

**Brief #3: Disability Disclosure in Work-Based Learning Programs:  
Key Issues by Linda Scholl and Marianne Mooney**

**DRAFT**

**INTRODUCTION**

The transition from secondary school to postsecondary education and work proves difficult for many youth. For youth with disabilities, this transition carries particular economic and social challenges. Studies have shown, for example, that youth with disabilities are twice as likely to drop out of high school than nondisabled students [citation needed]. Furthermore, youth with disabilities who do graduate from high school have significantly lower enrollment rates in postsecondary education than do their nondisabled peers, as well as higher rates of unemployment and lower wages. Most educators agree that if students with disabilities are to achieve equity, much more focus needs to be placed on maximizing students' learning potential and facilitating their transition to postschool education and work. High-quality work-based learning programs which focus on the development of integrated academic and vocational skills show the potential to prepare students, both with and without disabilities, for work and education in an increasingly complex economy. Through their emphasis on contextualized teaching and learning, such programs may provide youth with disabilities the opportunity to experience increased success in the world beyond high school.

In an effort to better understand the impact of participation in work-based learning programs on students with disabilities, researchers at the Center on Education and Work undertook a study examining the quality of the learning experiences, accommodation and support strategies, and post-school outcomes of students with disabilities who have participated in Wisconsin's Youth Apprenticeship (YA) Programs, a rigorous school- and work-based learning program for high school juniors and seniors. Through the use of intensive case study methods, this research project aimed to: 1) document factors that encourage students with disabilities to complete the program and make a successful transition to careers and/or college, and 2) use this information to

better assist stakeholders (students, parents, employers, school staff, etc.) directly involved in the career development and decision-making processes of high school students and youth with disabilities.

In this article, we highlight a set of particularly critical and closely interrelated factors that emerged during the study and that impact on the success of students with learning disabilities both during the program and in their postsecondary education and work paths: students' disclosure of their learning disabilities and their development of self-advocacy skills. Using profiles of students with learning disabilities who have participated in a youth apprenticeship program, this brief will examine the multiple factors that influence students' decision to disclose, the conditions necessary for "effective disclosure," and the relationship between disclosure and self-advocacy. In addition, we look at the effects of non-disclosure on students' performance at the worksite and in the offsite classroom instruction, as well as the potential benefits associated with disclosure when accompanied by advocacy, supports, and appropriate accommodations. Finally, we explore the implications this research has for a wide variety of stakeholders in work-based learning programs: students, parents, special education instructors, employers/mentors, school-to-work coordinators, apprenticeship instructors, and counselors. We consider how stakeholders themselves can become more effective advocates for students with disabilities in work-based learning programs and how we might foster the development of self-advocacy among the students with whom we work.

### ***Work-Based Learning Programs***

Although work-based learning programs have been in existence for many years, there has been a substantial increase in the number of such programs since 1995. A key tenet of work-based learning programs is the use of environments outside the traditional school setting to "assist students in making connections between what they are learning in school and how it is used in real-life work activities" (Lynch, 2000, p. 75). Work-based learning combines academic, theoretical instruction with applied, hands-on learning.

“This blending appears to result ...in increased retention of knowledge, deeper understanding of subject matter, and the ability to apply (i.e., transfer) knowledge and skills” (Lynch, 2000, p. 75) A further goal of work-based learning is to assist students in their career development by introducing them to the technical and employability skills needed to pursue a particular occupational field. Examples of work-based learning opportunities include: paid and unpaid internships, service learning, youth-run enterprises, subsidized employment training, cooperative education, and apprenticeships. (Lynch, 2000, p. 75)

A number of research studies (Bailey and Merritt, 1997; Phelps, 1998; Steinberg, 1998) have documented positive outcomes for students who have participated in well-organized work-based learning programs: higher grades and class rank, reduced absences, better earnings, increased engagement in learning, and increased enrollment in postsecondary education. These programs have also been shown to benefit students with disabilities and those at risk with improved attitude, motivation, and self confidence; broadened career options; employability skills; and increased high school completion (Public Forum Institute, 2000; Trach & Harney, 1998). Indeed, many educators argue that participation in work-based learning programs can significantly improve the postschool education and work lives of students with a variety of disabilities.

### ***Wisconsin’s Youth Apprenticeship Program***

Wisconsin’s Youth Apprenticeship (YA) Program is a two-year intensive work- and school-based learning program for high school juniors and seniors.<sup>1</sup> Students interested in participating in the program choose a particular occupational cluster for which a statewide industry-recognized curriculum has been developed (e.g., Printing/Graphic Arts, Manufacturing, Health, Finance, Auto Technology). For a portion of their high school credits and school-time, participants are placed at a worksite in an entry-level, paid position where they work and receive on-the-job training for an average of 10-15 hours/week. In addition, they receive 3-6 hours/week of school-based instruction in that

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<sup>1</sup> Recently, Wisconsin introduced one-year youth apprenticeship programs for some occupational clusters.

career area. Through the two years they are in the program, students are rotated through a variety of “competencies” both at the workplace and through their school work that introduce them to the breadth of basic skills and knowledge they need to pursue that occupation. At the end of the two years, youth apprentices graduate from high school and earn an industry-recognized Certificate of Occupational Proficiency. In addition, Youth Apprenticeship graduates are eligible to receive advanced-standing credits at a Wisconsin technical college.

Wisconsin’s YA program began in 1992, with the first 17 students graduating in 1994. Since then, the number of students graduating has grown each year. In 2000, 545 students representing 22 different occupational fields graduated through the youth apprenticeship program. Participation is open to all students; however, the occupational choices available to students at any particular high school vary significantly depending on local economic conditions and availability of worksites.

Students who choose to become involved in the YA program are extremely diverse in their motivation. While some YA participants enter the program very clear about their future career direction, many are confused about what they want to do after high school and uncertain about the strengths they already have and the skills they want to develop. Likewise, some program applicants demonstrate impressive school achievement, whereas others choose involvement in YA because they feel alienated from the school culture or academic environment and prefer to learn and perform in a more hands-on manner.

The YA program is designed to be a highly structured and rigorous experience. Youth apprenticeship students participate in a demanding program in which instructors, coordinators, and employers have high expectations for performance. Students are expected to manage an often-complicated class and work schedule in which they move between their school, an off-school worksite, and an instructional site. They must continue to take general academic coursework required for graduation, while learning new technical skills and performing well in a job setting with adult co-workers. While

many students have benefited greatly from the YA experience, others have struggled and eventually dropped out of the program. In recent years, roughly 70% of students who start the YA program go on to completion two years later, while 30% discontinue participation before completion.

Exit and follow-up studies conducted with program graduates have consistently shown high levels of satisfaction with the program, as well as impressive post-secondary education and work outcomes for those who graduate. Graduates attest to the benefits of participation including:

- The strengthening of career planning skills
- The development of job acquisition skills
- An increased understanding of the world of work
- The application of concepts and skills taught in the classroom to the work situation
- The development of “soft” skills transferable to any occupational field (e.g., interpersonal communication skills, team building skills, time management, self-confidence)
- Increased understanding of and motivation to pursue postsecondary education options

In the graduating class of 2000, ten percent of students participating in Wisconsin YA programs had disabilities, primarily learning disabilities (77%). Students with disabilities, however, have had a higher rate of non-completion than students without disabilities. Thus, while students with disabilities comprise 6% of the graduates overall, they comprise 9% of the non-completers. Despite this higher non-completion rate, it is clear that students with disabilities can and do perform well in youth apprenticeship programs. Between 1994 and 2000, 126 students with disabilities graduated from the YA program. This number represents 6.2% of the total number of YA graduates.

## **STUDY METHODOLOGY**

An intensive case study method was used for this research project. Researchers conducted personal interviews with 10 individuals each from four groups: program graduates with disabilities, non-completers with disabilities, program graduates without disabilities, and non-completers without disabilities. For this study, efforts were made to identify all the students with disabilities who participated in the YA program between 1992 and 2000. YA Coordinators, and School-To-Work Coordinators overseeing youth apprenticeship programs were sent informational letters on the study and were asked to pass these letters along to graduates and past participants from their programs who had disabilities. For the research, participants with disabilities and key related stakeholders (parents, special education teachers, employers, mentors, YA coordinators and instructors, and guidance counselors) were interviewed by phone. The interview protocols served as semi-structured guides, and additional probes were developed ad hoc according to the nature of the responses and uniqueness of the experiences reported by the participants (Stewart & Cash, 1985). Questions to guide the data collection process were developed around nine focus areas: demographic information; program recruitment, preparation, and selection processes; daily routine; relationships; disability characteristics; supports and accommodations; postschool employment; postschool education/training; and reflections on the future. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed in their entirety to facilitate the coding and analysis processes. The transcriptions and related field notes were analyzed to identify emergent themes. In addition to collecting interview data, researchers reviewed student documents (transcripts, IEPs, multidisciplinary team meeting reports, YA competency check lists). These documents provided a more detailed understanding of the students' disability, disability-related needs, and educational history.

## **FINDINGS**

Many factors appear to have a significant impact on students' success during participation in the YA program and in their subsequent post-school education and work paths. Some of these factors are evident for all participants—those with and without

disabilities. These include: 1) high levels of program organization and coordination, 2) meaningful and consistent communication between the stakeholders in the YA program (e.g., students, parents, instructors, YA coordinators, employers, and mentors), 3) high levels of student motivation and persistence, 4) a “good fit” between students’ abilities and their chosen YA career field, 5) a quality worksite placement (e.g., adequate rotation through positions at the worksite, the presence of knowledgeable and experienced mentors/trainers), and 6) rigorous classroom instruction based on integrated vocational and academic competencies.

In our analysis of the interview data collected specifically from students with disabilities and key related stakeholders, several additional and interrelated factors emerged that play a particularly important role in the YA experience of students with disabilities. These include: a) awareness of and orientation toward one’s disability; b) the presence of key mentors; c) the availability of appropriate supports and accommodations; d) stakeholders’ (e.g., parents, teachers, coordinators, employers, mentors) level of advocacy on behalf of the student; e) students’ own skills at self-advocacy, and f) students’ disclosure of their disability. These latter factors (d, e, and f) are tightly interwoven and have proven to be critical components that strengthen or detract from participants’ success in the program and in postsecondary education and work. It is to these factors that we now turn our attention.

### ***School/Work Divide***

Students with learning disabilities participating in work-based learning programs straddle two worlds with different levels of knowledge and understanding of learning disabilities: the world of special education services and the world of work. Since 1976, the incidence and/or recognition of learning disabilities has increased substantially. Currently, students with specific learning disabilities account for more than half of all students with disabilities (McDonnell, McLaughlin, and Morison, 1997). Over that time, much research has been conducted to determine how such disabilities manifest themselves and how educators can respond to the specific educational needs of those

students. However, much of the knowledge and understanding created as a result of that research has been contained primarily within the special education community. Even within educational settings, general educators often have minimal training in recognizing learning disabilities and working with students in ways that maximize their potential. Moreover, learning disabilities remain largely hidden to and often misunderstood by the general public. Employers know very little about such disabilities: the range of learning disabilities, how they may impact on individuals' ability to learn and work, and what kinds of supports and accommodations may be useful in educational settings, at work, and in everyday life.

The divide between special education and employment with respect to disability awareness is exacerbated further when we take a closer look at the cultural norms of these different worlds. Since IDEA and ADA legislation outlined the legal responsibilities of educational institutions with respect to individuals with disabilities, special education has evolved into a complex system designed to respond to the particular instructional needs of students with disabilities. Sands and Doll (1996) argue that while important gains have been achieved, this same system has had an unintended consequence: students' over reliance on school staff to define and respond to their learning needs and transition plans. "Many students come to believe that the conditions controlling their ability to learn are managed by adults, and that they cannot direct or affect their own success in academic or daily tasks. Accumulating evidence suggests that students with special education needs are more likely than nondisabled students to exhibit an external locus of control in matters that require choice or decision making, to acquire non-strategic approaches to learning tasks, and to have problems adjusting to adult roles" (p. 59). For students with disabilities approaching the end of high school, this tendency to rely primarily on adults for decision-making can be detrimental to their ability to make a successful transition to post-school education and work.

On the other hand, in the world of work, while employers' general awareness of disabilities issues has increased with implementation of the ADA, much of that

awareness has been limited to issues affecting individuals with physical disabilities. Adelman and Vogel (1993) suggest that many employers may not view learning disabilities as “legitimate” disabilities. Some may even view individuals with learning disabilities as being either intellectually deficient or simply underachievers. In either case, employers may have lowered expectations of individuals with learning disabilities and may not provide these individuals with the same training and advancement opportunities as they do for employees without disabilities.

Further complicating this divide between school and work for students with learning disabilities is the issue of disclosure. In the school setting, curriculum and services for students with learning disabilities are often centered around their disability status. The school institution plays a central role in identifying, testing, and providing accommodations and supports to students in elementary and secondary education. Students’ special education files provide a continuous record of progress that follows them from year to year and school to school. Key teachers, counselors, and support staff are aware of the student’s disability and are obligated to provide needed supports and accommodations. In that context, a student’s decision to disclose his/her disability is often limited to whether to tell friends/peers. In the work environment, however, employers are only obligated by law to provide supports and accommodations if and when an employee directly discloses his/her disability. If no disclosure is made, individuals with learning disabilities can expect no accommodations or modifications. Beyond the immediate school building, then, students with learning disabilities can choose whether or not to disclose their disability status to others.

When students with disabilities enroll in a work-based learning program such as youth apprenticeship, they travel between these two different worlds. While their YA experience is organized and coordinated by the school, much of their time is spent at a worksite (or off-school instructional setting). One world is protective—and sometimes overly enabling—of students with disabilities; the other, often ignorant of or occasionally unreceptive to those with hidden disabilities. As YA students with learning disabilities move through their week, they travel from the school setting where special education

staff are knowledgeable of their disability and fully geared toward providing services to the work setting where employers are largely unaware of (and sometimes unsympathetic to) the needs of employees with learning disabilities and where therefore the provision of appropriate accommodations is uncommon. Many YA students travel, as well, to an off-school instructional site where the instructor generally will not know of the student's disability unless advised directly by the student or a member of the home school staff. In the world of the student's home school, disclosure is unnecessary for receiving services; in the world of work and off-site instruction, disclosure is a critical step in requesting needed accommodations.

### ***Disability Disclosure***

In our research study, only one-third of the students we interviewed disclosed their disability either to their employer or to their off-site YA instructor. As a result, while all students with disabilities received traditional accommodations and supports at their home school, few received any accommodations at their worksite or in their YA instructional setting. Students cited many reasons for their lack of disclosure to YA-related staff and co-workers beyond their home school. One of the most frequently cited reasons for lack of disclosure at the worksite was that the students did not feel their disability would affect their work performance. This reasoning, while problematic in some ways, has some merit. For students with disabilities, the youth apprenticeship program offers modes of learning, working, and demonstrating achievement that are more deeply grounded in the tasks and activities they can expect to apply in their future work setting. Often these modes of learning differ significantly from the traditional academic models of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Because the YA program places such strong emphasis on hands-on learning, most of the students with learning disabilities in this research project felt more at ease and confident about their skills and abilities in their work environment than they did in their school setting. As a result, many did not view their disability as an important factor in their ability to learn and perform at the worksite. Often, this view simply extended itself to their off-site YA technical instruction setting which typically contained more traditionally academic modes of

instruction and assessment. Not surprisingly, it was in these more formal instructional settings that students' lack of disclosure had the most significant impact on their success in the program. A number of students who dropped out of the YA program did so not because of their performance at the worksite, but rather because they did poorly in the (off-site) YA technical courses.

Several students also mentioned that they did not disclose their learning disability for fear of discrimination or stereotyping—yet another reason that has merit. As mentioned above, learning disabilities are poorly understood by the general public. In the minds of many, learning disabilities are associated with cognitive impairment, developmental delay, and mental retardation. In the minds of others, a “learning disability” may be used as an excuse for what is perceived to be a lack of effort or persistence. It is not unreasonable or unfounded for YA participants to anticipate discrimination in the workplace. For individuals with learning disabilities, the act of disclosure can be fraught with stress and vulnerability.

*There is extreme anxiety in telling a teacher, employer, or friend about a learning disability because the individual fears that disclosure may place him/her in a vulnerable position. Although sensitivity and awareness have increased over the years, individuals with learning disabilities still feel a sense of anxiety and must exercise caution in deciding to whom they disclose because it is still common to be misunderstood; placed under suspicion; humiliated; perceived as less than equal; labeled a troublemaker; alienated; isolated; and/or stigmatized (Carpenter, 1997, p. 8).*

This sentiment is echoed by a number of researchers in the field of learning disabilities. Individuals with learning disabilities have good reasons for avoiding disclosure: they may be treated differently at the workplace, experience lowered expectations on the part of their supervisors and/or co-workers, and be presented fewer opportunities for advancement.

Several YA participants said, in our interviews, that they were advised by school staff, primarily YA coordinators and special educators, not to disclose their disability to their employer for the same reasons listed above: 1) their disability would not impact on their ability to learn and perform at work, or 2) out of concern that they would experience discrimination. For a number of students, this advice dovetailed well with their own desire to move away from the label “disabled.” Indeed, the divide between the worlds of school and work presented a welcome opportunity not to disclose their disability. For those students who felt stigmatized or burdened by such a descriptor in the school setting, entering the world of work through a YA program offered them the chance to assert their independence and to re-discover their strengths and abilities in a new context.

There were a number of students in our study, however, who *did* decide to disclose their disability to their employer. While the employers were generally receptive to this information, most did not know what accommodations and/or supports they could or should provide. Because the students themselves could often not articulate what supports would be helpful, few accommodations were provided. In the rare instances when students could communicate potentially useful supports, employers and mentors made adaptations that were invaluable to the youth apprentice.

After having researched disclosure decisions through this study, we believe that these issues are important to acknowledge in all their complexity. Some students with learning disabilities (particularly those whose disabilities are mild) are able to complete a YA program without accommodations at the work- or instructional site. For such students, compensatory strategies (or “self-accommodations” such as the use of good time management and study skills, working informally with responsive mentors, requesting extra time to complete tasks) provide sufficient support to participate in and benefit from a work-based learning program. In such cases, there is no immediate *need* for the student to disclose. On the other hand, many students with learning disabilities would benefit significantly from a more formalized provision of appropriate supports and

modifications both in the workplace and in the instructional setting. Indeed, many students with disabilities *require* appropriate supports and accommodations if they are to participate and succeed in programs that develop their vocational potential. Such accommodations do not change the nature of the task being performed, and do not lower or alter the standards or competencies established for program completion. Accommodations are made to meet the unique needs of the individual student, and only to the extent that permits the student to engage in a meaningful and productive work-based learning experience. When accommodations are effectively executed, the learning needs of the individual and the proficiency levels necessary for employment are both served. In these cases, students' disclosure to their off-site instructors and their employer is key. Disclosure can allow students to get needed supports and accommodations that will make a significant improvement in their ability to persist in and successfully complete a work-based learning program, as well as to make more productive transitions to postsecondary education and work. Disclosure can also present participants in work-based learning programs the opportunity "to participate in and be successful at activities that the student may have previously avoided.... A student with a hidden disability may find that, after disclosure, the stress of keeping the disability hidden is removed, therefore allowing the student to better concentrate..." (Lynch & Gussel, 1996, p. 353).

While some students with learning disabilities are able to successfully complete the YA program without formal accommodations, we must also acknowledge the complex effects of non-disclosure, not the least of which is the lack of supports that are critical for many participants with learning disabilities. As mentioned above, in our study, a number of students decided or were advised not to disclose, thinking that they would wait to see if a problem would arise. In those cases, program coordinators, and special education teachers—rather than developing a systematic and thoughtful strategy to support the student throughout the program—were forced to devise accommodations after the fact. By the time a problem had been brought to the attention of the appropriate staff, it was often more difficult to resolve. Furthermore, the students then experience and must recover from what may be viewed as a "failure." Students' level of

self-esteem and confidence may suffer as a result. Although counseling students not to disclose may be a strategic (and sometimes understandable) option in the short term, this practice sends students a negative message about their capacity to succeed as individuals with disabilities. Ironically, in such a situation, these students are being given the message that they will succeed only if they deny who they are; yet, by denying who they are, they are often being denied the supports and accommodations that help make for a successful experience. Such negative messages may play into and enhance such students' already low self-esteem or self-concept.

Furthermore, as reflected in much of the promotional literature on work-based learning, programs such as the Youth Apprenticeship Program often represent an effort to prepare students for *lifelong* learning and work. Students (as well as school staff) who believe either that a learning disability will not impact on the student's work performance or that disclosure should be withheld until a problem arises should consider that given today's economy and changing workforce needs, all employees will need training and re-training throughout their entire career life, even if they remain in the same position or in the same field—a situation which is exceedingly rare these days. This need to continually re-train or upgrade one's skills means that individuals with learning disabilities will be required to make decisions about disclosure and requests for accommodations on an ongoing basis. Preparing students to make those decisions thoughtfully and with full information about the risks and benefits of disclosure involves taking on these issues with students in a more straightforward manner. By avoiding direct engagement about disclosure with students, parents, teachers, counselors, and program coordinators miss a valuable opportunity to open up a dialogue about a decision that will critically impact their adult lives.

As is evident, disclosure presents a number of dilemmas for students and other related stakeholders: Should or shouldn't students disclose that they have a disability? If yes, to whom should they disclose? To their employers and co-workers? To their YA instructors? What specific supports and accommodations might be appropriate in these different settings? Who should be responsible for planning and implementing those

accommodations? How will all these issues be negotiated between the various stakeholders?

### ***“Effective” disclosure***

Here it is important to take a step back and explore in more detail what is meant by “disclosure.” Lynch and Gussel (1996) broadly define disclosure as “an intended release of personal information by individuals regarding their tastes, interests, work, money, education, attitudes, opinions, body, and personality.” However, they argue that for individuals with learning disabilities “effective” disclosure goes beyond simply telling someone, “I have a disability.” Effective disclosure begins when individuals are *knowledgeable about their disability and are able to articulate both their disability-related needs and their unique talents*. Because the “content and timing of self-disclosure ...potentially have an impact on outcomes (e.g., determine how an individual is perceived and how corresponding requests are treated),” an individual deciding whether to disclose a disability needs to consider carefully “when to disclose, how to disclose, how much to disclose, and to whom to disclose” (Lynch & Gussel, 1996, p. 353). Unless an individual takes these factors into consideration, efforts to disclose may not lead to improved supports and accommodations. Disclosure must be accompanied by potential solutions.

When an individual discloses “effectively,” a conversation or exchange should be initiated between that individual and the person to whom he/she disclosed. That conversation allows the individual with a disability to describe his/her disability, request appropriate supports and accommodations, and demonstrate the strengths and contributions they bring to the work or learning environment. The employer (or instructor) is able to provide the individual with ongoing feedback about his/her performance; adjustments to the supports and accommodations can then be made on an as-needed basis. In this ideal situation, the individual with a disability becomes a constructive and assertive advocate for him/herself, and the employer or instructor gains a better understanding not only of how to draw on that individual’s strengths, but

also how to work with other individuals who demonstrate a variety of learning styles and abilities. “Effective” disclosure, then, “requires shared information regarding disability-related needs; creative, practical suggestions for accommodations; open communication and constructive feedback to evaluate the impact of disclosure and the effectiveness of accommodations; and interactive mechanisms to make changes when efforts are not working.” (Lynch & Gussel, 1996, p. 356) For disclosure to be constructive, the interactivity of this process is key. For the individual with a disability, “effective” disclosure rests on an awareness of one’s disability and strengths, the ability both to describe one’s disability-related needs clearly and to demonstrate one’s strengths, and the capacity to serve as an on-going self-advocate. Conversely, the employer/instructor needs to be receptive to the individual who is disclosing, be willing to make appropriate accommodations, and be committed to communicating directly and clearly with the individual.

### ***Self-Advocacy***

The literature both on self-determination and self-advocacy is currently garnering increased attention in the field of special education. Both sets of literature highlight students’ need to learn to: 1) be aware of their needs, abilities, and preferences; 2) set goals and design strategies for achieving them; 3) identify and ask for assistance from trusted and key mentors; 4) solve problems creatively; and 5) candidly evaluate and adjust progress toward their goals (Adelman & Vogel, 1990, 1996; Eisenman, 2001; Field, 1998; Lynch & Gussel, 1996). In our study, few students had the foundation for developing self-advocacy skills. This was particularly evident by students’ generally low level of self-awareness and inability to describe their disability and disability-related needs. Three quarters of the youth apprentices with disabilities lacked a solid understanding about the nature of their disability. While many students could briefly describe some general aspects of their disability, they often could not articulate specifically how and in what contexts their disability manifested itself. As a result, many continued to view their disability as a purely academic issue, and failed to recognize how disability could impact on workplace training, performance and success. More

importantly perhaps, apprentices with disabilities often lacked a general understanding about their abilities, and were therefore unlikely to utilize their strengths to overcome weaknesses. This lack of self-awareness meant that many students did not have a balanced perspective on their abilities and disabilities; rather they focused primarily on their disability as an all-pervading deficit. Many youth apprentices with disabilities had clearly internalized negative messages about their work and capacities to learn and perform well both in school and at work. When problems surfaced or work experiences arose that were unsatisfying, apprentices were often unable to assertively address the situation, formulate constructive solutions, or seek assistance from potential adult advocates. While an inability to think critically in order to solve problems could be seen among students without disabilities as well, the effects were more evident among apprentices without disabilities, often causing longer-term effects such as decreased commitment and persistence in the program. In addition, school-based structures such as the annual Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that might be used to promote students' participation in their academic and transition planning were not being well utilized. Only 50% of the students we interviewed attended their IEP meeting. Of those who did attend, few participated in a significant or meaningful way in their IEP discussions.

These findings about the importance of self-awareness and problem-solving skills parallel those of other related studies concerning individuals with learning disabilities. Lack of self-awareness has been recognized as a dominant characteristic among adults with learning disabilities who were not successfully employed. In a study of employed adults with learning disabilities, Adelman and Vogel (1990) found that "although they knew they were having problems, these adults did not understand how their specific deficits impacted on their difficulties. Consequently, they could not anticipate problems nor develop compensatory strategies when they were having trouble completing their responsibilities" (p. 154). For high school students with learning disabilities, developing a thorough understanding of their disability can be particularly problematic. "Candid self-evaluation of personal strengths, weaknesses, and needs is ... an affectively loaded task that becomes singularly difficult for students with limited self-confidence or pronounced insecurity about their acceptance by significant others" (Sands & Doll,

1996, p. 64). As Merchant and Gajar (1997) write in an article on self-advocacy components in transition programs, students with learning disabilities often “exhibit minimal self-awareness and do not recognize their learning strengths because experience has taught them to focus on their learning weaknesses” (p. 224). Morrison and Cosden (1997) argue, “knowledge about one’s disability can reduce one’s vulnerability to it” (p 13). In particular, they found that “viewing the disability as circumscribed rather than global and encompassing is associated with successful adult functioning, including personal satisfaction, vocational success, and college completion” (p. 13). These researchers also found that self-awareness has wide-ranging effects on an individual’s ability to advocate for themselves. “Self-awareness serves as a protective factor, in part, because it allows the individual to develop proactive compensatory strategies for achieving in school, as well as for finding appropriate employment. For example, adults who have greater understanding of their disability are more likely to seek assistance when needed and avail themselves of educational and employment opportunities that build on their strengths and not their weaknesses” (Morrison and Cosden, p 13).

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The capacities to effectively disclose and become a self-advocate are critically important skills for all youth with disabilities. However, such skills do not simply develop as students mature; there must be a conscious, intensive, and sustained effort to foster their development. Precisely because the development of such skills is a *lifelong* process, it is essential that self-advocacy training become a major component of secondary educational programs serving students with disabilities. When students with learning disabilities participate in a work-based learning program, educators have a unique opportunity to foster the development of those skills. Students are exposed—often for the first time—to a work and learning environment in which they are treated as adults and expected to make independent decisions as well as assert their needs and preferences. By making use of this “teachable moment,” educators can begin to engage with students in a more immediate, sustained, and playful way about their

transition to post-secondary work and education. In this context, self-advocacy skills are not being taught in an abstract manner; rather, they are being developed through students' direct interaction with the "real world" environment into which they will soon be transitioning.

Self-advocacy training must include developing an awareness of one's abilities and disabilities. Students need to understand their disability and how it impacts on their learning and work performance. They need to be familiar with their preferred learning styles. They need to identify what supports and accommodations are helpful in the workplace and in the classroom. They need to receive instruction and encouragement for using a wide range of compensatory strategies such as note-taking and time management skills, taking additional time to finish tasks, asking for help from others, using appropriate technology, and doing self-relaxation exercises (Adelman & Vogel, 1990, 1993; Barga, 1996; Lynch & Gussel, 1996). They need to understand their unique strengths and how to use those talents to compensate for their disability. However, self-advocacy training must, as well, include practice in communicating all of the above to others if and when it is appropriate. The ability to articulate one's needs, desires, and preferences in an assertive and constructive manner is one of the most critical components of self-advocacy.

In addition, students with hidden disabilities participating in work-based learning programs need guidance about disability disclosure issues. They need to understand their legal rights, the benefits and risks of disclosure, and the potential effects of non-disclosure. They should then make *their own* decision about disclosure. If students decide to disclose, they should have guidance about and practice in how to disclose effectively.

This all requires collaboration between a variety of stakeholders (students, parents, special educators, career/technical instructors, guidance counselors, program administrators, and mentors). Throughout this process, collaboration needs to happen in an environment that encourages students to be the primary decision-makers

concerning their own learning and work. School staff and family can provide valuable insight, information, and support structures, but students must ultimately be responsible for the paths they take. When students with disabilities carry this responsibility, they learn more about the range of their strengths and abilities; this knowledge can then translate into a greater sense of confidence. Youth with disabilities who “believe in their competence and perceive support for autonomous behavior through interpersonal involvement with important adults and peers...evidence greater personal adjustment and academic success” (Eisenman, 2001, p. 5).

School staff involved in coordinating work-based learning programs do have a key and primary role to play in educating employers and work-based mentors about the nature of learning disabilities as well as reasonable supports and accommodations. Such education contributes significantly to employers’ knowledge base and often increases their willingness to accommodate and support individuals with learning disabilities.

## **CONCLUSION**

In lieu of a traditional conclusion that sums up the main points of our research, we would like to end this article with the narrative of one study participant whom we will call Mark. Although Mark has many of the internal personal characteristics that are associated with resilient individuals (e.g. an out-going personality, the ability to ask for help when needed, the persistence and drive to do well), he also had access to many of the other components that foster the development of resilience: key adult role models and mentors, a supportive family environment, and (learned) compensatory strategies. His narrative, drawn verbatim from his interview, illustrates how a student with a learning disability who enters a work-based learning program with some of the basic building blocks of self-advocacy and “effective” disclosure can deepen those skills and can make a successful transition to life and work after high school.

*I first heard of the Youth Apprenticeship program through school announcements. I wasn't really that interested, but what sounded interesting was to get skills behind my*

name and to have college transfer credits. I really didn't know what I was going to do after high school, and this gave me some direction. I like hands-on stuff, and I enjoy working with my hands. In printing I could get my hands dirty. My folks finally convinced me to go ahead and get signed on. They said, "You don't know what you're going to do after high school, and you've got nothing to lose. You get credit; you get to leave school, you get to experience a job site, and get paid to go to school." And when you're a kid, it's like, Yeah, Ok, let's get paid to go to school!

I filled out an application and needed three references. Then a bunch of printing businesses came to the high school and did interviews. I told every job person that interviewed me that I am learning disabled. It takes me a little longer to learn things, but as soon as I learn, I become the best at it. I'm so used to seeing different reactions. I can usually read people. Some people backed right away, and that's fine. I'd rather know if they don't want me than have them find out halfway through the job that I'm learning disabled. A couple people said, "I have a son, or I have a family member with a learning disability." They were really open. [At the worksite] they just treated me like a normal person, whatever normal is.

I was tested I believe in second grade. That's how I found out that I was learning disabled. It's like dyslexia. And it was labeled every since. It mostly affects reading and math. I'm a slower reader. I take more time with things. I don't pick up things as fast as most people. At that time, I was in [another town]. I would go to this real mean woman who would yell at us every time we would spell a word wrong. Oh, she was the meanest thing. My mom and I always laugh about her now, just because she was so mean.

[Later] we moved up to M— and I was in high school. That's where I met M.P. [special education teacher], who was very influential in my life. She showed me that you're just a normal person. She said, "You're not dumb. You're not stupid." (My mom and dad always told me that, but it's hard to take advice from your mom and dad.) I was in her room every day during study hall. We'd discuss what things I need to accomplish and who I've got to talk to. And she'd always make me answer her phone or make me talk to

*the teacher. And I was scared: “No, I can’t do that. That’s your job.” She’d make me do all this stuff I didn’t want to. But I did. And became better.*

*My mother was also learning disabled. She always said, “You’ll be fine. You just learn a little slower. That’s not a big deal.” It didn’t really sink into my head until freshman year. Then the combination of everyone making fun of me, kids picking on me, you finally just say, “That’s enough. Enough! I’m not going to put up with it anymore!” M.P. really convinced me that [having a learning disability] is nothing to be ashamed of. That really developed with my YA mentor, F.R., actually. He made me realize that I’m not dumb, I’m not stupid. I don’t have to listen to those people. I learned you have to be an advocate for yourself, otherwise you get trampled. I go full force. It’s something I’ve always done in my life: just get behind it 110%. A cliché, but it’s because with my disability I’ve always had to work harder than it seems like everyone else.*

*[The printing site I worked at] is a very small print shop. It was just more personal for me because there were five or six employees, and you got to know everyone real well. They all came up to me and showed me around. They showed me the safety rules, made me learn the chemicals, learn what the different machine here does. I got more personal attention at the smaller print shop. Everyone in there was really nice, because I was there to learn. They made me feel like one of the employees.*

*[The learning disability was an issue] when I was typesetting on the computer—reversals, misspellings. That was difficult because there’s a lot of jobs that come in. People just hand write notes and it’s hard for me to read the notes. I had to really ask what they want done. There was a lot of printing jargon that I had not learned, a lot of nicknames and things that you aren’t used to hearing and you can’t learn in a book. Like the color system was actually called PMS—panto matching system. At first you’re like ...PMS?*

*F.R. was my mentor. I was assigned to him right away. [I told him about my learning disability] just so he was aware, so that he didn’t have to play guessing games. He*

really had no experience with a learning disability at all. None at all. So I gave him the movie Fat City. It's a movie which talks about how to teach a learning disabled person, how they perceive things. It's sort of like a training video. I said to F.R. "This is probably the best video I could give you to show you what I deal with." He watched it and he came back afterwards: "Yeah, geeze, Ok, we'll try things a little differently." At first, we weren't really clicking that well. Things weren't working as well. But then after I showed him that video [there was] just a little bit of change in everything and it worked a lot better that way. He watched the video and just rolled with the punches. So it was kind of both of our teamwork. It worked real well.

F.R. was great; he changed my life a lot, my whole attitude. He'd never [mentored anyone] before either; he was just as apprehensive as I was. It turned out real well. I wasn't that great. I had never run a press in my life, and I'd mess up jobs. He would never yell, he'd never scream. He would just say, "Ok, you've got to do it again." He never made me feel uncomfortable. I remember the first day I was there, I had to cut the paper down. It's this big paper cutter, looks very scary. F.R. just walked me through it, and showed me how to do it. And I messed up. I messed up probably 20,000 sheets of paper. Then, F.R. goes, "Ok, I forgot to show you the little details." He was still trying to learn how to teach. He was only in printing for about five years, so he's still trying to learn. Because it was a small print shop, I would see him every day. Looking back, there were a few times I really screwed up. I mean I just royally. I busted a belt, and it was my fault. F.R. was mad but he didn't show it. You know he was throwing stuff all around, but he just said, "This isn't right. Let's see what you did wrong so it doesn't happen again." There were times when I thought he was definitely going to just give up on me because it took me a long time to finally work it out.

[In the YA classroom] I would learn about every aspect of printing. It was a very small class, six of us originally. We had a very good teacher the first year. He was teaching the class like a college class. He was a very tough grader. The first semester I got a C- from the teacher, because you're 16 and you're not used to the college atmosphere. So you've got to button down. In high school you can just breeze around and goof around.

*But this was: you've got to memorize these rollers, you've got to do this. You had to study. I'd go home and complain to my dad. And he goes, "Two more years and you'll be in college. Get used to it now." By the second semester the teacher graded me, and it was an A. I learned a lot from that teacher. I didn't realize it at first. [I thought] this guy's such a hardass. But by the end of the year, I really learned a lot. And then, the second year, we got this one guy who wasn't that good [as a teacher]. Every once in a while, we'd come to class and he goes, "You guys want to go to breakfast?" Sure. So we all go to breakfast instead of learning anything. And then the second semester of second year was even worse. We ran one printing job, and the rest of the time, we were pretty much out to breakfast or just talking in class. The second year just seemed unorganized. Back then it was like, "Ok! We're going out to breakfast. Who cares? I'm having a fun time." But...*

*At the worksite, I would use my manual; I would write those for myself: this part does this. I took the manual home. I would have a notebook and I would have my own little notes, just so I could refer back to them if I had questions. I had my own system. I got my little notes, and I'd have to look things up. I did it for my mom. She's a nurse and she had this whole list of words for herself, because when you're a nurse, you've got so many different diseases [to know]. She showed me this [system] when I was young. And I finally gave in and tried it. [In the evening] my dad would have a stack of work to do and I would have 50 pages to read in a book and he would read them to me. And my mom would give me support, too. Every evening, we'd read together; we'd do math together. My folks have always been there for me and showed me that I'm fine.*

*My dad and F.R. talked every once in a while just to see how I was doing. I believe my dad called him first just to keep the lines of communication open, because they've dealt with so much bureaucracy at the school. It's important to keep the lines of communication open. And they would just talk every once in a while: "How's he doing? Is there anything I can do to help him out?" M.P., too—she really said, "You know, you can ask for this stuff [accommodations]. Don't be afraid to. She and my folks were in very good contact with each other. They'd call her up every once in a while and consult with her.*

*I graduated high school. I graduated in the apprenticeship program too. I went on to a technical college in the printing program, and I got my two year's associate degree in printing. It was good experience. [In the printing program] they gave me 12 college credits—which is a semester. That's a lot of credits. The first year of printing classes in college, I pretty much knew everything. The first year was a real joy. I was actually teaching, helping people how to do it. And then I went up to the university. And realized that printing wasn't really my thing. I have always liked talking to people. I would never trade the apprenticeship program for anything—it made me a great person. But printing wasn't for me. It was too isolated. You're working on a machine. I enjoy doing that every once in a while, but not every single day. So, I came back to [this town] and I'm now in my second year of human services at the [technical college.] I graduate next year and I'm enjoying it so much. I'm out there in the community. Last year, I was at an elementary school working with troubled youth. This is something I've always wanted to do. And it just snowballed from the apprenticeship program. Printing was there, so I thought I might as well stay in it. And then I finally realized that human services is what I want to do. I am interning at a community work agency right now. I coach at various job sites, And get the clients' jobs ready for the day and see how they're doing.*

*Now all my teachers know [that I have a learning disability.] In human services it's not like they would shun you away or anything. It's sort of helping me. And at my job site, people are terrific. They treat me fine. I interviewed for one internship, and once again I was just right out there and said, "I have a learning disability." The whole nine yards. They had no problem with it. I quit using support programs when I went into college. I was used to having tests read out for me in high school. Now I do it alone, because I figured no one was going to read a textbook to me at work. I have [a learning disability], but I can conquer it. And it's kind of stubbornness, a little, like if they can do it, I can do it.*

*[In the future, I see myself] hopefully working with people with a developmental disability or with the learning disabled. I volunteered just my time to talk with M.P.'s class and just talk to fellow students, just trying to help people out, [to let them know] you can make it.*

*I've heard many horror stories because I talk to people with a learning disability and hear what they have to say. High school is just formatted for one certain type of person. And if you don't fit inside that box, too bad. I always feel so sorry for those people who get thrown out of high school just because they don't learn the way they want you to learn.*

*It was really very good I signed up [for YA] because I've learned a lot about myself, and what I can do. [From the YA program, I got] just the whole attitude, confidence, the overall confidence that you can make it in the job and the job's not as scary as you think it is. And to work hard. I'm not in printing now, but I learned so much from job skills to people skills. I'm glad I decided not to go into printing even though I had a great time when I was doing it. Now I'm in something I really like, and I can gain things from that.*

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