have contributed to positive outcomes for the individuals with disabilities with whom I have worked.

A leader is one who goes first and leads by example so that others are motivated to follow them. As a leader for DCDT, I have a deep-rooted commitment to supporting transition professionals and carrying out the mission of the organization: “to promote national and international efforts to improve the quality of, and access to, career/vocational and transition services, increase the participation of education in career development and transition goals, and to influence policies affecting career development and transition services for persons with disabilities” (<https://dcdt.org/about-dcdt>).

I want DCDT to be at the forefront of the change movement, ensuring students with disabilities are achieving positive outcomes and good quality of life. Adding value is a very important concept in my own life. I want to make things better for the people working on the front lines preparing our future

leaders. As president of DCDT, it is my duty to assist educators (both preservice and in-service) in developing knowledge and expertise that will be applicable to their future endeavors as educators, whether they are teachers, related service professionals, para-educators, or other support staff. I believe it is DCDT's responsibility to provide its members with opportunities to apply knowledge and assist students in developing skills to generalize the information learned to their own classrooms via the delivery of professional development (e.g., town halls, publications, conferences, committee work) and a quality academic journal (i.e., another means to acquiring ongoing professional development and support). Knowledge translation and developing strategies to support bridging the research-to-practice gap in education is an important first step in influencing student outcomes. I hope to lead DCDT through strategic planning to ensure we are meeting the needs of our membership.

Thank you again for allowing me to champion this work. I am looking forward to an amazing year. Please join us in Reno, Nevada, October 18–21, 2023, for our annual DCDT conference, and check out other ongoing opportunities to engage via our [website](#). Please do not hesitate to contact [myself](#), or our executive director, [Stacie Dojonovic](#), at any time.

Council for Exceptional Children (2015). *Code of ethics*. Retrieved from: <https://exceptionalchildren.org/standards/ethical-principles-and-practice-standards>

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## EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR UPDATE



DCDT certainly had a presence at CEC! It was great to catch up with several of our supporters and partners at the CEC convention the first week of March. The connections we deepen with CEC staff, including Executive Director Chad Rummel, enable us to continue to serve our membership of transition professionals.

### Implementation Highlight

I was able to attend a preconference session that discussed the implementation of evidence-based practices in transition planning delivered by our DCDT past-president, Mary Morningstar, and incoming DCDT president, Al Daviso. They interacted with transition professionals from across the country to assist us in moving beyond transition compliance to best practices in transition planning. They began the work-

shop with best practices for transition planning beginning in middle school and explored evidence-based (and practical) practices for career development and transition assessment. They covered topics including understanding work, education, independent living, and community options; appreciating and understanding types of work/careers; understanding and developing disability awareness; writing initial postschool goals with compliance and fidelity; and choosing a course of study for high school. This link ([resources for practice](#)) takes you to a list of materials and websites compiled for our DCDT members to view and implement.

### Partnership Highlight

If you missed the dynamic session at the CEC convention on School Counselor and Transition Specialist Partnerships

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to Support Youth (delivered by our DCDT immediate past-president Allison Lombardi and Clewiston Challenger) you can view their handouts and webinar on [NTACT:C](#). DCDT is excited that our partner NTACT:C is providing this resource to support transition specialists working to deepen their partnerships with school counselors to support college and career readiness. NTACT:C is filled with resources to implement evidence-based practices. We want to ensure that our DCDT members are aware of the valuable resources available to help with the implementation of evidence-based practices.

## Youth Voice Highlight

Virginia DCDT (VADCDT) invited us to attend their annual conference in Roanoke, Virginia. I encourage all DCDT members to attend VADCDT's monthly townhall meetings that they offer for all DCDT members. I felt energized after listening to the keynote speaker Garvin Rodrigue (MOVE Youth Leader, I'm Determined Project). Garvin highlighted the importance of building a strengths-based approach to transition planning. He shared the value of mentors, paid work experiences, and authentic leadership opportunities for youth with disabilities. The I'm Determined Project is filled with tools and support to help youth with disabilities not only set goals but also obtain them. We encourage practitioners to review the resources available [here](#). One thing the keynote stressed was the value of a tool for youth to assist with developing self-determination skills, the [I'm Determined One-Pager](#). What was concerning to me was that the hardest part for youth with disabilities who have completed the tool was to identify their strengths. This leads me to issuing a DCDT member challenge.

## DCDT Member Challenge

As I reflected and listened to members while attending the CEC convention and the VADCDT conference, I realized that we need to avoid deficit thinking to improve the adult life outcomes of all students. As we build personnel prep programs and ongoing professional development based on the [CEC/DCDT Transition Standards](#), work directly with youth with disabilities, or conduct research in the field of transition, we need to ensure that we are using a strength-based approach.

By taking a strength-based approach to culturally sustaining transition practices, you can help your students develop their skills and talents to realize their full potential. Let's help kids figure out what they're good at and improve those areas. Let's prioritize helping students to build on their strengths and practice using them daily. That will help them feel happier, experience more flow, and keep doing activities they enjoy—even when they must do other activities they don't like.

Transition specialists and families who use a strength-based approach will help youth to become more invested in their learning and more engaged in transition planning.

## Strengths Observation

A *strengths observation* is a way to proactively search for strengths in your students. Try immersing yourself in their environment, such as the classroom, hallway, cafeteria, extra-curricular activities areas, work-based learning site, and athletic events. A strengths observation differs from a traditional observation because you are intentionally searching for the positive. As a strengths observer, it's not your job to be right but to learn more about the individual you observe. That requires being open and receptive to what you may or may not see.

What is the most important trait in a strengths observer? Curiosity! You need to understand your students' behaviors, experiences, and desires. You'll need to ask questions that you might think are obvious or irrelevant. The more time you spend with them, the more you learn about their strengths. One of the most important steps to becoming a strengths observer is adopting an explorer's mindset. This means that you approach the observation with an open mind—without any preconceived notions—and seek to discover various strengths. It also means being open to every possibility. When you immerse yourself in your students' worlds, you give yourself permission to be curious and wonder. Then, you open yourself to discovering new strengths within your students that will help them achieve their adult life outcomes.

In a successful strengths observation, you will ask questions, expect unconventional answers, and learn about the students' worlds. Searching for strengths in your students might seem intuitive, but it's not. Since most educators are trained to identify students' deficits, we must actively work to identify their strengths. Pay attention to the following:

- Does the student work better independently or in a group?
- When does the student show excitement, boredom, more energy or less energy, frustration, or sustained focus?
- How easily do they initiate tasks, shift between tasks, and stay on task?
- Are they inspiring or motivating others?
- Are they creative in how they approach a given task?
- Do they leverage resources or social capital in a meaningful way?
- What was challenging for the student?
- What seemed easy for the student?
- What patterns did you notice throughout the observation?

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After the observation, review your findings with the student. Specifically, share the strengths you identified. For example, if you observed a student during math class while they had to sustain attention over a long period of time, you might say, “Your attention to detail is strong, and you were able to focus on the entire task to get the job done.” Maybe you observed a student who didn’t contribute much during the brainstorming portion of the group activity in social studies. Still, that student captivated his peers and had them on the edge of their seats during the group presentation to the whole class.

Next, have the student offer their reflections on how they view their strengths. Ask them if they agree with your assessment. This is an opportunity to get feedback on how well your observations match up with how the student sees themselves—and it also helps students learn more about themselves!

To take this a step further, help students reflect on their strengths by asking questions like:

- What do you think you are good at?
- What do you love to do?
- What comes easily to you?
- Are there any activities that make you lose track of time?

When students use their strengths, it gives them a chance to shine, and they are more likely to experience success. This builds self-efficacy and gives them a reason to persist, even when tasks are challenging. Simply put, when students have an opportunity to use their strengths and shine, they experience positive emotions and feel good about themselves.

Imagine a youth with perseverance (predictor of post-secondary success) as a strength who only has one shot at succeeding at a task. If they aren’t successful on the first try, that youth might become frustrated and learn that you have to be perfect, contributing to anxiety. Now imagine a student who has a signature strength of perseverance, and you instead give them multiple chances to demonstrate mastery. The student might not succeed on the first try, the second try, or even the third. But providing a student who demonstrates perseverance with the opportunity to work at the task until they are successful will help them feel accomplished, and they will continue to work at it even when they face adversity.

Creating opportunities for students to use and demonstrate their strengths is an excellent way to build self-confidence. Students will begin to believe in themselves, realize they are capable, and leverage their strengths in meaningful ways. Also, there is value in helping students recognize and identify missed opportunities for using their strengths. The idea here is that if students can identify these missed oppor-

tunities, then it might help to increase their awareness of future opportunities to use strengths.

In transition planning we must teach students to explicitly name their strengths. Help them to build up their strengths-based vocabulary, utilize tools, resources, and support available from VADCDT. Show them the power of “yet.” Instead of a student saying they are not good at math facts, please encourage them to say, “I might not be the best in math facts—YET.” Encourage young people to try using their strengths in new ways. If their strength is focus, ask them to try a new task like finding a solution to a problem no one has figured out yet.

I challenge you to help your students find ways to tap into the strengths of others. Why? Because the best schools, communities, transition teams, and organizations know how to harness the strengths of each other—and you can help your students do the same. This means helping students become well-attuned to their strengths and limitations and learn how to work with others with different strengths and limitations. As Jonathon Mooney stated in a DCDT keynote in Kansas, “Normal sucks. Embrace your differences.” For example, DCDT Vice-President Tracy Sinclair is fantastic at making decisions quickly and effectively. Dawn Rowe, our DCDT president, is able to bring unique perspectives to a consensus. Jennifer Bumble, our DCDT treasurer, can find inspiration in unexpected places. When you have a team that is familiar with everyone’s approach, you can create a culture where everyone feels comfortable contributing in ways that leverage their strengths. This leads to bigger and better ideas than if everyone just worked on their own, and it also leads to increased trust in the team, which is what makes our DCDT Board stronger overall.

One way to help people tap into the strengths of the transition students they work with is to ask them, “How might you use your strengths to help someone else?” This question guides me as I work with the DCDT Board daily to support all DCDT members. Please reach out to me or any of your DCDT Board members if we can be of assistance to you in any way.

In closing, I want to reflect on the words of the disability rights leader Judy Heumann: “When other people see you as a third-class citizen, the first thing you need is a belief in yourself and the knowledge that you have rights. The next thing you need is a group of friends to fight back with.” We hope that you believe in yourself and the rights of the youth we have the privilege to support, and that you find you have a group of friends within DCDT.

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## STRAIGHT FROM THE COLLEGE STUDENT'S MOUTH

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More students with disabilities are attending postsecondary education than ever before! Currently, 19% of college students report a disability (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). There is also an increase in inclusive postsecondary education, with over 300 programs across the United States (Think College, 2023). Therefore, on a cold winter day in January, the DCDT Publication Committee decided to gather the perspectives of undergraduate students with disabilities about their transition to college in hopes of providing some guidance to secondary educators and future college students. Through informal discussions, the students provided insightful information we have condensed into a short list of recommendations.

### Advice for Secondary Educators

First, students wished their high school teachers would have been realistic about college. Many of the students noted their high school teachers did not fully explain the college experience accurately. Most of the students said that college was better than what they had been told. This was evident through one student's perspective: "Professors in college are so much more understanding about accommodations and needing an extension compared to high school teachers." Some of the students simply wanted practical advice about applying to colleges, and others wished their teachers had explained why time-management skills were so important.

Past research has acknowledged the need for students with disabilities in higher education to have self-advocacy skills and request accommodations (Fleming, Plotner, & Oertle, 2017). One student explained their need for self-advocacy in college, stating, "It has not always been easy, but if having a disability in college taught me anything, it was how to advocate for myself and my needs." Regardless of visible or invisible disabilities, peers believed students with disabilities should have access to accommodations in higher education (Akin & Huang, 2019). In postsecondary settings, if a disability is disclosed through a Disability Services Center,

instructors receive notice of approved accommodations for students. While best practice would assume these instructors proactively reach out to students to ensure accommodations are being appropriately given in the instructional setting and that students feel their needs are being met, the reality for many undergraduate students requires that they approach instructors themselves. Understanding how to begin this conversation is an essential skill for undergraduate students.

Our recommendations to secondary educators based upon these conversations are to (a) provide realistic examples of applying to and attending college from a variety of settings and experiences and (b) teach students how to talk about their disabilities with professors.

### Advice for Educators: Provide Realistic Examples

As previously stated, this group of undergraduates wished they had more examples of what different postsecondary options looked like, from applying, to living on campus, to going to classes. Here we provide a resource you can share with your students specifically about the college admissions process. Other helpful tools to incorporate into your instructional repertoire as you support transition-age youth as they explore postsecondary options include

- (a) encouraging your junior and senior students to take advantage of college visit days—these can be used for colleges, universities, technical schools, and community colleges;
- (b) implementing the use of technology to students' advantage—many postsecondary institution websites include virtual tours, virtual visits, and webinars to interact with current students to learn about their lived experiences;
- (c) developing advising groups in high school for any students focused on a specific institution—this allows

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- for students from a variety of backgrounds to connect and learn about the college or university together; and
- (d) partnering with school counseling staff to help support students throughout the admission process, which begins with researching expectations and requirements.

**Khan Academy—College Admissions**

You may have heard of Khan Academy and have recommended your students use it for algebra, calculus, biology, or even history, but did you know they have a whole course on **college admissions**? The course starts with “Making College Count,” which explains the importance of leadership and extracurricular involvement. The course continues with applying for college, college options, and financial aid assistance. This could be a great activity to do as a whole group, small group, individual instruction, or be completed at home as a way to get families involved in the transition process.

**Advice for Educators: Talking About One’s Disability**

Skills of self-advocacy and self-awareness are key behaviors associated with self-determined individuals (Wehmeyer et al., 2008). Undergraduate students discussed the importance of knowing both what accommodations are needed and how to communicate that to instructors. As educators, we can do many instructional activities within our classrooms and educational planning meetings to promote these skills. Below we highlight a specific tool for developing an “elevator speech.” Other ways to promote skills of self-advocacy and self-awareness include many tried-and-true evidence-based practices, such as

- (a) encouraging active student participation and involvement in the IEP/transition process;
- (b) developing One-Pagers;
- (c) incorporating self-reflection into academic content;
- (d) self-monitoring data—tracking what accommodations work, hinder success, or are neutrally helpful; and
- (e) including social-emotional units of study focused on understanding personal culture, identity, and history.

**Elevator Speech About Your Disability**

Students with disabilities in higher education are often tasked with presenting information about their disabilities and explaining the accommodations they need. A great way to prepare students for these future conversations is to help them create an “elevator speech” about their disabilities and their accommodations. There are several resources online that walk the reader through the process of creating an elevator speech

for employers; with some minor changes to the formatting, these resources could help students create an elevator speech about their disabilities (e.g., Direct Service Works, 2023; Washington PAVE, 2022). Check out the *DADD Express* Spring 2022 newsletter article, “How to Write and Deliver a Successful Elevator Speech” (Gilley, 2022).

**Advice to Future College Students**

Students were asked to give advice to future college students about living outside the family home and college life. Their advice mostly resides in two camps: (a) find a positive human support system and (b) find an emotional outlet. A positive support system is a predictor of postsecondary success (McCConnell et al., 2013). As one student said, “[You get a] fresh start in college because [at] college no one knows your past, only you do, so you have a bright future with that.” Another student explained how important it is to have strategies to cope with mental health struggles while at college: “I learned different techniques to ground myself, bring myself back to the present moment in class, and write about what was going on in my head.” Part of the positive support system for academic success includes disability support services and counseling services. In fact, California State University found a significant increase in the need for their students to obtain mental health services (Georgetown University, 2022). The same study showed Texas A&M had an increase of referrals for disability accommodations for mental health over the last decade. While anecdotal, there appears to be growth in the need for mental health support systems across most university settings. College students should utilize services offered to support their academic and social successes, which often begins with mental health.

**Get Involved**

Every college has clubs, organizations, and/or athletic teams students can join. Prior to the first day on campus, research and explore options for campus involvement. Many universities have involvement fairs during the first few weeks of school. These are great places to visit to determine where the best place is to get connected to the community while fitting into the student’s individual preferences. One student offered the following advice: “Go out there, have fun, make new friends, get involved in clubs at school.” The feeling of belonging is so important to college success and life satisfaction (Fleming, Oertle et al., 2017). Individuals can draw identity and belonging from groups on campus. There are many different types of organizations or clubs (e.g., anime, chess, philanthropic, professional, intramurals, faith-based, or culture-related).

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There are even peer organizations on campus that are created to support students with disabilities. These organizations hold high expectations for their members, including those with intellectual and developmental disabilities (Carter et al., 2019). These high expectations enable students with disabilities to achieve greater outcomes while in college and beyond. In addition, peers at universities believed students with disabilities were “equally social and academically capable” (Akin & Huang, 2019).

### Emotional Outlet

Mental health supports on and off campus are often available, but many students are unaware of their existence or how to access these services. Student health services always include mental health. Counseling, support, and accommodations are available to students with disabilities. Numerous “off campus” options for online counseling are available to young adults. Many of these options are covered by insurance. To align with the student’s busy schedule, online counseling can be provided through several platforms such as text messaging, emailing, videoconferencing, and/or phone calls. These online platforms also have specializations, including LGBTQIA+, life coaching, goal-driven support, and anxiety/depression. Some online therapy avenues that work well with insurance are BetterHelp ([www.betterhelp.com](http://www.betterhelp.com)), Pride Counseling ([www.pridecounseling.com](http://www.pridecounseling.com)), and TalkSpace ([www.talkspace.com](http://www.talkspace.com)). Another site that offers support for mental health to students in higher education is ActiveMinds ([www.activeminds.org](http://www.activeminds.org)).

Other emotional outlets can be beneficial to student well-being. These might include finding a hobby, exercising, joining campus groups, and attending events on and off campus. Some students sought solace in faith-based organizations on campus as well.

### Conclusion

Our conversations with current college students with disabilities were insightful. We were pleasantly surprised by their honesty and the ownership they took over their strengths, needs, and disabilities. These students showed a great amount of self-advocacy that would rival any neurotypical peer at universities across the United States. We believe the future for college students with disabilities is bright, and their advice will, we hope, impact high school students and their teachers to better prepare others for the transition to university life.

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## 10 REASONS WHY YOU SHOULD ATTEND DCDT IN RENO

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1. Reno is the Biggest Little City in the World and DCDT is the Biggest Little Conference in the World! It just makes sense!
2. Pick from over 100 sessions on transition evidence-based practices, policy, and research.
3. Enjoy Silver Legacy Resort accommodations with restaurants, bars, and entertainment ([click here](#) for more information).
4. Rent a car and take a one-hour drive to stunning Lake Tahoe.
5. Try your luck in a classic Reno casino (e.g., Atlantis, Peppermill, Circus Circus, Grand Sierra).
6. Take a quick jaunt to the beautiful Truckee Riverwalk, Arts District, or University of Nevada, Reno campus.
7. Go horseback riding, golfing, or even bowling. Check out the Taj Majal of Tenpin ([click here](#) for more information).
8. Try spectacular restaurants, breweries, and distilleries. Check out Louis' Basque Corner ([click here](#) for more information).
9. Lounge outside and enjoy the spectacular mountain views set against the shiny neon lights of the city (the average temperature for Reno in October is 70 degrees).
10. Last but not least, all your transition friends (and future friends) are going to be there! See you October 18–21st, 2023, in Reno!