

# Discovering ME: An innovative planning tool for students with significant disabilities

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## Abstract.

**BACKGROUND:** The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) requires transition plans for students with disabilities to be based on high-quality, age-appropriate transition assessments. However, educators struggle to garner reliable assessment results for students with significant disabilities, because so few assessments are designed or validated for students with these barriers.

**OBJECTIVE:** The purpose of this practice brief is to share details on the process, called Discovering ME, which provides an effective transition assessment and planning tool that is critical to increasing students' employment outcomes, especially for those who face the most significant barriers to employment.

**METHODS:** Sixty-one students across rural, urban, and suburban school districts participated in Discovering ME. Data were collected across five years, including demographic information and examples of students' top career cluster areas for future employment. In addition, a statewide survey was conducted with educators participating in Discovering ME on the effectiveness of this early career planning process.

**RESULTS:** The Discovering ME process provides career-related opportunities for students with significant barriers in the home, school, and community in a variety of career clusters based on their expressed interests. Educators report that the focus of this process on students and their interests helped to create positive experiences for them by creating opportunities for success.

**CONCLUSION:** The Discovering ME process provides students with disabilities with authentic, coordinated career awareness and development activities and the building of self-determination, work readiness, and community integration skills.

Keywords: Transition, person-centered planning, work-based learning, employment preparation, career awareness, discovery

## 1. Introduction

National longitudinal data on post-school outcomes report that students with disabilities on an IEP

are less likely to plan or take steps to prepare for their future compared to their peers without an IEP (Lipscomb et al., 2017). The data on employment for youth with disabilities (YWD) is troubling. For these youth, ages 16 to 19, their participation rate in the labor force, including those actively seeking work, is 22.5%; in comparison, the rate for youth without disabilities is 34.2% (ODEP, 2020). This gap widens for YWD ages 20 to 24, with an employment rate of 44.3% compared to 70.6% for those without dis-

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abilities (ODEP, 2020). Even more distressing is the finding that people with disabilities are underrepresented in 16 of the 20 fastest-growing occupations and overrepresented in 17 of the top 20 fastest-declining occupations (U.S. Department of Labor, 2018).

The data on employment participation of YWD reflects a critical need for continuous career and employment preparation while in school. An important step that lays the foundation for preparing students with disabilities is providing career exploration activities early in their transition planning process that offers them opportunities to identify their interests, preferences, and potential career options. An additional barrier for students with disabilities, however, is that career exploration and workplace readiness experiences are often limited (Lombardi et al., 2017; Monahan et al., 2018). Yet career development, particularly early career, and continuous career planning are critical for all youth, including youth with disabilities (Wehmeyer et al., 2019). As such, providing multiple opportunities to explore potential career options can lead students with disabilities to meet the demands of a continually changing economic and employment landscape (Test et al., 2016; Wehmeyer et al., 2019).

To provide educators with a framework for early career planning for students with disabilities, this brief will outline a process, called *Discovering ME*, which provides an effective transition assessment and planning tool that is critical to increasing employment outcomes for students with disabilities - especially those who face the most significant barriers to employment. Unfortunately, while many transition assessments exist, educators struggle to garner reliable assessment results for students with significant disabilities, because so few assessments are designed or validated for students with these barriers (Dear-dorff et al., 2020). *Discovering ME* was adapted from the process of *Discovery*; developed by Marc Gold & Associates (Callahan, 2016). This process gathers information using person-centered planning (PCP) to guide the development of customized employment for adults with significant disabilities. The challenges of implementing an adult process, such as *Discovery*, with middle school and early high school-aged students proved to be too great. Hence, a state-funded transition center located at Virginia Commonwealth University identified adaptations to *Discovery* for use with school-age students. Initially, efforts focused on high school students but soon expanded to students in middle school.

While a definition of person-centered planning is not currently reported in the literature (Mansell & Beadle-Brown, 2004; Schwartz et al., 2000), common features of PCP tools have been identified (Schwartz et al., 2000). Based on these common features, *Discovering ME* establishes a transition planning tool that is both similar to and distinct from other PCP tools. Like other PCP processes, DM supports a strengths-based approach and aspires to listen and understand the individual to meet their needs and unique circumstances. A team approach involving the people most important to the student that encourages collaboration and the building of partnerships is universal to all PCP tools and central to the DM model. *Discovering ME* is different from other PCP tools in their targeted population and goals. Unlike many of the tools built for adults who are ready to engage in postsecondary outcomes, *Discovering ME* is designed for students with significant disabilities who need to engage in work-based learning opportunities for career exploration. More specifically, DM aims to address the needs of students with significant disabilities who require extensive support to learn and retain skills. Additionally, it is anticipated that they will require either supportive or customized employment support in order to work competitively following a period of rich career exploration in authentic environments.

*Discovering ME* incorporates several of the evidence-based practices critical for a successful transition to postsecondary education, employment, and independent living skills. These include career awareness, community experiences, family involvement, interagency collaboration, and self-realization (Test et al., 2016). *Discovering ME* is a youth-focused, person-centered transition assessment, and planning process. It is designed to build early, customized work-based learning experiences for students with significant disabilities and barriers to employment. The long-term goal of *Discovering ME* is that all students find and maintain employment in careers that best match their strengths and contributions, interests, challenges to consider, and conditions for success.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. *Discovering ME model*

The first year of *Discovering ME* (DM) lays the foundation for continual career development and

firmly establishes the student's strengths and interests. The first year consists of three meetings focusing on (1) collecting student information, (2) building opportunities in the home, school, and community, and (3) exploring careers. Subsequent years of the process involve two meetings each year with the team focusing on updating student information and building on the work-based learning opportunities developed during the first year.

## 2.2. *Meeting 1: Collecting student information*

The focus of the first meeting is to discover and collect information about the student's strengths and contributions, interests, conditions for success, and challenges within the home, school, and community environments. The team is primarily composed of school personnel, community agencies, students, and family members. Most of the meeting is devoted to a facilitated discussion using an interview format. This type of meeting format invites participants to share stories, examples, and perceptions in a safe and supportive environment. These discussions are intended to uncover detailed information from various perspectives. The information gathered helps the team get to know the student before developing exploratory activities for employment. Through the collection of information in various sectors of the student's life, the team is more likely to uncover the student's strengths and interests—thus laying the foundation for a strengths-based approach to career development.

## 2.3. *Meeting 2: Building work-based experiences in the home, school, and community*

During the second meeting, the Discovering ME team focuses on determining opportunities in the home, school, and community that build on the student's strengths, interests, and contributions. In the first meeting, the team began collecting information about the student as a unique individual. The second meeting continues to collect information through a review of additional sources of data (e.g. triennial assessments, classroom observations, curriculum-based assessments, etc.) and an informal team assessment of the student's workplace readiness skills. The team then uses that information to build new opportunities for the student within their home, school, and community.

One of the primary activities of the second meeting is to collect information on the student's general work skills. The workplace readiness skills, identified through a survey of Virginia employers, are identified as the most needed for successful employment (Crespin, 2019). Twenty-first-century workplace readiness skills include personal qualities, professional knowledge, and technology skills (Virginia Department of Education, 2019). Conducted through a team interview, the 21st Century Workplace Readiness Skills Assessment includes questions on school attendance (work ethics), appropriate hygiene (self-representation), responsibilities for cleaning and maintaining one's bedroom (time, tasks, and resource management), and use of technology (job-specific technology). The informal assessment provides baseline data to help guide instruction and determine if progress is being made in building these skills, which will be useful in multiple environments.

## 2.4. *Meeting 3: Exploring career interests through the career clusters*

The focus of this meeting is to explore careers since many middle and high school students with significant disabilities lack ways to explore career interests to begin determining future employment opportunities. Students lacking the basic knowledge of what jobs exist can often contribute to the historic stereotyping of people with disabilities into a narrow range of careers. To counter this, one way to promote career awareness is through early career-related work-based learning experiences (Ross et al., 2020).

During the third student meeting of DM, the team reviews the 17 career clusters and collects information on the students' interests and aptitudes in specific clusters (Virginia Career VIEW, 2023). Through a process of identifying and then narrowing choices, the student's team then collaboratively identifies the top three clusters matching the student's foundation information as established in the first year of DM. As part of narrowing selections to the top three clusters, the team identifies the student's assets and challenges related to those clusters. This will allow the team to pinpoint possible work-related barriers and accommodations the young person needs to be successful in that job or career cluster.

Next, the focus is on building customized work-based learning opportunities in the home, school, and community that are related to one or more of the identified career clusters. In Meeting 3, the source of these opportunities shifts from the students' identified

strengths and interests in Meeting 2 to the student's more specific top three career clusters. Customized work-based learning experiences are the precursor to customized employment (Molina & Demchak, 2016). Through the DM process of identifying these opportunities, the implementing team is provided with a method for evaluating the appropriateness of a career cluster choice for the individual student.

### 2.5. *Subsequent years*

All of the work conducted during the first year of DM starts to pay off in subsequent years. The process follows the student as they change schools, case managers, and teachers to continue building opportunities and skills until the student exits school. The goal of DM in subsequent years is to continually build on the opportunities developed each year toward increasing the team's understanding of the student's contributions, interests, conditions for success, and challenges.

Following the first year of implementation of the DM, the team meets twice a year, rather than three times. This two-meeting process allows the team to update information, build new opportunities, and continue to explore careers. The focus of meetings during the subsequent years is to conduct an updated interview, edit information as needed, and continue building opportunities with a focus on updating and extending career development opportunities.

## 3. Results

Sixty-one students who participated in Discovering ME represented eight school districts from across the state. The largest number of student participants resided in rural areas, followed by suburban and urban areas. Most of the participants were identified on the autism spectrum (52%), with approximately a quarter of the students identifying as having an intellectual disability. The majority of students were in middle school, which was the focus of the statewide demonstration of the process. Table 1 provides a breakdown of student participant demographics.

## 4. Discussion

A critical component of the Discovering ME process is working as a team to identify students' areas of interest within career clusters. This assists the team

Table 1  
Student participant demographics N = 61

Category	Variable	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	42	69%
	Female	19	31%
Age	Middle School	38	62%
	Age		
Geographic Location	High School Age	23	38%
	Rural	44	72%
Location	Urban	4	7%
	Suburban	13	21%
Disability Category	Intellectual Disability	14	23%
	Autism	32	52%
	Other Disabilities*	15	25%

\*Other disabilities include SLD, ED, VI, HI, MD, OI, OHI.

in developing opportunities in the home, school, and community for students to promote career awareness through work-based learning experiences. For students residing in rural areas, examples of their top career cluster choices were occupations in agriculture, food, and natural resources; arts, audio/video technology, and communications; hospitality and tourism; and human services. For students located in suburban areas, their top choices were hospitality and tourism; education and training; and arts, audio/video technology, and communications. In urban settings, students selected hospitality and tourism; manufacturing; and marketing.

In addition to data collected on student participants, an evaluation was conducted across Virginia on school districts implementing the DM process. The evaluation was conducted with the eight school districts that received training and technical assistance from VCU staff and completed all phases of the DM process. The evaluation was conducted using an online survey focusing on the implementation of the process, including the forms used, support received by school district administration, training provided by teachers to other school staff on the use of DM, and information shared by teachers as students transitioned from middle school to high school. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the evaluation data (Ary et al., 1979). Educators overwhelmingly agreed that the time taken to implement the process was well worth the investment. Some of the major benefits identified included participating collaboratively, obtaining greater awareness of the need for early transition services, and building higher expectations for student employment as a result of gaining new perspectives of what was possible for these students. Respondents believed this happened due to thinking more creatively about students'

work-related experiences and helping administrators, educators, students, and families think about a positive and fulfilling future for students. Finally, educators expressed that the focus of the DM process on students and their interests helped create positive experiences for them, thereby increasing their opportunities for success (Center on Transition Innovations, 2020).

## 5. Conclusion

Discovering ME is a student-focused transition assessment and planning tool that is critical to increasing students' employment outcomes, especially for those who face the most significant barriers to employment. The process allows for collaboration among critical partners in a student's life, which includes family, community agencies, school personnel, and others. Student outcomes will vary because of the customization of experiences developed for each student based on their strengths, interests, and support needs. However, general outcomes of this process have included participation in authentic, coordinated career awareness and development activities as well as the building of self-determination, work readiness, and community integration skills.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Ethical considerations

This article, as a practice brief, is exempt from Institutional Review Board approval.

## Informed consent

There is no identifiable information in this practice brief. As such, informed consent has not been obtained.

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