

Executive Summary: Supporting Positive Transitions for Youth with Disabilities

Synopsis of Core/Thematic Area

Transition-age students and youth with disabilities (ages 14-22) exhibit lower achievement rates on all post-school outcome measures compared to students without disabilities. To improve their life outcomes, an intentional and seamless state-to-local system of coordinated services is paramount. State and local systems need adequate infrastructure with visionary and cooperative leadership to support practitioners and families. Practitioners at the local level need the knowledge and skills to provide a multitude of services (e.g., meaningful assessment and planning, high-quality instruction, service coordination) that support successful outcomes. For the purposes of this proposal, we use the term *transition supports* to refer to the combination of transition planning and transition strategies. Every student with a disability beginning at age 16 (age 14 in some states) engages in a transition-planning process required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004). IDEIA (2004) requires setting measurable post-school goals in education/training, employment, and independent living, based on age-appropriate transition assessments and collaboration with the student, their family, and school- and community-based service providers. Our research cluster in SPCD has supported positive transition experiences for youth with disabilities through our research and scholarship. Our collaborative scholarship has gained both national and international recognition.

Evidence Supporting Nomination as Existing Area of Excellence and Distinction

Studying effective transition supports requires knowledge of the multiple systems that youth with disabilities encounter as they move from secondary school to postsecondary environments. Knowledge of the ways in which these systems must interact with one another is critical to facilitating seamless and productive pathways to postsecondary success. Our research cluster of secondary transition experts brings understanding of these systems and knowledge of secondary special education, including research on best practices related to supporting the transition of students with disabilities into post-school education, employment, and community living. This area of research was led at UNC Charlotte by Dr. David Test (Professor Emeritus) with internal and external colleagues over three decades. Under Dr. Test, a series of national Technical Assistance and Dissemination Centers on secondary transition were funded by the US Department of Education's (USDOE) Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). During his tenure, Dr. Test brought in more than \$35 million in grant funding related to secondary transition from multiple agencies. Drs. Mazzotti and Fowler are nationally/internationally recognized experts who have led efforts to identify secondary evidence-based practices and predictors of post-school success and published extensively in this area. Collectively, Drs. Mazzotti, Fowler, and Bross have published 96 journal articles, book chapters, and books, and delivered 259 presentations to international, national, and regional audiences. They have secured over \$42 million in external funding with grants focused on improving transition outcomes for youth with disabilities. Dr. Bross is an up-and-coming researcher and leader in secondary transition, focused on enhancing post-school outcomes for students with autism spectrum disorder.

Finally, our research cluster in secondary transition has a long history of recruiting doctoral scholars. These scholars have received funding and opportunities to engage in transition-focused research and policy analysis and have obtained employment at various research institutions (e.g., University of Oregon, University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign).

Evidence of Strength and Evidence

Collaboration, Achieved Excellence, and Broader Impacts of Research Outcomes

Our secondary transition research cluster is recognized for research contributions in this area. Dr. Mazzotti has provided extensive professional development focused on research in secondary education and transition to teachers in Australia through the Australian Association of Special Education. NACT and its predecessor Centers have achieved national/international prominence since 2006. Our team brings experience providing national, state, and local support that focuses on improved outcomes for youth with disabilities. Since 2007, we have facilitated hundreds of meetings and trainings, and developed numerous products used by state and local agencies. States and local education agencies have made progress regarding compliance with IDEIA for transition, the use of data, collaboration, and implementing effective practices (NACT, 2020).

Evidence of the Success and Collective Impact of the Group

Table 1 reflects the most recent successes of our grant procurement and collective impact of this group to acquire funding to support our vision and mission for improving outcomes for transition-age youth with disabilities. Our vitae reflect our scholarly and collaborative work.

Table 1.

Project Citation	Funding Agency	Dates	Funding
Fowler, C.H. [PD] , Unruh, D. K., Morningstar, M. E., MaGee, C., Diehl, M. P., Luecking, R., Fabian, E., Mazzotti, V. L. [PI] , McGuire-Kuletz., M., Rowe, D. A., & Lattin, D. (2020). <i>National Technical Assistance Center on Transition for Students and Youth with Disabilities</i> . [co-PI, CFDA 84.326E, H326E200003]	OSERS, US-DOE, Technical Assistance and Dissemination to Improve Services and Results for Children with Disabilities.	10/01/20-09/30/25	Annually at \$4,000,000 across 5 years, total \$20,000,000
Garet, M., Mazzotti, V. L. , Heppen, J., & Miller, T. (2019). <i>NCEE: Evaluation of Transition Supports for Youth with Disabilities</i> . [co-PI, Solicitation # 919900-19-R-0022, 10/01/19].	USDOE, IES National Center for Educational Evaluation	10/01/19-09/30/27	Sub-contract budget: \$1,470,204
Pennington, R., Mazzotti, V. L. , & Beach, K. D. (2019). <i>UNC Charlotte's Ph.D. Program in Special Education: 2020-2025</i> [co-PI, H325D190013, CFDA: 84.325D, 09/30/19].	US DOE, OSEP: Preparation of Special Education, Leadership Personnel	01/01/20-12/31/25	\$1,230,555
Lombardi, A., Morningstar, M. E., Mazzotti, V. L. , Swaminathan, H., & Rogers, H. J. (2019). <i>Secondary Transition Assessment: Development and Validation of a Student College and Career Readiness Measure</i> . [co-PI, R324A190170, CFDA: 84.324A]	USDOE, IES: Special Education Research Grants - Goal 5 Measurement Project	07/01/19-06/30/23	\$1,398,298
Mazzotti, V. L. (2019). <i>Student-Centered Transitions Network in Texas</i> .	Texas Education Agency	07/01/19-08/31/21	\$110,683

Subcontract with Houston State University. [PI]			
Shogren, K., Mazzotti, V. L. , & Little, T. (2018). <i>Promoting Self-Determination for Students with Disabilities: Goal-Setting Challenge App</i> . [co-PI, R324A180012; CFDA: 84.324A]	USDOE, IES Special Education Research Grants Development & Innovation Project	07/01/18-06/30/21	\$1,400,000
Bross, L. A. (2020). I-Connect: A Technology-based Self-monitoring Application to Support Transition-age Youth with Autism in Community, Employment, and School Settings. Submitted to UNC Charlotte. [PI]	UNC Charlotte, Faculty Research Grant	07/01/20-12/31/21	\$8,000

Strength of the Individuals, Cohesion of the Group, and Specific Synergies for Impact

Dr. Mazzotti currently serves as co-PI on five federal grants and has published more than 30 articles in peer-reviewed journals on self-determination, secondary transition evidence-based practices and predictors of post-school success, and interagency collaboration. Dr. Fowler has served as Project Director for NTACTION-C and as project coordinator for other TA Centers since 2002. Dr. Bross teaches courses within our SPCD graduate and undergraduate programs related to autism, transition, and single-case research design. Dr. Bross serves as the Director of the Autism Spectrum Disorder Graduate Certificate program. Our team has multiple joint publications and several grant proposals coming this spring. Our collective performance in the area of secondary transition reflects our ability as a research cluster to continue to achieve excellence in this area both at the national and international levels. We have a common vision and commitment to ensuring youth with disabilities experience positive transitions and post-school outcomes. Our records of scholarship to date indicate that we will continue to have great impact on the field of secondary special education and transition. See Table 1 and vitae.

Additional Resources to Build or Expand upon Past Success

Additional resources will allow us to hire new faculty in the area of secondary special education and transition that will further promote our recognition as leaders in this research cluster. Also, resources will help us provide funds to support post-doctoral positions within SPCD, one indicator of moving towards a R1 institution. Additional resources would allow us to focus recruitment efforts on doctoral and postdoctoral scholars from traditionally underrepresented groups. SPCD would benefit from increased resources to support faculty in pre/post-award management. Finally, additional resources could support collaboration with other departments.

Group Contribution to Student Education and Research Training

Since its inception in 2001, we have developed a strong and diverse Ph.D. program in Special Education thanks to Part D IDEIA leadership funding. To date, our doctoral program has graduated 80 students, 64 of whom have taken positions in higher education, and 16 who are involved in special education research or administration. This program was, and still is, urgently needed due to increasing faculty shortages in special education nationally and within North Carolina. In addition, SPCD has been able to fund between two and six doctoral students each year through Department funds and other Graduate Assistant positions supported through external funding.

Alignment with Regional and National Priorities

Alignment with Regional, National and International Priorities

As the home to the federally funded project to support all states and territories to implement evidence-based secondary transition since 2006, our cluster is steeped in the needs and priorities of the nation. The research and teaching of Drs. Mazzotti, Fowler, and Bross are constantly informed by and inform those priorities which align with the mission and vision of the College, and Department and all are driven by regional, national, and international priorities in service to the mission of UNC Charlotte. The conceptual framework of our SPCD doctoral program is organized around four core competencies: teaching, research, collaboration and diversity, and leadership. Specific to secondary transition, Drs. Mazzotti, Fowler, and Bross ensure scholars develop the knowledge and skills to collaborate with school professionals, interagency organizations, and families from diverse backgrounds to improve outcomes for students and youth with disabilities. Improving outcomes for these youth and their families requires an understanding of the rapidly changing demographics reshaping society and education in the U.S. (Cohn & Caumont, 2016) and is a focus of our teaching, research, and professional development as a cluster. The professional capacity of our cluster is team-oriented, ethically responsible, and collaborative in that we are here to (a) support development of our professional capacity, (b) increase recognition of our Department, and (b) ensure we can achieve excellence in research by sustaining professional capacity of our faculty and staff beyond our research cluster. The recognized excellence of faculty in our research cluster provides a context of a robust intellectual environment that reflects and values social and cultural diversity, collaboration, and applied research, thus preparing doctoral scholars for future careers in higher education.

Supporting Evidence

Our cluster aligns with national priorities as identified in Table 2. Our collaboration within NTACT-C and numerous state and national organizations (e.g., Council for Exceptional Children [CEC]; CEC’s Division on Career Development and Transition [DCDT]; NC-DCDT) reflects the recognition of faculty within our cluster and other SPCD faculty expertise and contributions. Our work also closely aligns with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction’s strategic plan which stresses the adoption of evidence-based practices to support schools. This adherence to local, state, and national priorities aligns with and is reflected in our research and the work of NTACT-C.

Table 2. Alignment between IES Priorities and Faculty Expertise

IES Priority Area	Selected Aligned Activities
Transition to Postsecondary Education, Career, and/or Independent Living	NCEE: Evaluation of Transition Supports for Youth with Disabilities (Mazzotti & Fowler)
	Secondary Transition Assessment: Development and Validation of a Student College and Career Readiness Measure (Mazzotti)
	Promoting Self-Determination for Students with Disabilities: Goal-Setting Challenge App (Mazzotti)
	Understanding Barriers to Community Integration of Transition-Age Youth with Disabilities: In-Depth Interpretive Study (Bross)

List of Participating Faculty

Name	Title	Area of Expertise
Valerie L. Mazzotti, PhD (cluster Lead)	Professor of Special Education	Self-Determination, Secondary Transition Evidence-Based Practices and Predictors Of Post-School Success, and Interagency Collaboration for Students with Disabilities
Catherine H. Fowler, PhD (co-Lead)	Director of National Technical Assistance Center on Transition: the Collaborative/ Adjunct Instructor of Special Education	Secondary Transition: Evidence-Based Practices, National, State and Local Policy and Procedures, Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy; Youth Leadership Development
Leslie A. Bross, PhD, BCBA-D (co-Lead)	Assistant Professor of Special Education	Secondary Transition: Evidence-Based Practices, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Single-Case Design Research