Assessing Transition Skills in the 21st Century

Dawn A. Rowe, Valerie L. Mazzotti, Kara Hirano, and Charlotte Y. Alverson

Ms. Quincy and Ms. Lorenzo are special education teachers at Cato Town High School. Ms. Quincy is a veteran teacher who has worked with students with various disabilities and a range of support needs (e.g., specific learning disabilities, emotional and behavioral disorders, intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder) throughout her career. Ms. Lorenzo, in her first year of teaching, is mentored by Ms. Quincy. Lately, Ms. Lorenzo has been asking questions about the components of the transition assessment process. Specifically, Ms. Lorenzo does not know where to begin to determine what to assess, where to find assessments, and how to make use of assessment data when developing transition plans.

As a result of the demanding 21st-century workforce, local education agencies are beginning to refocus and retool to ensure students with disabilities have the knowledge and skills to be productive adults and attain positive postschool outcomes. The skills 21st-century transition assessments address are relevant to teachers and students given the need for all students to be college and career ready. However, there is evidence that practitioners are not familiar with the transition assessment process—a process that is essential to supporting students in developing the skills they need to achieve their college, career, and life goals.

When considering the transition assessment process, it is important for teachers to be aware of the multitude of skills that can be assessed to provide a comprehensive picture of a student’s abilities and needs. In the 21st century, conducting transition assessments with all students is beneficial. Transition assessments (e.g., vocational, career, self-determination, independent living, college readiness) provide teachers with information to ensure all students are college and career ready.

Specifically, the Blueprint for Reform (hereafter Blueprint; U.S. Department of Education, 2010) outlined a plan for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and called for “better assessments” and “a complete education” for all students, including students with disabilities. Related to better assessment, the Blueprint called for assessments aligned with college and career success (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

The transition assessment process consists of five separate but interconnected processes (see Figure 1): determining what to assess, selecting appropriate assessments, conducting assessments, analyzing assessment results, and using assessment data. Transition assessment is an ongoing process of collecting information on a student’s strengths, interests, preferences, skills or aptitudes, and needs related to current demands and future career, educational, personal, and social environments (Sitlington & Payne, 2004). Transition assessment provides a foundation for defining individualized education program (IEP) goals and transition services and guides instructional decision making.

The transition assessment process is strengthened when teachers across the curricula collaborate to conduct transition assessments related to specific content areas (Mazzotti & Rowe, in press). Transition assessment should include four broad topics: academic achievement, self-determination, vocational interest and exploration, and adaptive behavior and independent living (Walker, Kortering, Fowler, Rowe, & Bethune, 2013). Neubert and Leconte (2013) suggested transition assessment information is further strengthened when it includes skills and aptitudes a student has as well as the skills needed to be successful in the next environment.

Figure 1. Components of the Transition Assessment Process
Table 1. Shifting Viewpoints of Transition Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional transition assessment process</th>
<th>21st-century transition assessment process</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Norm/criterion referenced</td>
<td>Formal and informal measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual process</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on current capabilities</td>
<td>Focus on future role as a worker, life-long learner, active community member, family member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on weaknesses and disabilities</td>
<td>Focus on strengths and capabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive role of student</td>
<td>Active involvement of student</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Transition assessments
- provide information useful in career counseling;
- help students choose an appropriate course of study;
- allow ongoing assessment of performance in course work and community experiences;
- help determine appropriate instructional settings; and
- assist with determining necessary accommodations, supports, and services.

Results from initial assessments form the starting point for transition planning and remain the driving force for determining individualized services that help ensure students with disabilities have the skills needed to achieve in-school and postschool goals. The ultimate goal of transition assessment is to generate a comprehensive appraisal of a student’s goals, skills, aptitudes, and needs in relation to the student’s future environments (e.g., work, education, living) that will serve as a guide for instruction and activities. In addition, data from transition assessments can help students make informed choices and take charge of their transition planning process (Mazzotti et al., 2009; Neubert & Leconte, 2013).

Assessment plays a key role in ensuring that all students transition from high school to postschool life prepared for college, careers, and life (Common Core State Standards; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2012). Transition assessments gauge student strengths, interests, needs, and preferences and provide information to students, families, and educators to make certain high school course work and activities align with the student’s postschool career, education, and life aspirations (Neubert & Leconte, 2013). Further, it is important to consider the changes in the transition assessment process in the 21st century to better meet the needs of all students. The changes in the transition assessment process parallel the philosophical changes that have occurred in regard to how educators think about transition planning in general (e.g., focus on abilities, not disabilities; emphasize student involvement; focus on the future; ensure the process is ongoing; see Table 1). This shift also follows the philosophy behind student-centered planning that has emerged in the 21st century (Morningstar, Bassett, Kochher-Bryant, Cashman, & Wehmeyer, 2012).

Results from initial assessments should be the starting point for transition planning and remain the driving force for determining individualized services.

What were traditionally considered basic skills (e.g., reading, writing, mathematics) are no longer sufficient for students with disabilities to be successful postgraduation; participation in the 21st-century workforce requires additional competency in areas such as essential life skills (e.g., banking, money management, transportation) and nonacademic skills (e.g., self-determination, self-efficacy, persistence; Chappuis & Chappuis, 2002; McConnell et al., 2013). As a result of these new expectations, state and local education agencies are beginning to refocus and retool to ensure students have the knowledge and skills to be successful in school and postschool. Therefore, assessments that go beyond the basics are required. Selecting assessments that measure essential life skills and nonacademic skills can provide teachers and related service providers with the necessary information to identify students’ strengths and needs. Further, it is important teachers and related service providers use assessments that assess knowledge as well as application of skills in settings where such skills would be demonstrated (Chappuis & Chappuis, 2002; McConnell et al., 2013).

Any single assessment will not provide a comprehensive set of information that can be used for transition planning. Luckily a wide variety of assessments exist and can be delivered across a range of modes (e.g., online web-based assessments, interactive simulated assessments, ecological/environmental assessments, smartphone technology) in order to gather data on a range of skills and contexts. Together, such assessments can address the breadth and depth of transition needs of students with disabilities and their peers. Given the need for all students to be college and career ready, the skills that such 21st-century transition assessments address (e.g., employment, self-determination, independent living, postsecondary...
preparation) are particularly useful for support planning. However, there is evidence that practitioners are not necessarily familiar with the transition assessment process (Morningstar & Liss, 2008).

Although the extensive selection of assessments is beneficial to the field, selecting appropriate assessments to use can sometimes be overwhelming for practitioners. Determining the appropriate battery of assessments to use with one student or groups of students requires knowledge to enable critical examination of assessments. Critical examination provides information to determine the appropriateness of the assessment for any given context (e.g., accessibility, purpose, validity, reliability).

**Determining What to Assess**

Consideration of several factors will assist in selecting appropriate assessments. Many transition assessments gather information regarding student interests; perceptions of students, families, or other school personnel related to a student’s skills or behaviors; or actual demonstration of skills. A comprehensive transition assessment process will include gathering information about interests, perceptions, and performance of skills related to the four broad areas of academic achievement, self-determination, vocational interest and exploration, and adaptive behavior and independent living. In addition, using multiple assessments over time can help educators attain a more complete picture of a student.

Prior to selecting assessments to review, Ms. Quincy asked Ms. Lorenzo to consider each student’s specific strengths, interests, needs, and preferences. Knowing that she wanted to conduct a comprehensive transition assessment, Ms. Lorenzo decided she specifically wanted to select a vocational interest assessment and assessments related to her students’ existing self-determination and adaptive behaviors. For example, Ms. Lorenzo has a student who plans to work in an arts-related field. She will need to select an assessment that can provide additional information on this general interest. Ms. Lorenzo also knows some students’ families have expressed a need for ensuring access to the community. Ms. Quincy has suggested that Ms. Lorenzo learn about community activities students will engage in after high school to identify skills to assess (e.g., What skills will students need to successfully access the community and engage in community activities?) and the selection of the appropriate assessment. Ms. Lorenzo plans to use data from the vocational and behavior assessment with existing achievement assessments when developing the transition plan.

**Selecting Appropriate Assessments**

A variety of assessments and techniques are available for assessing students’ strengths, interests, needs, and preferences related to transition, such as interviews, surveys, direct observations, questionnaires, and transition-planning inventories (Neubert & Leconte, 2013). Although each method of assessment has strengths, utilizing a mixture of approaches is recommended (Mazzotti et al., 2009). In addition to the variety of approaches for collecting transition-related data, the availability of different types of transition assessments continues to expand. For example, comprehensive assessments, such as the Transition Assessment and Goal Generator (Martin et al., 2015), are now available and can be used to identify student strengths and weaknesses, persistence, goal setting, employment, community support, and so on. Some assessments are free via the web, whereas others are available for a fee through publishers. Table 2 provides some examples of no-cost or low-cost assessments in the areas of (a) academic achievement, (b) self-determination, (c) vocational interest and exploration, and (d) adaptive behavior and independent living.

Transition assessments provide results that inform decisions regarding instruction, transition services, community experiences, and future planning students need to achieve their postschool goals. When determining which assessments to use with students, it is important to be critical consumers (i.e., someone who uses a wide range of criteria to evaluate products before purchasing or using). For instance, teachers should consider (a) who needs the information obtained from the assessment, (b) what information is needed for planning and instructional purposes, and (c) what decisions can be made using the transition assessment data (Chappuis & Chappuis, 2002). Other considerations when selecting assessments include whether it is formal or informal, norm- or
Ms. Quincy has been coaching Ms. Lorenzo to determine appropriate assessments to use with a variety of students in their school. Cato Town High School serves both students with high-incidence disabilities (e.g., specific learning disability, emotional or behavioral disorders) and students with more intense support needs. Ms. Quincy provides her with a Transition Assessment Review Tool (Figure 2) that provides some guiding questions to help examine the appropriateness of transition assessments. Ms. Lorenzo uses the tool to review the O*Net Interest Profiler (Figure 3) and decides that this would be one helpful assessment tool to use.

**Conducting Assessments**

Conducting any assessment requires preparation. The specific steps involved when administering an assessment will depend on what area is being assessed and data collection technique required. Nevertheless, there are a few guiding considerations that apply to conducting a comprehensive transition battery.

**Utilize a Multidisciplinary Approach to Assessment**

Involve multiple people, over multiple days, and use multiple assessments. This approach is not as onerous as it sounds. It means obtaining input from multiple sources, such as students, family members, other teachers, and local employers or supervisors. Using a multidisciplinary approach means all of the assessment information is not collected on one day; rather, work samples, observations, or direct assessments with an individual are obtained and completed over several days to ensure an accurate measure of the skill or knowledge. A multidisciplinary approach relies on a variety of methods to collect relevant information. For example, a parent and another teacher may complete a questionnaire addressing a student’s social skills, and the student’s teacher or case manager conducts a direct observation of social skills. Having multiple staff administer assessments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment area: Academic achievement</th>
<th>URL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PSAT, SAT</td>
<td><a href="https://www.collegeboard.org/">https://www.collegeboard.org/</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment area: Self-determination</th>
<th>URL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AIR Self-Determination Assessment (Wolman, Campeau, Du Bois, Mithaug, &amp; Stolarski, 1994)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ou.edu/zarrow/sdetermination.html">http://www.ou.edu/zarrow/sdetermination.html</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Determination Assessment, Internet (Hoffman, Field, Sawilowsky, 2014)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ealyeducation.com/">http://www.ealyeducation.com/</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment area: Career interests and aptitude</th>
<th>URL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>O*NET Career Interest Inventory (U.S. Department of Labor, 2002)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.onetonline.org">http://www.onetonline.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Key (Jones, 2014)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.careerkey.org">http://www.careerkey.org</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment area: Life skills</th>
<th>URL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Casey Life Skills (Casey Family Programs, 2012)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.caseylifeskills.org">http://www.caseylifeskills.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enderle-Severson Transition Rating Scale (Enderle &amp; Severson, 2003)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.estr.net/publications.cfm">http://www.estr.net/publications.cfm</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and conduct observations provides for broader perspectives and understanding of students’ needs and abilities. Families are important contributors to the assessment process as they supply information about home and community contexts, goals, and future plans that should inform and support students’ transition planning and services. Obtaining data from multiple sources is especially critical when the assessment instruments being used are informal and results may vary widely from day to day.

**Assessment Requires Preparation**

This starts with being familiar with the assessment instrument and having the right materials on hand (e.g., test protocols). Other considerations for conducting assessments will depend on the method of assessment being used (e.g., situational assessments, standardized assessments). For some assessments, it will be important to conduct the assessment in environments that most closely resemble future training, employment, education, independent living, or community environments (i.e., ecological or situational assessments). Assessing a student in multiple environments allows for sampling of skills utilizing authentic, real-life cues, prompts, and responses that cannot be

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**Figure 2. Transition Assessment Review Tool**

**Transition Assessment Review**

**Purpose** of this tool is to provide teachers with a guide to assist in reviewing transition assessments to determine if they would be appropriate to use with transition-age students with disabilities.

| Name of transition assessment being reviewed: |  |
| Purpose of assessment (interest/preference, performance): |  |
| Type of assessment (perception, observation, self report, performance): |  |
| Cost of assessment: |  |
| Who is it designed for? (e.g., specific disability group, middle school, high school) |  |
| Strengths and weaknesses (list at least two strengths and two weaknesses): |  |

1. Does the transition assessment assess skills necessary to be successful in postsecondary environments (e.g., employment, postsecondary education, living)?
   - **Yes**
   - **No**
   - **Evidence**

2. Does the transition assessment have any data to support reliability?
   - **Yes**
   - **No**
   - **Evidence**

   **Note:** A reliable test provides consistent results over time. In other words, students with the same reading level, will score at or near the same each time they take the assessment regardless of when they take it, as long as their reading level does not dramatically change.

3. Is the transition assessment free from bias (e.g., cultural, gender)?
   - **Yes**
   - **No**
   - **Evidence**

4. Is the transition assessment a valid measure of student skills (i.e., does it measure what the authors claim it will measure)?
   - **Yes**
   - **No**
   - **Evidence**

5. Can the assessment be adapted or modified?
   - **Yes**
   - **No**
   - **Evidence**

6. Does the transition assessment allow for accommodations (e.g., extended time)?
   - **Yes**
   - **No**
   - **Evidence**

7. Does the transition assessment match to the student’s (or population of students’) cognitive functioning level, reading ability, math ability, level of career development, and/or independent/community living skills?
   - **Yes**
   - **No**
   - **Evidence**
**Figure 3. Completed Transition Assessment Review Form**

| Name of transition assessment being reviewed: | O*Net Interest Profiler |
| Purpose of assessment (interest/preference, performance): | To help individuals identify their work-related interest |
| Type of assessment (perception, observation, self-report, performance): | Paper/pencil instrument or online; self-reported interest |
| Cost of assessment: | Can be downloaded from web for free or can order paper copies ($52.00/25 copies of instrument; $19.40/5 copies of User Guide) |
| Who is it designed for? (e.g., specific disability group, middle school, high school) | Developed for schools, employment service offices, etc.  
  • Developed to be self-administered.  
  • Designed for workers in transition, college students, junior and senior high students (suggested eighth-grade reading level or above)  
  • Designed for individuals age 14 and above |

**Strengths and weaknesses (list at least two strengths and two weaknesses):**

**Strengths:**

- Offered online and in paper/pencil version
- Low cost or no cost
- Provides hints for completing the profiler (e.g., what to think about, what not to think about)
- Color coded to facilitate scoring
- Can be administered as a group or individual

**Weaknesses:**

- Takes between 20 to 60 minutes to complete
- If self-administered must read manual to understand how to interpret results
- Must have a reading ability of 8th grade or higher

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Does the transition assessment assess skills necessary to be successful in postsecondary environments (e.g., employment, postsecondary education, living)?</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assessment only examines career interest and does not examine interest outside of work (e.g., leisure, relationships, family)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 2. Does the transition assessment have any data to support reliability?  
*Note:* A reliable test provides consistent results over time. In other words, students with the same reading level, will score at or near the same each time they take the assessment regardless of when they take it, as long as their reading level does not dramatically change. | Yes | No | Evidence |
| O*Net Interest Profiler: Reliability, Validity, and Self-Scoring (Rounds et al., 1999)  High Degree of Reliability with alphas from .5 to .97 (p. 39 of User manual) |

| 3. Is the transition assessment free from bias (e.g., cultural, gender)? | Yes | No | Evidence |
| Balance of gender, overall positive response bias (pp. 38-39 of User Manual) |

| 4. Is the transition assessment a valid measure of student skills (i.e., does it measure what the authors claim it will measure)? | Yes | No | Evidence |
| Had evidence of convergent validity (p. 43 of User Manual) meaning it measured what it set out to measure. |

| 5. Can the assessment be adapted or modified? | Yes | No | Evidence |
| Permission is not provided in user manual to adapt or modify. |

| 6. Does the transition assessment allow for accommodations (e.g., extended time)? | Yes | No | Evidence |
| The assessment is not a timed measure; therefore extended time would be allowed. Online versions would allow for other assistive technologies (e.g., screen reader, text-to-speech). |

| 7. Does the transition assessment match to the student’s (or population of students’) cognitive functioning level, reading ability, math ability, level of career development, and/or independent/community living skills? | Yes | No | Evidence |
| Would be appropriate for students ages 14 and older reading at or above eighth-grade level. |
replicated effectively in a classroom or clinical setting.

**Preparing to Administer an Assessment Requires Forethought**

It is important to respect a student’s cultural and linguistic differences, build rapport, and ensure the student has an effective way to communicate responses. It may be necessary to provide accommodations or incorporate assistive technology to allow students to access the assessments so that they can communicate their interests so that they can demonstrate their aptitudes.

**Analyzing Assessment Results**

It is important that the IEP team carefully analyze and interpret all assessment data to determine appropriate goals to assist students in the acquisition of their postsecondary aspirations. When analyzing formal, standardized assessments with norm tables and ranges, the analysis process is usually straightforward with well-written instructions on scoring. When using informal assessments, as most transition assessments are, there is usually little or no formal scoring of items. Interest inventories, interviews, and observations rely on the person administering the assessment to interpret, or make meaning out of, the results. Regardless of whether formal, informal, or (most likely) a combination of assessments are used, the goal is to have data that generate information that can be acted upon when making decisions about a student’s postschool goals and the skills and knowledge needed to achieve goals. Communicating the interpretation of assessment results to students, parents, and other IEP team members provides an opportunity for the IEP team to discuss how findings match experiences, perceptions, and expectations. It also provides a forum to determine whether additional assessment information is needed. Once data are synthesized, results are used to determine appropriate goals to assist students in the acquisition of their postsecondary aspirations.

**Using Assessment Data**

Transition assessments can be used to determine what type of postsecondary education or employment students are interested in, where and with whom they want to live after high school, what type of supports they will need to achieve those goals, and what skills they will need to possess in order to be successful. Identifying postsecondary goals is essential to developing a transition plan that reflects students’ strengths, needs, and aptitudes. It also provides insight into existing skills, related experiences to support postsecondary goals. By examining transition assessment information, one can determine the starting point from which progress in academic and functional behavior can be measured (Bateman & Herr, 2006).

Finally, transition assessment should guide instruction (i.e., determine which skills to teach, help refine and identify which practices are best to teach those skills). It should also be used to determine courses and related experiences to support postsecondary goals. In terms of skill, transition assessment information provides insight into existing skills, possible talents, and limitations. This information must be considered against a backdrop of what skills are needed to facilitate the student’s graduation and future success in a chosen career. The former may be dictated by state and local graduation requirements. These requirements, to be met, may warrant specific skill instruction or remediation (e.g., improving reading or math skills), supplementary learning experiences or support (e.g., online learning opportunities), and academic support (after-school support).

Transition assessment information can also be used to modify instruction as needed so as to help the student be as successful as possible. The resulting information on career ambitions, interests, and talents can be central to students’ motivation to succeed in academic classes. For example, if a student demonstrates interests in architecture or building trades, the teacher could use blueprints as a vehicle to teach the concepts of area and perimeter to motivate the student to succeed in geometry class.

Relative to courses, the information from transition assessment should help students to identify courses of study, including electives that will best prepare them for their postsecondary goals. These courses may be influenced by students’ postsecondary education or training plans (e.g., career technical courses of study, university preparation) and employment.

**Conclusion**

There are a number of important reasons for conducting transition assessments. Assessments not only help students learn about themselves but also provide the IEP team with information that guides instruction and transition services. Assessment data also provide teachers and related service providers with knowledge to help students take an active role in their career and life development (Osborn & Zunker, 2011). Transition assessments can help answer many questions for and about students, such as:

- What are my interests, preferences, strengths, needs, capabilities, and aptitudes in school, work, and the community?
- Where do I want to work, live, and go to school after high school?
- What courses do I need to take in high school to achieve my postschool goals?
• What skills do I need to learn in order to be independent?
• What training programs best match my interests and needs?

The transition assessment process provides needed information for transition planning and postsecondary outcomes. Teachers and other school personnel must also match assessment methods to students’ characteristics, including cultural and linguistic differences. Assistive technology, supports, modifications, and accommodations should be incorporated into the process. Considering and assessing environmental factors affecting the student will ensure true abilities and potential.

**Use varied transition assessments over a period of time (ongoing and continuous) that are current and, if standardized, are reliable and valid.**

To allow opportunities for students to demonstrate true abilities and potential, conduct assessments in real environments and under natural conditions. Use varied transition assessments over a period of time (ongoing and continuous) that are current and, if standardized, are reliable and valid. Individuals, especially those with disabilities, may need evaluations and assessments of varying degrees given at different junctures over their career life span. Assessment methods should produce outcomes that contribute to the ongoing development, planning, and implementation of next steps in the student’s transition process.

**References**


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